

MY PERIODIC TABLE – OLIVER SACKS

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Next to the circle of lead on my table is the land of bismuth: naturally occurring bismuth from Australia; little limousine-shaped ingots of bismuth from a mine in Bolivia; bismuth slowly cooled from a melt to form beautiful iridescent crystals terraced like a Hopi village; and, in a nod to Euclid and the beauty of geometry, a cylinder and a sphere made of bismuth.

Bismuth is element 83. I do not think I will see my 83rd birthday, but I feel there is something hopeful, something encouraging, about having “83” around. Moreover, I have a soft spot for bismuth, a modest gray metal, often unregarded, ignored, even by metal lovers. My feeling as a doctor for the mistreated or marginalized extends into the inorganic world and finds a parallel in my feeling for bismuth.

I almost certainly will not see my polonium (84th) birthday, nor would I want any polonium around, with its intense, murderous radioactivity. But then, at the other end of my table — my periodic table — I have a beautifully machined piece of beryllium (element 4) to remind me of my childhood, and of how long ago my soon-to-end life began.