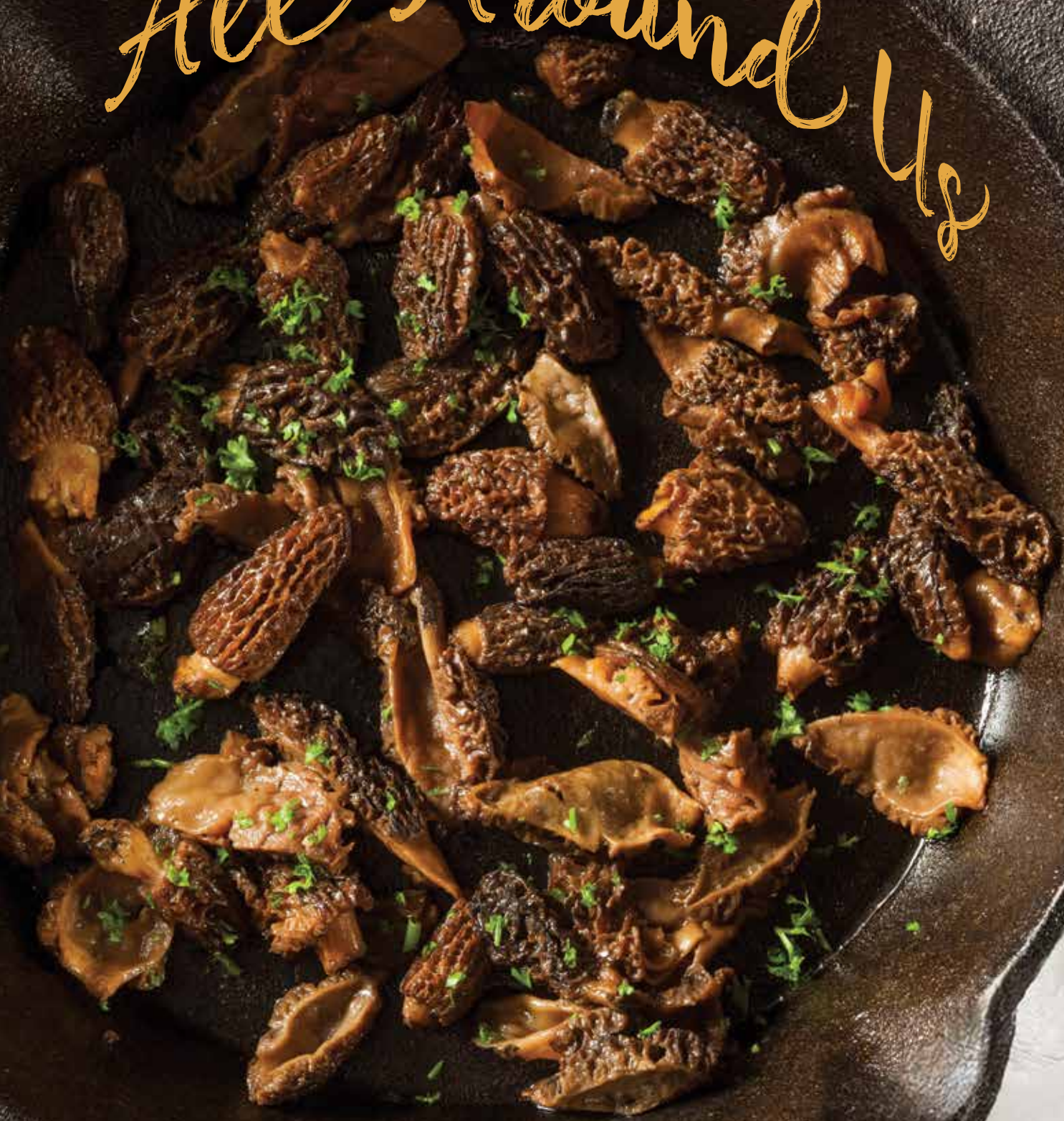


All Around Us





## Matt Geiger

In Dmitry Glukhovsky's wildly popular underground novel *Metro 2033*, the aboveground world is a blasted husk of its former self, a black shadow and white ash reflection of the verdant biosphere that once was. Irradiated monsters prowl and human stalkers soak up radiation like sponges as they slink among the wreckage, searching desperately for anything of use. It is only in Moscow's metro, a 287-mile accidental fallout shelter, that any real human life remains. And while they huddle in the darkness and try to eke out their lives under all that concrete, they drink the one great comfort that remains—mushroom tea—because of course, in this and so many other worlds, fungi persist. Fungi proliferate. Fungi live on, even when times get tough.

These strange living things, not plant nor animal, but very much alive, seem to defy the rules humans invented for our natural world. They find life in death and decay, they thrive without the sun, and they are, perhaps most importantly to some of us, beautiful and delicious. Some adhere to Ernest Hemingway's Iceberg Principle, the idea that only a tiny portion of the story, the very peak, should show, while its foundation and roots spread out in a vast and meaningful network, just beneath the surface. Mushrooms tell stories that run deep beneath the surface of our world.

I was recently on a spring turkey hunt with conservationist Doug Duren, trying to lure in and shoot a wild Wisconsin bird to roast and eat. Mushrooms were the furthest thing from my mind. The event was organized by Sharing the Land, an initiative Duren spearheads that works to connect private landowners with "access seekers" who want to forage, fish or hunt. The access seekers volunteer to help improve the wild landscape, and the property owners let them come back and harvest deer, turkeys, trout, nuts, fruit, or, as turned out to be the case on this particular day, more morels than I ever dreamed possible.

We spent a rainy morning staring at a pair of turkey decoys. From time to time, Duren expertly scratched his pot call, trying to rile up a Tom or Jake (a younger male turkey) and bring them into shooting range. We never got a bird, but on the way back, soaking wet and carrying damp shotguns, we investigated some dead trees and discovered what seemed like an entire metropolis of morels. While they are prized by chefs in places like France and Spain, I first tasted the warm, buttery, nutty flavor of *Morchella* in the American Midwest, where they live silent, clandestine lives. We gathered them up, working in a frenzy as we filled a huge canvas sack with them, and brought them back to the "Buck Shack" where a group of journalists and conservationists had convened for the hunt. We fried them in a cast iron skillet, swimming in sizzling butter, and slipped them into our mouths.

I mused about the fact that I had set out in search of turkeys and come back with morels. And suddenly it occurred to me that this was actually the *second* time Duren and I

had stumbled upon a treasure trove of edible fungi on his property. The prior year, I was visiting to chat with Duren for a newspaper article I was working on about conservation and land ethic. After spending a couple hours talking about deer, prairie plants, specific Midwestern wisdom and general human folly, we climbed aboard his Can-Am UTV and started exploring his vast family farm. We checked trail cameras and tree stands. We peered into the frigid, rushing waters of a trout stream and drank the sweet and ancient water under a spring house from a tin cup. We checked on calves. Duren talked about prairie restoration and streambank stabilization. I saw three Whitetail does bound across a field and crash into the thick forest that weaves through his land. And then, as our Can-Am nimbly climbed a rutted and daunting hill, my host suddenly hit the brakes.

"Whoah," he said. "Look at that!"

We hopped out and walked over to a tree on which a flamboyant cluster of chicken of the woods grew. *Laetiporus sulphureus* have several scrumptious sounding common names (chicken of the woods, chicken mushroom, and chicken fungus) and one slightly revolting moniker (sulphur shelf). In any case, they are the vivid color of a neoclassical painting of an autumn sunset, and to your teeth they feel like chicken while to your tongue they taste like it. They grow in shelves that usually range from two to ten inches across. The two of us brought as many as we could carry back to the UTV, placing them in the back, and headed to the Buck Shack, where we divided up our find. That night, I coated them with fresh tomato sauce and garlic, serving them with rigatoni. My family loved them.

And for the umpteenth time in my life, I was reminded that it doesn't matter what you set out to find in the woods, or anywhere else, on any given day. It only matters that you *do* set out, and keep your eyes peeled for the things that survive, the life that persists, the things that live on, all around us. To try to get a sense of the whole iceberg, the vast network of meaning on which everything else rests. And remember that even when times get tough, some things live on.

The world certainly seems broken at times, and it's hard not to feel the slow creep of apocalyptic paralysis if you let every little sinister harbinger burrow into your psyche. There is much money to be made in convincing the general populace that our reality is little more than a blasted husk of its former self. When this feels like too much, it's nice to brew some tea, or fry up some mushrooms, or just head out into the woods, remembering that there is more to life than panicky news headlines and double-talking politicians. There are things that survive all around us, silent, beautiful and delicious to mouth, eye and mind alike.

*Matt Geiger is an author, editor and journalist living in Wisconsin. He is a Midwest Book Award winner and contributes to numerous literary journals, magazines, newspapers and radio programs. His work has appeared in Strung Sporting Journal, Gray's Sporting Journal, Outdoor News, Bear Hunting Magazine, Fur-Fish-Game, Whitetails Unlimited, Hypertext Review, Journal from the Heartland, Chicken Soup for the Soul, Green Mountain Review, the Sunlight Press and more.* 🍄