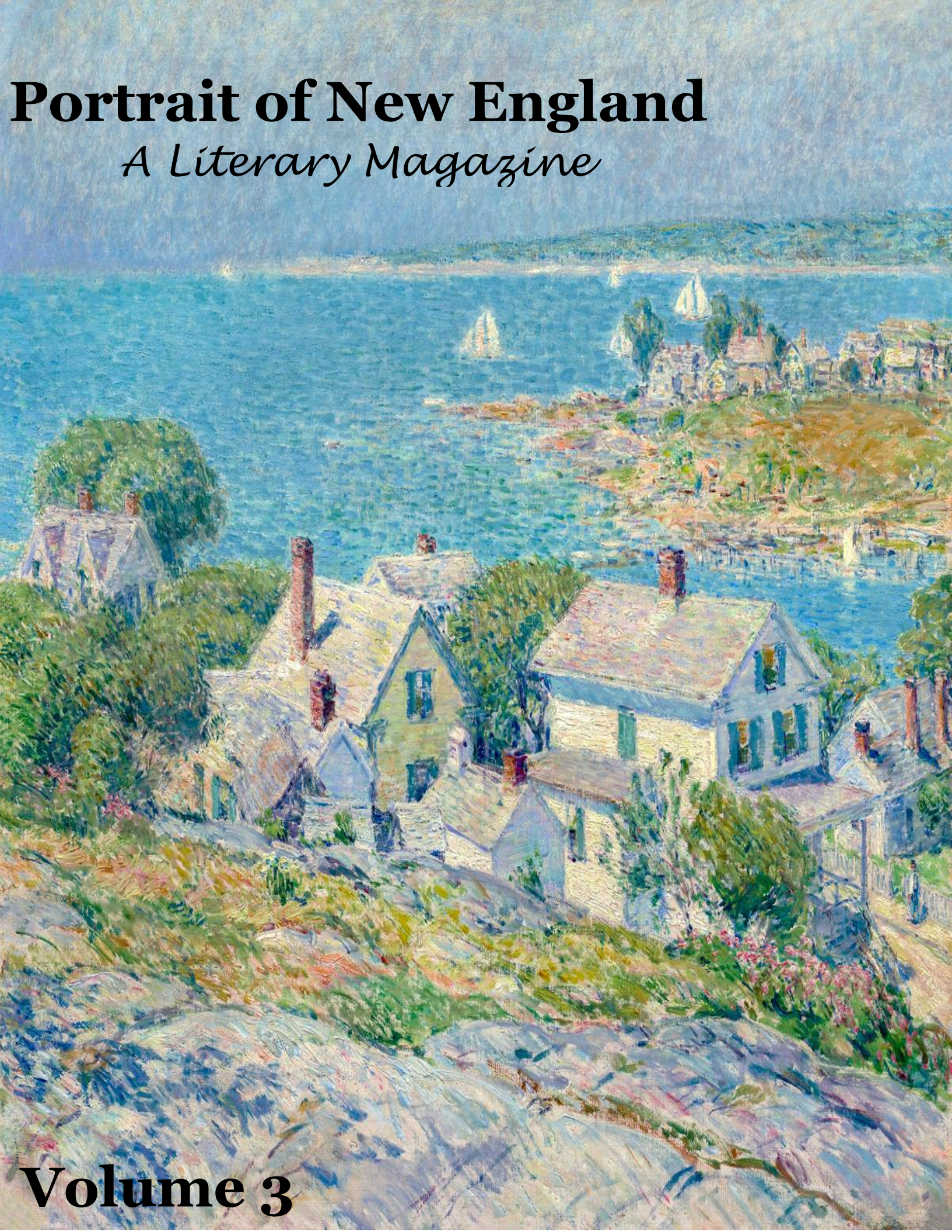
Portrait of New England

A Literary Magazine



Volume 3

VOLUME THREE

The editor and advisory board would like to thank the writers who chose to submit to the *Portrait of New England*, as well as the readers viewing this issue.

We are thankful to you.

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COVER ART BY CHILDE HASSAM,
"NEW ENGLAND HEADLANDS"

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Editor's Note:

For me, one of the most rewarding aspects of any task is the organizing element of it. Now, I am not saying washing dishes or the car is a regular passion project of mine, but the structuring of it all, before and after, from the stacking of plates in the appropriate cabinet to arranging the back of the car trunk is where I find a lot of satisfaction. It's a similar feeling of satisfaction when I organized both the last and the present issue of *Portrait of New England.*

It certainly is a unique task, and at first glance, as I am reviewing acceptances of the issue, it can be a little overwhelming. The voices and works of writers are not stagnant or passive like the typical tasks I mentioned before, and I love that they are not. In just one story included in this issue, the subjects of identity and memory crisis, puffins, and a relationship possibly on the brink, are seamlessly woven together to create a compelling piece of fiction. The poems in this issue are just as diverse, ranging from Julia Child to barnyard animals and farming tools, and to days of winter, spring, and summer. Now structuring such a mosaic of styles is really one of the challenging and fun parts of the editor role, and in this, the third issue of *The Portrait of New England,* I am eager to see you, reader, draw the connections between so many brilliant writers as I have.

As I end my note, and before hopping into the issue, I must state my deep appreciation of the writers who chose to submit to *The Portrait of New England,* where their creative poems and fiction meet here to be read in dialogue with each other. And of course, I am grateful and must thank you, the audience, for choosing to gather here to read the works of writers with such unique voices and styles. I hope that you enjoy reading.

Thank you,
Matthew

My First Home Indoors
Giulia Napoli

I cannot remember a time when I did not feel comfortable outside. I love the rain and the wind. The way sunsets shock most people into some sense of wonder is the way I feel every time I step outside. I feel awestruck and breathless and familiar. Maybe the outside is special to me because the inside was always in the range of its boiling point. My first inside home was Brownbridge House. The house is at the corner of Brownbridge Street and State Route 135. It is white on the outside and has three stories. If you look too hard, you may become worried about the crookedness of the windows and sagging floors. This house is home to 17 undergraduate students. When I lived there, we had doors with keypads at the front and on the side. The double doors to the porch were always open, no keypad code necessary, leading right to the kitchen. There is a massive stovetop and oven in the center, three fridges to which are stuck various quotes and photos, and a very stained wooden table. Couches that were once forest green with some now undistinguishable patterns form a circle in one part of the room. Dirty, worn-out masking tape stuck to the floor forms a four-square court in the space between the couches. It is difficult to tell how old everything is, but the people who live here seem to have always been the same. There are windows behind the couches; there is no wall here and the wooden studs are exposed. The porch door is always open because the kitchen is always warm. The cabinets above the counters and shelving have recently been painted a seafoam green that lights up the room. Photos of smiling residents past and present hang crookedly on the cabinets.

I first came to Brownbridge House as a sophomore in college. I had no idea who I was, but I did know that I liked to be outside. I had a smattering of friends, but would still call myself a loner. I had been sharing a room with a friend and apart from several boundary discrepancies, I needed a change. Something about living and working in such a small radius does not work for my spirit. Make me walk and feel separate. My loneliness feels bigger with people and buildings familiar to me: give me a longer walk, with houses that have personalities and windows lit by people who aren't just like me, using the same furniture and eating the same food. I loved looking into rooms of real houses with lights on and seeing painted walls covered in artwork.

Friends knew that I was having roommate troubles and suggested I move to Brownbridge House. Most of the college was on a hill, Brownbridge was at the bottom of the hill, right where the town began. The town is not

much; you can see most of it in one glance, but it is cozy and homey. In those days, there was a store right around the corner that sold everything from milk to beer, and of course, creemees. Creemees are a Vermont specialty, soft-serve ice cream made with milk that has a higher butterfat content than other soft serves, so they take longer to melt. The town was once a mill town and a creek snakes through it, built mostly of brick except for the old stone mill area, where everything is made of the same gray stone as much of the college.

One Saturday, I made my way down the hill for my first brunch at Brownbridge to meet the current inhabitants before I moved in, even though I had basically already committed myself to this mysterious, sagging structure. It was a Saturday in the fall in New England, the kind of weather that calls for a sweater, but no jacket. The air outside was crisp but sun-warmed and I was filled with a blissful sort of excitement as I approached. Upon arrival, I awkwardly poked my head through the open porch door and was welcomed in. The air in the house was warm and sweet. I arrived after the meal began. The floor was blue linoleum caked in grime and a resident named Ofir offered me a bowl of rice pudding from a massive pot on the stove. I graciously accepted the pudding and sat down on a spot on the couch where the sun was streaming in. Music was playing softly on a speaker. I didn't recognize the songs, but liked them nonetheless. Without much thought, or even asking for a tour beyond the kitchen, I agreed to move in. These people seemed like they all just wanted to be themselves and enjoyed the house. I felt the same way.

I lived in the house for most of my remaining time in college. The wooden beam in the kitchen had two decorated envelopes on it: "You are my sunshine" to praise those who lightened everyone's days and "I know what you did" to keep us aware of what not to do. We wrote our feedback to each other on small slips of paper and read them anonymously at Sunday house dinners. I contributed to both over the years and lived in many of the house's rooms with a variety of roommates. The house was entirely reliant on local foods; everything we ate was from within 100 miles of the corner, except for oil and spices. Students were employed over the summer to preserve everything from cherries to broccoli stems for the school year. Located in the middle of cow country, we ate a lot of local dairy. We offered dinner on Wednesdays and brunch on Saturdays to the local community and college students seeking an escape. Several people signed up to cook and clean up each meal and we had semester-long chores. I was the stove cleaner for most of my tenure there, but I also took on the roles of bean maker and bread maker. As harmonious as the house may sound, we

created our fair share of drama over the years, but the house always brought me more joy than stress.

I walked by Brownbridge House recently, several years after graduation. They added a firepit outside behind the house where some inhabitants stored a shared canoe during my time there. The kitchen was lit up, the porch door was open, and I heard music and laughter coming from the windows. There is a room in the front of the house we called, “the exploratorium,” fronted by a bay window. A shelf sagging with books pertaining to everything from genomics to canning to the climate crisis, with a general tilt towards activism and rebellion stands precariously on the back wall. Delightful kitchen smells of onions, warm vegetables, and baking bread used to waft in. A worn gray couch was positioned before the bookshelf, as if to keep it from falling over. I spent many late nights and early mornings curled up on the couch or at the table cramming in the work I hadn’t done during normal hours because I was cooking instead.

As a student, I always sought out a lonely corner or room or hallway for working alone. In Brownbridge, we frequently worked together, and my desire to hide faded. I had found my hiding spot. When I walked by recently, the hallway light illuminated a mason jar on the table in the exploratorium. We always had jars everywhere because so much was preserved over the summer. Apple butter, jam, pickles. This made me smile, to know that so little had changed; that no time had passed. Maybe that’s what home is all about, a place you hope never changes. Like our blood families that we cannot change. Like the sun reliably rising and setting.

Bacon
Sara Letourneau

She scrapes the bacon's underside,
loosens it with her spatula.
Lifts each crispy, blackened-edged ribbon
from the frying pan to a blue-rimmed Corelle plate,
next to warm blueberry pancakes
and scrambled eggs the color of saffron-dyed cloth.
Sets one plate at each place at the dining room table
with a grandmother's hands of love despite
the stiff knees hampering her steps.
It's almost time for breakfast-for-dinner;
if you were inside, you could smell it,
smoky and tempting, meat and maple and salt.
Everyone asks not for their first helping, but if they can help
by filling glasses of water, orange juice, or milk
or gathering the silverware waiting in the drawer.
Everyone, except her five-year-old grandson
and his grandpa, her husband of forty-five years.
Still holding the screen door open,
the man-still-a-boy pants for breath
as the even younger boy runs from outside
into the kitchen, climbs into his chair, asks his grandmother,
"Where's Bacon? He's not in his pen."

Silent, she leans against a chair to support herself.
Does she dare tell him that every heartbeat as she hesitates
equals one absent heartbeat of his friend?
Does she risk this family meal, and his fondness
of the cured meat, by admitting where it comes from?
Can she live with the fact that, with a few words,
she could cut away a scrap of his innocence
by revealing the fate of a farm pig?
Or is it best to let him discover this for himself
when he's older, and leave him wondering why she lied?
All her answers, she keeps to herself as,
never glancing out the window toward the empty pig pen,
she shrugs and says, "Oh, he ran away."

Epiphanies With Baby Goats
Keri Stewart

The babe is a swoon and swaddle
of brick-faced fur and unbridled attention.
Boots of coddled umber hue
guide
the goat
through passage.
And I
discover the intricacies of a goat's well-intentioned, goated brain
to which neurons devise
Kantian pleasures,
and the gambles of hourglass wavelengths
are in the hands of mortality.

I just want to change the hoof to heel disparities
for which the gaze of rose-colored hue becomes firmly prose
and present goats become the standard;
oh be gone such, gentle fencing, oh be gone tonight!
Lay out the wooden posts to dry
that are crawling with starved termites,
and stick them with an ax.

Standing, shaking, sleeping upright.
Hoof on ground carving out sigils at breakfast out of blueberry jam,
and hosting seances with leftover hay
for the long searched-for objects
of desire… I do not yet know where the meaning is.
It has been due
for weeks
and such arrival is requisite for ruminants.

Goat Number Twenty eats a pebble off the brick
for the ambrosian taste of rock and dirt and everything

that has stepped foot on this ground.
Goat Number Twenty-One stamps a leg forward
and the crash of its hoof leads to the crash of horn
followed by the steady metronome of action.

I understand
and in understanding completely,
I leave the goats to their pasture
of idyllic bricks
because they choose where to step next.

A Ferris Wheel at Benson's
Frank William Finney

An ape house, an aviary…
Anacondas to zebras.
The whole damn ark
without the flood.
Voices fell
from green gondolas:
Wanna pet the sharks?
Wanna hold a snake?
No mention of birds,
though they must have known
everything we knew
was up in the air.

*Note: Benson's Wild Animal Farm was a private zoo and amusement park (1926-1987) in Hudson, New Hampshire (www.hudsonnh.gov).

The Day on Which the Days Depend
Eric D. Lehman

The tiny cabin had been modernized and mouse proofed with linoleum floors and smooth paneled walls, but retained the large iron woodstove that had hunched in the same spot for over a hundred years. The tile had been hesitantly cut around it, and in spots, you could see the bones of a much older structure that the renovation hid. The stove's thick black walls bulged outward into the room, and the pipe that forced its way through the slanted roof looked as broad as a man's chest. Because the cabin was so small, the stove seemed even bigger, edging toward the small table, the metal-framed bed, and the remaining two of four rickety chairs. In the winter, it gave off enough warmth for ten cabins of this size, but during the summer months, when Harris cooked, the oppressive heat pushed him out into the buggy northern forest.

There were many tasks to complete while living in a cabin like this; tasks that kept him busy most of every day. Chopping wood took up the tilth of the hours: sawing down a big tree into sections, splitting those pieces with a maul, and stacking those smaller pieces in round haystack piles seemed to take all spring and most of the short autumn. For the two, hot months he fished, pulling in a trout or three each day. That wasn't enough to live on, but he didn't necessarily need them for food. He bought bulk supplies in the nearby town on the coast and with his sure eye, easily shot his limit of deer, keeping the meat and supplies in an underground refrigerator locked against bears. He had only seen three bears since coming to this small river valley on the Gaspe Peninsula two years ago. Plenty of moose, though. Red squirrels played in the cleared space around the cabin and raccoons and muskrats hunted through his compost.

The general store in town did not have everything he needed, but it would order most specialized supplies. He had sold his old two-seater soon after moving here, and in the winter, had to snowshoe in for emergencies or for his monthly trip to the small seafood restaurant attached to the motel. Many of the people in town did not speak English, and he spoke very little French, so conversations on these occasions were limited. That was good. No one had questioned his residency, even though he was obviously American. Since he disappeared for months at a time in the winter, maybe they assumed he was using the cabin the way it was intended and sold to him in the first place, as a vacation home. But he had not left the cabin or the general area of Mont-Saint-Pierre since he had sold the car.

He had no electricity, no radio, no telephone. He chewed wild sarsaparilla and lazily picked low-bush blueberries. The forests revealed wild ginger and fiddleheads in season, too, but he wasn't really there to live off the land or sample the local mushrooms. The fireweed in the meadow and the whales surfacing off the coast held no interest for him. He kept a few modern conveniences: a propane heater for the coldest months, a solar shower, and a flush toilet. He had a significant amount of money in the bank; when needed he hitchhiked twenty kilometers away to the larger town of Sainte Anne des Monts. The money might have only been enough for a few years of his previous life, but was enough for twenty years of this.

It was no paradise, though. He had been bitten by ticks, black flies, and mosquitoes and was sure he had mild Lyme disease, and had suffered through panic attacks. In the late summer, his skin looked like a map of a thousand red islands, and he scratched the itches until he bled. He had had one bad case of poison ivy, and his hands hurt all the time from work. A broken leg or a serious illness could end all of this very quickly, he knew.

On a trip for cod tongues in May, he stopped at the half-moon beach, curved between two prominent cliffs. Sitting on a piece of driftwood, he watched a small tribe of gannets dive into the St. Lawrence Seaway, searching for their own meals. A thin line of white clouds marked the north shore of the Seaway, where the Laurentian Mountains could be seen. A few children played nearby, skipping rocks across the lapping waves. They slowly moved closer to him – three boys and a girl not yet in their teens. He examined the rocks on the beach.

"Pardonne moi, Monsieur American."

"Yes?" He looked up, startled.

"We were wondering what you did before you came here to live. Marcel believes you were a lumberjack."

Harris smiled slightly, stroking his beard. "I was the exact opposite of a lumberjack. I was a fisherman."

"My father is a fisherman!" the smallest boy piped up.

"Were you a cod fisherman?" the girl asked.

"No, I fished far south in a place called Long Island."

They chattered in French. "Why did you come here? You're too young to stop fishing, no?"

"Yes, that's true." He sighed. "I will tell you if you promise to keep it a secret. I was out in the deep waters and there was a hurricane. My boat sank and I almost drowned. Luckily, I was rescued by the coast guard, which sent a helicopter out and lowered a rope to me."

"How did the helicopter…" the boy searched for a word, and not finding it, continued anyway, "in the hurricane?"

"How did it get out? The hurricane passed. I was on a raft for almost a day. That was one of those days that the rest of life depends on."

The children looked impressed. "Merci," they told him.

He picked up his walking stick and moved across the street to the little restaurant, where he ordered cod tongues and French fries, washing them down with a beer. Seeing the time on the clock in the motel lobby, he hurried across the sidewalks to the post office, where he rented a box. He hadn't been there for two months and his small key struggled in the lock. Inside were a few pieces of junk mail from the realtor – no one else knew he was here. Except one person. In between the junk was a small envelope addressed to him from his wife. As he walked back up the gravel road that led from town into the narrow river valley where he lived, he tore it open and read it. "Harris," it said simply. "Homer died. Thought you should know. Mary Beth."

Homer was his cat. He loved that cat. He thought of how Homer used to curl up by his side every night and put a tiny paw on his arm. To his dismay, he started to cry, and for the first time in many months dipped into his stash of Canadian Club whisky.

A month later, he was back in town and this time, the hostess at the restaurant, Annie, struck up a conversation. After some preliminaries about the fine weather and the latest gossip, she said, pleasantly, as if an afterthought. "Word is around town that you used to be a fisherman."

"Uhm…" he said, remembering the children.

"The *Riviere de Amour* needs some help this summer if you want to make a couple bucks, break the routine."

"No," he exhaled. "I am not…was not a fisherman. I just told that story to some children and I guess it got around."

"Oh!" she said, though she didn't seem surprised. "What do you do then?"

"I was trained as a vintner. I worked for a winery on Long Island."

"What did you grow?"

"Oh, well, Merlot, Chardonnay. You can't really grow the big reds out there, and the soil is fairly sandy."

"I see," she said. "So, you do not fish?"

"Only in the river." He smiled slightly.

"Isn't it the summer now? Time to take care of the vines?"

"The vines all died. One day, there was an ice storm and it killed everything. I no longer had a job to do there."

She nodded and a few minutes later brought him the bill.

He didn't check the post office box after that conversation, but the next month he did, finding another small envelope from his wife. With a gagging motion, he opened it, expecting something horrible, like Homer's ashes to fall out. But it was only another postcard. "Harris. My old friend Erin is driving around the Gaspe with her family in July. She plans to stop by, so I hope you'll be there. She has a few things to drop off, too. Mary Beth." There were three dates with question marks in Mary Beth's letter, and a small note adjacent to the main text, "one of these days," it said.

Harris cursed, and in a blind rage, threw his walking stick at a squirrel, missing by several feet. He stomped back to the cabin, furious at the presumption of the intrusion. Figuring out the dates, he realized the first one was only a week away. How could they do this? Didn't they know that he wanted no part of that? He didn't want to talk to anyone, much less people from his old life. And Erin? She was a silly blonde girl when he knew her, and her husband was not much better. He was a chef of some sort, and she ran the catering business. Ugh, probably on some sort of foodie tour of French Canada, sampling lobster rillettes and wild game. Would they expect him to provide a meal? He looked around at his little shack. He had some smoked venison from last winter and a card table to set outside.

Wait, they had two children. He remembered now – that's why he hadn't seen Erin for a few years. A few years plus the last two; the kids must be six or seven now. He cursed again. There were no mirrors in the cabin, but he found a piece of reflective glass, trimmed the long scraggly beard to a reasonable length, and combed his long hair. He showered and found deodorant, dry and crusted, but usable. He put on his "town clothes" that he saved for going to the bank or the restaurant, and put them on. He was about to set up the card table outside when he realized the sun was setting and they wouldn't arrive for another week. He sat down on his bed and laughed bitterly.

Nevertheless, over the next week, he saw things out of place here and there and idly cleaned up the cabin, airing it out, wiping things down, and making it look civilized. Why did he care so much? He told himself that he didn't want people to think he was crazy. That's why he moved here in the first place, wasn't it? It was bad enough without people gossiping.

The first possible date came and went, sending Harris into a state of frenzied frustration. He screamed at the woodpeckers and chickadees. He worried at his bug bites and chopped nearly a cord of wood before it was dry enough, damaging his ax. He hated her so much – not Erin, but Mary

Beth. She had been blameless? A saint? Not anymore. Why was she torturing him? Why couldn't everyone just leave him alone?

The second day came and he spent the morning thinking about leaving, hiking up into the Chic-Choc Mountains, and finding a place to fish. He would leave a note. A note would be the right thing to do. He put a fishing kit together and picked out a walking stick. What would he say? An emergency? No, that would just make them more interested and want to help him. What then?

A sound of car wheels on the long gravel drive broke into the cabin. Too late! He frantically dressed in his town clothes, combing his hair. Car doors. "Just a minute!" he called, washing his hands in the sink. Dirt under his fingernails. So much dirt. "I'm coming!"

"Take your time," a woman's voice floated to him. He heard children, a man's voice, and he splashed water on his face.

He opened the door. "Hello!" burst out louder than he intended.

Erin was just as he remembered, a skinny blonde with cargo shorts, boots, and a t-shirt that read "Jardin de Metis." Her husband, a tall man with thick black hair and glasses, walked up and offered his hand, which Harris took, trying to smile. "Jim, nice to see you again Harris."

"Yeah, hi, Jim."

"Ginny and Mark." He pointed at two shy children lurking by the red minivan. "And of course, you remember Erin."

"Of course." He gave a little wave, but she came forward and half-hugged him, pecking him on the cheek.

"Darling place you've got here, Harris. What a hideaway."

"Yes," he said again, stupidly.

"Do we get the grand tour?"

"Oh, well, this is it." He pointed inside. "You can see the whole cabin right there."

Jim poked his head through the door. "Great setup, man. I'm a little jealous."

"Jealous." Harris's voice went flat.

"Of the cabin, I mean. And your awesome beard."

"Yes, Harris, I love, love, love your beard." Erin gestured at the children. "Come here and say hello to Mr. Jennings."

They approached, but not too close. "Hello."

"They're tired," said Jim. "We drove up from Parc Bic on the St. Lawrence. Been there?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Well, it's great…" Jim began to talk about the many exciting attributes of yurt life, renting bicycles, and seal watching. Harris nodded along, noticing that Erin was watching him sharply.

"I almost forgot," she said when there was a break in Jim's story. "I have some things from Mary Beth."

"Oh yes." Suddenly, Harris remembered the card table. "I was going to invite you to sit. He ducked into the cabin, retrieving the table, which he handed to Jim. "And now the chairs." His heart sank as he brought them out. "I only have two chairs. Sorry."

"We've got a couple," Jim said, and went to get them out of the minivan, while Erin presented Harris with a heavy cardboard box.

He looked at it with trepidation, wondering what it contained, and put it down without opening it. "Thanks."

Erin gave a wry grin. "I think you'll like this." She bent down and opened it up and took out a framed photo. It was Homer leaping for a feather and there was a yellow post-it note that read: "Homer a week before his death." The frame had held one of their wedding pictures, he remembered, not the big one over the mantel, but a smaller one from the dining room. He choked up.

"I knew how much he meant to you, Harris."

He coughed, choked, and sat down in the rickety wooden chair so heavily it cracked. Jim put the other two chairs down uncertainly, and he and Erin sat. The kids peered into the cabin, whispering.

"I wish I could have been there for him, but it's so hard. I guess I wasn't built hard enough to kill a man."

Silence. Jim glanced at the children. "You seem hard enough to live out here. Winters must be rough." Erin shook her head at him.

"I kept thinking about his mother and how she must have felt, And I couldn't be in that house anymore. Every time I saw the hallway…"

"Listen, man, anyone would have done it." Jim leaned forward, furrowing his brow. "You had no choice."

"No choice but to become a killer." Harris choked out, his eyes on the ground. "It wasn't right."

"He broke into your house, he was armed…" Jim trailed off, looking at the wide-eyed children.

"Jim," said Erin firmly. "Why don't you take Ginny and Mark for a walk in the meadow there? Take the butterfly nets."

Jim stood up, shrugging. "Come on guys, let's get the nets." They tramped up behind the cabin while Erin and Harris sat in silence.

“How’s Mary Beth?” Harris said, realizing he had made a fool out of himself.

“She’s well,” Erin said, pulling out a ponytail band and putting her hair back. “God, how do you live here with all these flies?” She smacked one on her arm.

“They’re pretty bad.” He held out his own welted arms for inspection.

“I mean, she’s not pining away for you, if that’s what you’re asking. She’s moved on. I don’t mean to be cruel, but what did you expect?”

“No,” he said, choking again. “She should.”

“I mean, she hasn’t found anyone good enough to send you divorce papers, but she’s had quite a parade of men, especially this past winter.”

“Thanks for letting me know,” he spit out.

Erin sat quietly for a while, swatting at bugs. “Maybe you didn’t know this,” she said finally, watching her children and husband frolic in the meadow. “But I accidentally ran over a man with my Jeep when I was seventeen.”

“What? No, you didn’t.”

“Yes, I had only passed my driver’s license a few months earlier and was driving home at night, when a man stepped out in front of me. I just plowed right into him. I remember hearing this screaming; just terrible screaming, but it wasn’t him, it was me.” She stopped.

“So, what happened?”

“Well, the police were involved, of course, but he was drunk, homeless, mentally disabled, and I wasn’t drunk myself. I just got probation; community service. It really wasn’t my fault.”

Harris sat there, astonished by this tale. “Are you making this up?”

“What? What is wrong with you? Of course I’m not making this up,” she hissed. “You of all people should know how serious it was.”

“Sorry, it’s just, I would never have known.”

“Because I am a silly girl?” She narrowed her eyes. “Yes, Mary Beth told me what you think of me.”

“So, why come at all?”

“Mary Beth asked me. We were driving by. That’s all. You’re welcome.” She looked at her family again and sighed. “I went to a therapist. Time passed. I got better. You know, like people do who experience something terrible.”

Harris thought about this. “Does Jim know?”

“He knows, but he doesn’t really understand. Not like we do.”

They sat there in silence slapping at the flies. The children laughed at something. Erin stood up and walked to the meadow and as she neared her family, she turned a cartwheel. The children cheered.

Harris stared after her, astonished. Then he looked down at his dirty fingernails, his dirty pants, and the sad little card table. When he looked up again all four visitors were standing in front of him.

"We're staying at the motel in the village here, and we'd like to treat you to dinner at the restaurant." Jim smiled broadly.

"Okay," he said. "They have excellent cod tongues."

"Ooh, cod tongues!" one of the children exclaimed. "Sounds gross!"

"They're delicious," he said, and saw the disappointment. "Deliciously gross."

He changed into his town clothes and sat in the passenger seat, listening to the children chatter. During the meal, he managed conversation with Jim and Erin about both cabin life and their catering business. They stayed at the table longer than usual, went for a walk on the beach together, and soon evening settled in.

"We'll drive you back," Jim said. "It's dark."

"Sure," he said, and ten minutes later as the car's headlights swept onto the front of his little cabin he was afraid, suddenly, of being alone. "Wait here," he said, running around to the underground refrigerator and returning with a bag. "Put this in your cooler."

"What is it?" Mark asked.

"Smoked deer meat."

"Where'd you get it?"

"I smoked it myself."

"Did you kill the deer?"

"Mark!"

"Yes…I killed it. Real smoked venison from the Gaspe. Better eat it on your trip, though. They might not let you take it across the border."

"Thanks, man." Jim shook his hand. "Keep well."

"Come visit us!" Mark said, holding the wrapped meat with a sort of awe.

Erin said nothing, but as the minivan pulled away she rolled down the window. "Give her a call!"

Harris walked back into the cabin and lit the wick of the kerosene lamp, turned it up, and began to go through the cardboard box. There were a few of his books, a mug he had always used, and a small battery-powered radio they had used for camping. It was not what he had expected. Confused, he went to the wood stove and lit it to make some tea. While he

was waiting for the water to boil, he picked up the framed photo of Homer and pulled the back open. Their wedding photo was still behind it. He put it back, and looked again at his cat's funny little clown face, allowing himself to cry. Then wail. Oh, that little boy!

He was still sobbing when he smelled smoke. The teapot was boiling and he picked it up. Not that. Then he saw that the seal on the roof pipe was broken, and was it leaking smoke into the cabin. Cursing and panicked, he took a bucket of well water and splashed it into the heart of the wood stove. Then again and again, until the fire went out. As more smoke poured into the small room, he opened the door and walked onto the graveled drive. The stars clustered thickly above the circle of dark treetops. He looked at them as the smoke dispersed, following a satellite until it passed. Then he went back inside and by the light of the kerosene lamp, examined the pipe. It was cracked, and if he wanted to seal it again, he would probably have to make a special order at the store. Luckily it was summer.

He decided to rest on the problem, and curled up into his sleeping bag, glancing at the framed photo on the table before he turned down the wick. His body, used to daily work, felt awake and alive, and it took him a long time to convince his muscles that the day was done. A day, another day, which stretched its smoky hands and broke into night. One of those days on which the coming days depend.

Bird in Flight
Laurel Sharon

James Kress

As I wake in the morning, I feel the light before I see it, and am quickly energized by its warmth; my skin has been sensitized from years of outdoor living. As I arrive at a greater consciousness, my energy is further stoked by knowing today will be another glorious day as I move forward from… wherever I am to Muscongus Bay.

A man lying next to me says, "What's for breakfast?"

"Who…? What?"

"I'm starving," he says.

"I'm not your personal chef," I say, irritated by his presumption and nudity.

"What?" he replies. When I don't answer he says, "Estelle?"

"Who?"

"Estelle," he says, looking at me.

"Who's Estelle?" I say.

"You."

I notice a bit of spittle collecting at the corners of his mouth, indicative of a heightened state of arousal or potential drug use. Not wanting to incite him further, I respond in a warm and calm voice, typically reserved for toddlers or people suffering from dementia. "I'm not Estelle," I say.

For a moment, he seems to understand, but then says, "Are you crazy? You're Estelle."

"I'm not crazy. You are," I say, at this point, unable to contain my annoyance as he begins to put a kibosh on my good mood.

Being in bed with a veritable stranger has never held any appeal for me and in any event; I need to return to my life. Intuitively, I know where to find the clothes that I need (which is kind of strange) and head for a bureau where I find a pair of cargo pants and a collection of t-shirts, largely pink and lavender, but hit pay dirt when I find white. I then dress, although I can't get an ounce of privacy from this dolt who is looking at me, as he continues to insist I'm someone I'm not. I start to feel better after finding a windbreaker, knee-length shorts with a plethora of pockets, hiking boots, and sunglasses – all items I need for my line of work.

"Okay, then if you're not Estelle, who are you?"

"Must we?"

"I'm just asking – if you're not Estelle then who are you?"

"James Kress," I say and head for the kitchen where again, somehow, I know there will be a set of car keys in a bowl on the countertop.

"No, you're not," he says, having continued to follow me. "You're Estelle, my wife." When I don't answer, he continues, "And I'm Ron, your husband."

"Look," I say. "I don't know what your problem is, and frankly, I don't care, but I've never met you before, and my name is James Kress."

"For God's sake, Estelle, who is James Kress?"

"The world-renowned naturalist, ornithologist and environmental educator. You must have heard of me."

I note a small victory as he stops talking and uses his silence as an opportunity to launch into a further explanation of my identity that hopefully he will find not only edifying, but inspiring.

"I have a degree in zoology which, as you might or might not know, is the study of animals and their behavior, with an emphasis on ornithology. My professional code of ethics throughout the years has been, 'Let no bird die.' Early in my career, through a series of events almost mystical in their confluence, I focused on the puffin."

"Puffin. Isn't that a pastry?"

"I'm talking about a bird."

"God am I hungry. Do we have any Danish left?"

"I have to go," I say, realizing trying to converse with him at anything other than a very primitive level is a waste of time.

"Go? Wait. What? You're leaving me?"

I head for the garage, only to find he has run ahead of me and blocked my way – still naked. I mean, this man has no personal dignity.

"Estelle, I need you."

"I don't know what to tell you," I say.

As I move forward and cross into his personal space, he refuses to move. I realize I have no other option than to use force. So, I shove him. In the chest, catching him off guard. Since I'm used to manual labor out in the field, I'm quite strong and he falls backward and onto his buttocks. Not wanting any more senseless dramatics, I get into the car quickly and start the engine.

"You pushed me. Why did you push me?"

"Because you were beyond reason, all morning for that matter, and I've been away from my beautiful birds for too long."

"Don't leave me. We can work this out," he says. I don't answer and as I begin to pull the car out of the driveway he yells, "Ellie. E-l-l-i-e."

I head the car down the block and after I've created some distance between myself and that bizarre, graceless, little man, I start to laugh uncontrollably. I haven't the slightest idea why, but frankly, I don't care.

Ron

When I woke that morning, Estelle was lying in bed, the covers kicked off, her eyes closed, with a smile on her face. It was a little weird – the smiling part. She was also wearing that ratty nightgown that I've asked her a million times to throw out.

"The light," she said.

"Okay," I said, even though the room was pretty bright already, and turned on the light next to my side of the bed. That's when I realized I was starving and said, "What's for breakfast?"

It was a simple question and one I asked every morning. That's why I couldn't believe her reaction. First, she looked at me with complete disgust. I mean, where was that coming from? Then she said, "I'm not cooking anything for you." I was in a panic because if she didn't cook, then what was I going to do? There was no way I was going to eat some breakfast cereal crap. I deserved better than that. I mean I needed to eat something better than that. After all, I had my health to consider.

Then things got worse. She had no idea who I was, and get this, who she was. She even said she wasn't Estelle anymore. First, I thought this was some sort of passive-aggressive routine because of what I had said about the new sunglasses she had bought. I had told her they made her look like she just had cataract surgery. But Estelle's not the kind of person to hold a grudge. So it wasn't that. Then I thought, maybe she was joking around, except she's not the kind of person who jokes around. I mean she doesn't like video games or trying to see how many marshmallows she can stuff into her mouth at one time or having sex. Although, now that I think about it, she has done some weird things.

For example, she pulled her hair out. We were having some argument, even though I had a migraine at the time, about my not working. Then, at some point, she reached up to the side of her head and I heard this ripping sound. It was awful. Estelle has such nice hair. Then, wait; do you know what she did with that hair? She kept it. Put it in the top drawer of her bureau where she also kept that ratty nightgown. "To remind me never to lose my temper again," she said. Okay, that was nice. Then she gave me a great apology. I mean it was really sincere. She said she was sorry for traumatizing me.

But that morning when she said she didn't care if I starved to death, she was out of her mind. She said she was some guy who was into bird watching. I was getting really frustrated but knew someone had to be the grown-up, which is a phrase Estelle uses a lot, so I kept my cool. Then the situation got really dicey. She had already gotten dressed and found her wallet. But when she grabbed the car keys and tried to head out the door, I knew I had to stop her. I mean, she was acting crazy. "No," I said. "I'm not having it. You are not leaving this house." She tried to shove me out of the way, but I'm a gentleman so of course; I didn't retaliate or anything. A guy getting physical with a woman is disgusting behavior. What's not disgusting behavior is asking what's for breakfast – although, I think somewhere in all of this, she did offer me a Danish. Then she drove away. That's it. I mean what could I do? I was pretty tired after all the craziness. After all, I was already dealing with the credit card debt and my "confession." So, after she left, I got back into bed and slept until noon. I knew she'd be back. At least, I thought she'd be back. I mean, she had to come back. We'd been married over 20 years for God's sake.

Estelle

All I knew about what happened was from what other people told me. Apparently, after I was pulled out of the water, the police took me to the hospital. I was saying I was James Kress while all the doctors and nurses were telling me I was Estelle. That's when I got really mad, which is the only thing about all of this that made any sense. I mean, what was the point of telling me I was Estelle over and over again? It was kind of like, when a person doesn't speak English, but you keep on talking louder and louder thinking that's the way to get them to understand you. Then to shake up my memory, somebody showed me some pictures of me. They said I said I didn't know who that was. I said, I didn't even think that person was attractive, and then I said, I'd never go out on a date with them. Not that I could date myself or anyone else for that matter. I'm married to Ron.

The doctors did lots of blood tests and CAT scans and an MRI. In fact, I think it was the clanking magnets in the MRI machine that brought me back to myself. When I first became Estelle again, I felt as though I had been drugged. Of course, I had no idea where I was, which by then, apparently had become kind of normal. Those tests the doctors had given me were to see if I had a brain tumor or brain infection or vitamin deficiency. But they didn't find anything, which meant that what happened, had happened all in my mind.

Before the doctors would let me go home, I had to agree to see a psychotherapist once a week. They seemed to think it was a big deal, me forgetting who I was. I didn't because I'd known who I was; it was just that I'd been the wrong person. What I mean is, nobody had liked me, the person that I'd been. The doctors were determined to give me an identity makeover. By the time I was done with therapy, they said, I'd be a better version of myself.

When I finally did get home, the first thing I did was cook Ron breakfast. I even went to the bakery for some fresh Danish. Everything seemed fine except, sometimes, I'd feel glazed over or hung over or find myself someplace and not know how I got there. My therapist was worried those feelings were the beginning of me forgetting myself and becoming that guy again or even someone else. But, why would I want to be someone other than James Kress? The way Ron described him, despite his not-so-subtle put downs, he sounded amazing – a real Birdman who had made a lifetime commitment to nature. I felt so excited that he had been me or I had been him because together, I knew we could take on the world.

James Kress

I arrived at Boothbay Harbor, where I am here to see my birds. I remember nothing about the drive. The only hint as to what might have happened is a wrapper from a Bobo Bar stuffed into the car console. Suddenly, overwhelmed with exhaustion, a parking lot appears, as though the hand of God has guided my car. Is there Anyone that doesn't respect my mission?

While sleeping in the front seat, which I have moved to the reclining position, I have a dream. A naked man stands in soft grass on a sea cliff. He is using an oversized net to hunt puffins. One crosses the sky and he bags it. The net envelops the bird. It can't move. All it can do is wait. The man, who I wish would put on some clothes, pulls the bird from the net and snaps its neck. Quickly, he splits the puffin open and searches for its heart, a delicacy. (The dream, apparently, is taking place in Iceland.) After finding the heart, which is still beating, he eats it. There is blood on his hands. Right before I wake, I see myself in the distance standing on the same sea cliff. My head is bowed in defeat. When I wake, I'm not sure what to make of the dream. What I am sure of, though, is that I'm hungry and in need of breakfast.

Estelle

The doctors called what happened to me a dissociative fugue. Ron called it selfish and when I got agitated after he said that the nurse told him he had to leave my room. Apparently, the fugue had happened because I'd gotten super depressed, I mean stressed, because I was feeling fine before all this happened and the doctors wanted to know what had super stressed me.

I couldn't think of anything except Ron buying a couple of go-pro cameras off the internet – and a remote-controlled mini sports car. And some clothing, like a merino wool and cashmere beanie, no-iron khaki pants, and a pair of wing-tipped shoes. And maybe some wellness stuff like an acupressure mat and pillow, a rock salt lamp, a blood pressure cuff, and a weighted pillow. And maybe a Fitbit and a hairbrush with a built-in infrared light to promote hair growth. Possibly a Sony PlayStation, an air hockey table, a craft beer subscription, and a marshmallow sampler pack. Oh, and some scented candles, a G-spot vibrator, and a new nightgown for me because he thought my old one was ratty. (The nap had worn off the flannel.) I think the G-spot vibrator was for me too, but I wasn't sure. And a Turkish cotton terry bathrobe that was monogrammed, a monthly cologne subscription box, an Apple Watch, an organic latex mattress, and a Carvel franchise. He had emptied our joint savings account to pay the start-up fee. I don't remember anything else, except maybe Ron grabbing me by the back of the neck and trying to force-feed me some ice cream. The flavor was chocolate. I only like strawberry.

<u>Ron</u>

Estelle said she was depressed and wanted to be the person she'd been when she was in the fugue state. I couldn't understand that. I mean how could she want to be someone (again) she didn't know?

"What's so hard about being you?"

"Nothing," she said, "except it's relentless."

I had no idea what that meant, and besides, I was running short on empathy. I mean, how would you feel if your wife told you she wanted to be a man instead of a woman and that man was a stranger even to herself? Was she making some kind of indirect comment about my sexual prowess? I'd been out of work for a while and was already questioning my masculine identity. Was I still a man and if I was what kind of a man? An invisible man, a man's man, a real man? Where did the ratty old nightgown of hers fit into all of this? Was my masculine identity solid no matter what other

people thought of me or was I only a man in context – which was something Estelle learned in therapy. Context that is.

To feel better about myself, I did some online shopping, but how many drones can you buy before it all becomes pointless? I never could bring myself to tell Estelle that she was the reason I was fired from my last job. When I introduced her to my manager at the holiday party, she never stood to shake his hand. When I asked her about it later she said, "What are you talking about? I had a plate of hors d'oeuvres on my knees."

For a little while, well maybe a bunch of years, I had no idea what my next professional move would be. Alright, I was lost. Then it came to me in a dream and without drugs. A woman that looked like a combo of the Statue of Liberty, Estelle, and a bird, held – in place of the torch – an oversized ice cream cone topped with soft serve in her hand. If I hadn't been sleeping, I would have slapped myself on the forehead. Of course. My next move was to open a Carvel franchise. When I told Estelle about my dream and the franchise idea, she didn't say anything. I was a little taken aback by her lack of enthusiasm. "Everybody loves ice cream," I said. To prove my point, I put some in a bowl and handed it to her. I gave her chocolate. She said she only liked butter pecan. For a moment, all the light that was inside me went out. Sometimes it felt like I could never do anything right.

James Kress

I'm sitting on a Puffin Cruise still in Boothbay Harbor, surrounded by people who don't know my true identity. That beautiful bird that they've traveled from all parts of the world to see is a result of my unrelenting efforts in marine bird conservation. Eastern Egg Rock Island would have continued to be devoid of puffins if I hadn't given them new life, and in the process, made them celebrities. These people with their binoculars and cameras, if not as vicious as the paparazzi, are just as intense. Thank God they sell beer on board this cruise to make people a bit jollier, although personally, I only drink wine – preferably a 2007 Brunello.

The tour guide on the boat is not a scientist, and so his presentation is worse than idiotic. He seems to be melting in the hot sun offering only the most basic of information. "The puffin mates for life. The puffin stands upright like a penguin. The puffin eats herring." How long can I stand this? I can't stand this. I walk to where the tour guide is standing and interrupt him (somebody's got to) and explain that I am a world-renowned naturalist, ornithologist, and environmental educator. "Your point is?" he says. "With my background and educational pedigree, I think I can offer the

passengers information that is significantly more meaningful." He seems unmoved by my plea, leaving me no choice but to grab the microphone from his hands. "I'm Dr. James Kress," I say to the passengers, "and want to point out that the Atlantic puffin only comes to shore to breed. Most of this bird's life is spent alone out at sea. Yes, you heard me folks. Alone. I know most of you are terrified of being alone, always hovering together as a frightened mass desperate for connection. I mean, you'll put up with anything, won't you? But not these birds. They are confident in their own abilities, independent and in charge of their own destinies.

"Yet, they remain so fragile. Just a series of blips in nature, super storms, some ocean warming, skimpier food supplies and they'd be gone. Take for example, their cousin, the tufted puffin in Alaska, emaciated and dead washing up on shore… "

No one is listening. We have arrived at the island where the puffin colony resides. People swarm to the side of the boat with the best view. I have no need to be part of the mob. All I need to do is look to the sky. I see my puffins. I hear my puffins. They are singing to me, like sirens from another odyssey. "Come home. Jimmy come home." Only I can hear the song and understand their lyrics. I am master of the bird universe, free from the mundane and all credit card debt. When a naturalist was needed to save the Bermuda petrel, didn't they call me? And when the double-breasted cormorants in Oregon and the Galapagos penguin needed to be saved from extinction, didn't they call me again? "Come, Jimmy. Come," the birds continue to call. The sunlight that bounces off the water is mesmerizing, and I find myself walking down the stairs to the main deck where I climb the railing. When I hit the water, it's startling cold. For a moment, I feel disoriented, but so what? I flip over and try to backstroke. The cold water makes it hard to swim with much efficiency. I'm shivering and can't coordinate my movements, and as I head for the island, I feel increasingly pooped. I stop moving and as I give way to floating, I feel happy knowing I'm close and with each nudge of the current growing closer to the puffins that I love.

Estelle

I told my therapist that I had thought them sexy – the sunglasses. They were oversized with dark lenses – really dark, with a cream-colored frame. I was so happy at checkout. When I got home, I tried them on for Ron, to show him how great they looked. "You look like you just had cataract surgery," he said. My therapist said, "Context defines who we are."

What did that mean? My idea of me, how I felt about me, if I even liked me, was it defined by other people? Did that include Ron? If that was the case, then I was going to keep on spending time in the backyard with a couple of chipmunks, a hedgehog, and the birds. I really liked the birds. They seemed to like me. They never put down my sunglasses, either.

I set up a birdfeeder and in the birdseed, put cayenne pepper. Didn't bother the birds, but the squirrels didn't like it and besides, why should the squirrels eat food that didn't belong to them? Let them order takeout. I also bought a small waterproof booklet (which was good because Ron spilled coffee on it) called, "Backyard Birds of the Northeast." That way, I knew what or rather who I was watching. Over time, I got to really know the birds – habits, personalities and felt like I had a personal relationship with each one. I talked to them. They talked back. I never told the therapist that.

Then in a meant-to-be, everything happens for a reason, a magic moment kind of way I found a list of the world's cutest birds while looking up something else on the Internet. Most of them were in places that I knew, in my lifetime I'd never get to, except for one. The Atlantic puffin was only a four or five-hour drive from my home. I was thrilled. That was my bird even though it had the saddest eyes. Forget the bright beak and its nickname, "The Clown of the Sea," this was a depressed bird that no amount of medication or psychotherapy was going to perk up.

Ron

It took a little while before I realized Estelle was gone. It made my mind explode to think the fugue had taken her again. I couldn't comprehend it, so the first evening she was gone, I looked through takeout menus pretending nothing had happened. Reality hit when the delivery arrived and I looked at the greasy chicken cacciatore floating in a plastic container. I knew heartburn would be dessert.

Clearly, the return of the fugue had happened while I was at the New Franchise Orientation Program. Cruelly, James Kress had mentally overpowered Estelle and displaced or replaced her identity. That's what happened and that's why she wasn't able to even say goodbye. She had no memory of anything that really mattered. The only source of calm I felt was in knowing where they were headed – back to Maine. Although Estelle had also mentioned there were more islands loaded with those birds further north in Nova Scotia. "Ellie, I was listening," I hollered to no one. The house was empty.

I went into the bedroom and saw there was something on my pillow. At first, I had no idea what it was. As I got closer, I saw it was the hair she had pulled out of her head all those years ago. At least, I thought it was, unless she had ripped more hair from her head like a special occasion kind of thing. For a moment, I felt sick at the memory the hair held. But I didn't have to become someone else to get away from the bad feeling. No siree. I wasn't going to do any mindless eating or overeating or become stupidly lonely and desperate. I was standing strong and dealing with all this creepy weirdness. I mean what was the hair doing on my pillow? Was it something her therapist told her to do? Was James Kress competing with me? I turned to the police for help and told them about the hair on the pillow. "Let the Canadians handle it," they said. After that, all I could think about was Estelle face up or face down floating in water in some underpopulated place with no one to save her.

Weird. That was the word that described everything. The hair thing was weird. The fugue thing was weird. Estelle was weird. Don't think I didn't hear her talking to her birds in the backyard. I let it slide. That's because every time I gave her a hug, whether she wanted one or not, and took a deep breath, she always smelled sweet. But Estelle was gone, lost to herself, and lost to me and between the two of us, it seemed as though I was the only one left who cared. What was I going to do?

The Cottage Remembers
Gloria Heffernan

The waves never even waved goodbye.
But the cottage still listens
for our tires in the driveway.
It knew from the first time
we crossed the threshold
that we would return.
The back porch chairs
where we sat every evening
still bear the curve of my backside.
Twilight still drapes the shoreline
in a golden shawl,
and Owl's Head Lighthouse
still sends out its silent beam
to guide us back
to the bay.

Yes, It IS Julia Child In The Flesh!
Gerard Sarnat

Viewing HBO's Julia.
Where Sarah Lancashire
So magically conveys
An uncommon likeness
To their eponymous star*
You are suddenly reminded
Of exactly fifty years ago
When just one lowly intern
At Harvard Med School's
Beth Israel Hospital
As our Coronary Care Unit's
Double doors swing open
And in strides an Amazon
Of an operatic woman
Juggling at least
Two sumptuous platters
Chock full of delicacies
To in her words, Feed
These lovely hard-working
Boys and even a few girls!
Although sleep-deprived,
Voila, we immediately
Recognize The French Chef
Straight out of WGBH
Boston's hit PBS show
But took us some while
Before connect odd dots,
That she was here to visit
Oy her husband Paul
(Child) -- up to that point
Simply non-descript guy
Admitted during his MI
(Myocardial infarction,
Or in more lay-person
Terms, heart attack).
Finally figuring out
What's happening,

It flashed through
My clouded mind
Not to fuck-up now
Like did fearfully
Earlier this year –
Attending autopsy
To see grease-clogged arteries
Of not-too-old man had
Co-owned Brookline's Jack 'N Marion Deli.

*unlike the totally inaccurate, almost foolish portrayal of John Updike

Grandfather's Hoe
William Doreski

All night, distances ripen,
trimmed with ice. The fortune
my grandfather earned and lost
forms an eerie mist in the pines
that the stiff breeze can't disperse.
I want to inhale it, but too late
by three generations, I flog
myself outdoors to suffer
the judgment of the trees. Grandpa
shouldered me like a grain sack
as he roamed the garden for weeds.
I still have his hoe, at least
a hundred years old, the handle
worn smooth as ceramic glaze.
No use pondering this weapon.
No use wielding it against weather
sly enough to addle science.
My corporate identity has yet
to form. If I could sift through
the capital dispersed in the sky
I could start a business thick enough
to appease my grandfather's failure
and reclaim valley tobacco land
built over with colorful houses.
A few of the sheds he built
linger where broadleaf still grows
or shade tenting ornaments summers
boasting small but loud children.
I wasn't allowed to be loud
because we lived beside a doctor
whose office faced my play-space.
Now I can be loud enough
to shake the snow from the pines.
But I lack the will to efface myself
in noise my grandfather, tough
and Russian, would shrug away
with a rare but blistering smile.

The Fawn
Matthew Pramas

He was sitting at his antique desk in the shop on Main Street, bearing smiling eyes as the time neared five when a horrid image flashed in his mind. His fingers tapped the leather top desk and he looked at the screen of his listings and buyers' offers. That's enough, he thought as he reclined back toward a chest of drawers holding castors and blankets, letters and brochures. He looked up and down the page at all the furniture for sale, and then all around the shop where mirrors hung, lamps glistened, stools crouched, and couches lounged before turning back to the page. These are good offers, he thought. Terry can get the paperwork sorted in a jiffy and CJ can drive them out Monday, he thought. These fine pieces of antiquity would make him a healthy profit, indeed.

He returned upright and looked outside, past his cluttered desk and the shop floor where everything lived and into the darkness that lingered outside where the white church stood across the sleepy street. It was quarter till five. Close enough, he thought.

"Terry, I think I'm going to close shop early," he said.

"Theo, that sounds like a great idea," Terry said, "Got to get back to your James, after all."

"That's true," Theo said. "He's been playing with the dog too much. I think he's sick of me working all the time."

"You're pushing it too hard," Terry said. "Take Monday off, why don't you?"

"Just get this paperwork sorted quickly Terry and then we'll wrap up," Theo said. "I'll call CJ in the morning and have the sold pieces sent out ASAP. I'll think about Monday, but you know it's important I'm here."

"Ok, I'll get these sorted in no time," Terry said.

Theo was used to the motion of it all now. He had been in a balanced quandary his whole life. The research, the hunt, the buying, the selling, the deal, and the customers who always talked and only sometimes bought, all took a toll. Something clicked some years back when a fellow dealer called

him out of the blue. “Sixty’s around the corner,” they had said. “Can you believe you’re still doing this all these years later?”

“Oh, you know the saying,” Theo had said. “They’re buying this stuff like hotcakes these days.”

This week started out as the typical grind. There was a hustle here and a hustle there. A couple of auctions and a pesky customer that had a habit of taking things on loan.

“She’s a total pain in the ass,” Terry had said.

“I know,” Theo had said. “But she’s got a lot of dough and her mother’s a dear friend.”

But it all ended blissfully with the sale of an original E.A.Gruppe giltwood framed painting and a Harold Newton original painting, a set of six George III dining chairs, and an eighteenth-century French commode.

“The Met has one of those,” Theo had said to Terry. “I bid on it immediately and no one knew what they were looking at.”

It was the unexpected ending Theo hoped for, the perfect segway into a relaxing and well-deserved weekend with James. Theo loved the weekend like anybody else. Anyone could tell you that. He’d slip out of his loafers and into his slippers when the moment hit five. He’d loosen the top button of his shirt and reach for the cardigan slung behind the chair.

“It’s that glorious time again, Terry,” he’d say as he sauntered and slid across the oak floors towards the dimmer switch, the old shop keys dangling from his finger. “I’m going to wind that Jag out tonight good on my way home. I need to burn off some of that big-six carbon.”

“Oh Theo,” Terry would say, “Just be careful. You can’t see a damn thing out there.”

Then they’d gather their things and head towards the door like two aging aristocrats. Theo would drive off in a fervor to the home where James waited. They would talk of trips to France or Vietnam and sip wine like

always while the oven warmed and the sounds of crashing waves reached the kitchen.

“Lots of interesting antiques there,” Theo would say “All over the world, really. Could be a good opportunity to diversify the collection.”

“Or we could just, you know, relax,” James would say. “Couldn’t we just relax?”

But tonight was different, of course. The thought, the gruesome memory, a filthy product of his brain, struck fifteen minutes before this weekly ritual. The warm, comforting slide into the weekend took a turn down a black diamond on an icy day.

He still sat at his desk as Terry finished the paperwork.

“All done,” Terry said as he logged off for the night and collected belongings. “Any big plans for you and James this weekend,” he asked as he motioned toward the door.

Theo looked away from the Japanese vase that he’d been staring at in the corner.

“No, maybe just a walk on the beach and some tuna at Nat’s,” Theo said as his fingers abruptly, neurotically tapped the leather desktop again.

“Sounds lovely, Theo,” Terry said, “Well have a good weekend.”

“Yes, you too,” Theo said.

“Take care,” Terry said as he departed into the cold.

The door closed with a gentle click of the latch and after a moment, Theo sauntered over, as usual, to lock it and dim the lights, but this time, his eyes stared vaguely toward the ground with his vision blurred. In a moment, he found himself behind the desk again, forgetting if he’d made it to the door. Closing up was one of those rituals that no longer made memories. He poured two fingers from the brown bottle hiding inside the desk. He drank it. He slowly lifted each leg up on the leather top.

He ruminated on the memory that had struck. It began with his father, of course. There were times he remembered, times he thought he remembered, and times he knew he couldn't. Memories are like leaves piling up in October, he thought. He would have liked the leaves flying behind the Jag, he thought. And then he thought of his mother and then he thought of himself. He took out a dusty journal and began to write.

Dad was at work and we were in the car, Mom and I, heading toward camp where the road ran straight and the tall, skinny trees lined the gully that led to a thin forest. That was the kind of town Boxford was.

Damn, God bless the keyboard, he thought, as he stretched his hand and brought it back to the page.

I remember the way the old station wagon sounded. It was gray and I think it was quite old. I remember Dad cursing the damn thing out. This thing's a total lemon, he'd say. Yes, but it is safe, Mom would say.

It was a beautifully typical summer morning. A bit chilly. The dew still stuck to manicured grass. We were moving at a decent clip, as fast as an officer would allow. I could hear the tires glide over the cracks and the golf clubs jumping up and clattering down every time we hit an uneven patch in the road. And then we stopped abruptly with the sound of sliding sand beneath the tires. I was surprised as I recall. That was when I looked through the headrest slats and I saw it there, the baby deer, the fawn shall we call it, lying helpless and hurt and afraid and not yet dead. I heard it whine in agony. It was on the cold pavement, under the umbrella the trees formed over the road. I was on the cold leather looking on when Mom pulled the car slowly to the side. Her hands trembled; I remember that. And I did, too. I remember sliding left, it must have been left as I always sat to the right of Mom or Dad so I could see them drive and talk to them, where I looked past the curved windshield and into the whole world that looked bigger, brighter, and scarier. The fawn squirmed and I moved around in my seat. Its four petit legs moved around hopelessly. And that's when I saw a great big white Chevrolet, the kind rich mothers drove those days, speed off in terror with dust and smoke spewing behind it. I'd never seen a car so reckless and angry. It stood on its haunches as the tail dipped back. Mom, what's happening, I asked. Baby don't look, she said, this is nothing you need to see.

Theo dropped the pen when he felt a cramp arising and he poured another splash of brown liquid into the glass. On occasion, he was like this, and only when things seemed good. He resented his brain, the brain that granted him all this money and success and adventure and love, because of it. He picked up the pen when the glass was empty.

We sat there for a moment in silence and that's when I saw another car pull up. The lady got out in horror. She didn't know what to do. I looked on. It was a horror too much for me to bear at eleven. I remember covering my eyes before peeking again, hoping the deer mustered the strength to get up and hobble away to mother. It never did. It was a horror that couldn't be unseen so I embraced the horror with all the innocence I could stand to lose. The fawn continued its weakening hold on life. The big Chevrolet was long gone now, far down the road where the fork lay. It could be dangerous to help it now, Mom said. We could hurt it more. That bitch, I remember saying. That bitch just drove off. Yes, sweetie, I know, Mom had said. I know.

That was when the big oil truck came. I thought it would stop, and I told Mom that I thought it would stop and that the trucker would know what to do. He did, in a sense, though it was once again a sight that I had not ever seen and a sight I had never wanted to see. Its eighteen wheels came spinning past with tremendous inertia and they swayed left and right around the parked cars along the road. The wheels rolled outside the struggling fawn and the truck glided over it. I saw the fawn squirm through the gaps between each set of wheels and I thought for a moment more it would struggle before someone would save the poor thing. The woman on the side of the road had made a call and surely help was on the way. That was when the last pair of wheels swerved back straight and drove over the fawn's head. Its brains and guts spewed everywhere. Blood was everywhere. It was the most horrifying thing I'd ever seen. I looked away and looked back. Mom and I reacted, but I can't remember what we said or what we did as the last spasms of the fawn faded forever. All that I remember is that Mom lowered the window and looked at the woman across the street. I made the call, the woman said, and Mom rolled up the window and slowly drove off. There was nothing more.

Theo threw the pen down, ripped the sheet out of the journal, and shoved it in his pocket. He let out a sigh, not of relief but of acceptance. He sat there, in the dim light that surrounded him with the collection of things that

surrounded his life. With the shop keys in his cardigan pocket, he grabbed the car keys and left the shop behind, knowing it would all be there intact and present as it always was when he returned Monday. I have James to get back to, he thought.

He opened the Jag's metal door with a satisfying click, slipped into the leather bucket seat, and started her up with the typical rumble and clatter of a big six. Pulling away from the shop when her engine was warm, he quickly wound her out. He sailed through the wind, handling the road with precision, each turn expertly navigated, each gear shift perfectly matched as the old Jag bounced along, clanking and whining louder than the chilling winds. He ran her good that night down Lakeshore Drive. So good, in fact, his attention was only deviated when the jogger flashed before him on the sharpest curve. Theo abruptly and violently cut the wheel, sliding the rear axle as if over ice, toward the thin and tall forest that lined the road.

Silk Waves
Evelyn Walsh

No matter how far away I am from the ocean's edge, I still feel the ship heaving below me.

Men love to talk about their sea legs. How they can stand on deck and look out at the great horizon and not feel even the slightest twinge of seasickness.

What is the reverse called? Do sailors have a name for when you never get your land legs? With each step I take, I expect to feel the floor rise up to meet me--the undulation of a great, blue beast. I have always craved the ocean—to gaze at it endlessly, as if I could consume it all with my eyes.

I was born on a ship. Even if I could forget the memory that rested deep within my bones, no one would let me. It was a story I heard endlessly--in church, at the market, whispered from ear to ear for as long as I can remember being old enough to recognize that people were talking about me.

"...And that dress!"

The dress was their favorite part, it seemed. There was something so solid and undeniable about it--proof of the unbelievable. It rested in a hope chest in the parlor, glowing like a hot coal in everyone's imagination.

My whole life seemed to be a product of my beginning. My name, chosen by a man who was less a man and more a villain in a play. My future, the dress. “Ocean Born Mary,” they called me. Once, and forever more.

I was there for the events, but only technically--being but a babe in arms and a few days old at the time. And yet, I've heard it all so many times, I feel as though I can play it all before me like a magic lantern slide, vivid and more real than life.

My mother, recently widowed, young and beautiful and trembling below deck as pirates swarmed from their ship to ours, en route to the Colonies. Myself, small and squalid and red-faced. And the pirate captain, looming and mysterious and placing my little head below the palm of his hand as if I was something precious.

“Name the girl ‘Mary,’ and you’ll be free to go.”

Our freedom was gifted, all in exchange for a name. An easy trade--you can't blame my mother for taking it. No harm done, anyway. And of course, who could deny the other gift that came with it: the exquisite bolts of sea foam green fabric, wound through with whorls like the currents and smoother than any silk I've ever held before or since.

"For her wedding dress," he'd said at the time. A bold assumption that the wrathful newborn would ever get married.

But I did, didn't I? I met a man with eyes like dark ocean water, and I decided that was almost as good as looking at the sea. I was married in a dress made from the mysterious cloth, and I could've sworn that in its folds, I could feel the tangle of seaweed, the quick flick of some deep-sea fish's tail against my legs.

My husband and I had four sons, all of them as long-limbed and red-headed as I, but with their father's eyes. And I was happy, even if I did sometimes hear the sound of the surf emanating from the hope chest. But one day, their father died, leaving us all on our own.

And not long after, there was a knock on the door.

It was a bright morning when he appeared. Like a figure from a dream, grizzled and silver-haired--The Captain.

I never asked how he found me; somehow it only seemed natural that eventually the two of us would meet again. I let him in without a word, still in my widow's weeds and wondering if my boys would soon be without a mother.

But I did not expect what he told me--that the sea was too much for him to handle in his old age; that he had crossed too many people, and had too many near misses. He had bought a homestead in the mountains, far away from prying eyes, and intended to settle down there. Having heard of my recent loss, he thought that I might be his housekeeper.

To be christened by a pirate is one thing--to be one's housekeeper is another matter entirely. But he promised to pay me handsomely, then asked to see the dress out of the hope chest. As I watched him running his fingers across the fabric, gently unpacked from its nest of cedar, I knew I had no other choice.

Moving inwards, moving inland, away from the ocean--it made my bones ache.

Another compromise that took me away from the place I wanted to be. But the homestead was beautiful, I had to admit. And I felt great peace and satisfaction to watch my boys grow as tall and strong as the old bull pines that stood watch all along the mountainside.

The captain, for his part, was a good and kind master. The violence of years past had left him tired and washed out. Whatever fire that had first propelled him to live a life of blood and thievery had long since been banked and faded into weak embers.

Or so I thought. One night, as I sat by the hearth, darning and listening to one of the boys reading aloud, there was a flicker out the

window that drew my eye. Someone was outside, in the orchard behind the house where the crabapples grew. They held a torch--and as I watched, it was quickly extinguished.

I felt a great unease take root in my heart--something dark seemed to have entered the parlor. I hid my disquiet until later, when I was able to speak to the captain in private.

"Was someone about in the orchard?" I asked when I brought him his nightly tea in the little cabin-like room that he called his study. He had whirled on me then, his eyes lit up like pitch fire. For a moment, I glimpsed the man who had so terrified my mother and her fellow travelers. And then it was gone, and my benevolent employer was back.

"Nothing to worry yourself about, Mary," he said. "Just an old shipmate, stopping as he passed through."

Just an old shipmate. A likely story. So far out of the way, on a road rarely traveled, and not even invited in for supper or a cup of tea. I didn't believe it--I was and am many things, but I am certainly not a fool. I felt a powerful compulsion come over me--like Bluebeard's wife--to go out into the orchard one eve and search until I found a clue.

But I did not. Whatever force drove me, I subdued it. I looked at my boys, growing strong and brave in the serenity of the mountainside, and I knew I could do nothing to disturb them.

But sometimes, the choice is taken from us. Weeks later, I came back late from the market with a sense of dread in my gut that I could not explain. It only grew when I found the door unlocked, swinging lightly on its hinges in the cool, sweet evening air that was nipped around the edges with frost.

The captain was dead, gored on the floor next to the kitchen fire. I dropped the day's shopping in shock, and little wild potatoes and the last of the season's apples rolled into the blood pooling on the pine floors.

I searched the house, trying hard to avoid looking at the captain. My boys, peacefully asleep, rustling a little in their beds like hibernating bears; the old servant woman who helped me around the house, asleep in front of the servants' quarters fire; our old dog, Roger, growling at his master's still, silent form. Whoever had been here had left everyone else undisturbed—they had been on a particular mission. Had they found what they were looking for? I thought that perhaps they hadn't.

I ran out to the orchard. All across the ground, as if dug up by some massive forest creature, were little holes, hastily and messily dug. I went back to the house and took a shovel and lit a lantern, but not before looking

out the parlor window where I had seen the light, those few weeks ago. Where, in the dark sea of the orchard, had they been standing?

I thought I knew where. I took the shovel and started digging; the lights in the windows of the house were just barely visible in the distance--my boys sleeping upstairs, undisturbed, and the captain still dead in the kitchen.

I had been digging for some time, wondering now if I had the wrong place when my shovel struck something hard that rang in the dark, gravelly earth with the resonance of a gong. A metal chest peeked shyly out of the ground. I was winded--my palms had started to blister from the exertion of shoveling. I was used to hard work around the house, but not this. But the faint glimmer of metal under the grime renewed me--I clawed at the dirt with my bare hands, brushing the lid off and hauling the chest out of the ground.

I dragged it back to the house, but not before filling the hole back in and covering it back up as best I could with fall leaves. There was still a little rise in the ground, like a freshly dug grave.

I locked the windows and bolted the door, and only then noticed how much I shook. Had I ever been farther from home than at this moment? I was covered in filth, and my dress was soaked through with sweat. The chest sat in the middle of the kitchen floor, glinting dully in the firelight. I didn't know what to do. Could there still be someone outside, lurking in the dark and waiting for another chance to search the orchard? Did they know that I had retrieved the chest? And how would I explain the murdered man in the kitchen?

My mind spun through these and many other questions, but my eyes kept returning to the chest. It was so small--it had seemed larger when I was dragging it through the dark and back to the house. What was in it that was so heavy?

I went to open it, but the keyhole was plugged with dirt. I dug it out with my fingernails (already cracked from scrabbling at the earth), then sat back on my heels and wondered how I would get it open without a key.

I remembered the captain, sitting in his chair by the fire, watching the flames. A familiar pose for him. And always one hand on his vest pocket...

I gently rolled the dead man over, trying not to look at his wide and glassy eyes. I had seen death before, of course--my husband was cold and still in our bed, ocean blue eyes closed forever--but the violence of this, the shock still written across the captain's face unsettled me. I found what I was looking for, though--I pulled a little silver key from his waistcoat pocket and slid it into the chest's lock.

It was as if the contents of the chest were lit from within as I opened it, and only grew brighter as the firelight crept inside. Gold--the chest was filled with gold, tumbling out onto the floor as I lifted the lid the rest of the way. And wrapped around it, like a nest, was more of the beautiful, watery silk.

I felt myself to be in a strange and horrible dream. The corpse on the floor--the glittering chest of gold—a dragon's hoard. I froze in place. Almost unconsciously, I reached out to touch the fine silk pouring over the edge of the chest. I thought of my wedding day and of deep caverns at the bottom of the sea.

*

How deep does the sea expand below the surface? What lies there?

When I was just a child, I imagined stars at the bottom of the ocean, twinkling in response to the ones in the heavens. The bright, distant flash off of gold in sunken ships; light escaping from strange fishes' eyes.

The water below me glowed, the soft illumination revealing the barnacles and seaweed that clung to the ship's hull. I couldn't stop staring.

Wind skipped lightly across the water, and in the distance, I could hear the palm trees rattling on shore, beyond the lapping of the waves against the white, soft beaches. I felt as if the very universe lay below my feet. I watched the swarming, glowing water--I saw little jellyfish pulsing just below the surface.

I was born on the ocean. Could such a thing truly make such a difference for the rest of one's life? Why was it that my bones only felt steady on the deck of a ship?

As I have gotten older, I have learned that there are some mysteries that will never seize to haunt us. My boys are grown now--brave and clever and settled, with beautiful homes and farms carved out for themselves back in the green, dark woods of New England. My story has faded from memory, and no one connects my tall, red-headed boys with it. But I am here--and I am in many places. Whether real or imagined, I feel a sense of pursuit keenly at the back of my mind. The person who sought the horde wouldn’t give up, and questions about the captain’s death never quite went away—so I keep moving. The ship (chartered with the captain’s gold—what was left after making sure the boys were established) carries me wherever I want to go. I was an oddity, at first--some men even refused to sail with me. But soon, they came around.

"'Ocean Born Mary?" One of them said once I'd related my tale. "Sounds like you were made for the life.”

And I think that I was.

Removing
Emily Fabbricotti

The grandmother and the mother and the daughter had habits of removing
The grandmother boiled the grime off the dishes and sanitized the past
The mother threw out the broken things and compacted the pride
The daughter pulled the dust from behind the furniture and scrubbed the bad habits

They each felt the need to take things away to maintain the balance
Cutting out hearts and star shapes in the dough
and sweeping away the misshapen limbs their blank spaces create
To keep the clean in
the useless out
the momentum going

Toys and trashes
clutter and splashes
have no place in home or mind
(though there's stains they've left behind)

When lumps appear in their breasts
they're removed
One generation at a time
Scrape the cookies from the pan
Pull the splinter from your hand

The grandmother and the mother and the daughter welcome the removing
It's how to keep the family moving

The Moon on Hennepin Street
Kirsti Sandy

She died in a restaurant parking lot on a warm November night
Fell to the ground, struck by a car, found still breathing in the slush
As the paramedics held the light in her eyes
Did she think it was the moon, blinding her?

Thirty years before, Trinity Hall
Watching *Moonstruck* in the lounge
Reading *Wuthering Heights* in Sister Rita's class
Seeing love as a tether
To eternal suffering, but also to survival
Leaving to yell at her boyfriend on the hall phone
Quiet hours broken by her Jersey accent:
I came here for you, so what I am I supposed to do now?

She became a hospice nurse, tending the dying
Moved to Minnesota and married too late for children
The sound of sirens after George Floyd's murder haunted her
As she posted late one night
Flashes in the darkness moving across her bedroom wall

A woman in her fifties fell in a parking lot, the stories read
The cause of the fall undetermined
Alone just after dark
Her hair tangled in mud-soaked snow
Headlights blinking, rising, fading all around her

1989, Denny's sign on Route 93 to Boston
Moons over my Hammy and a pot of coffee
Voices hoarse from yelling over the music
At the flight school across town
Curling and spraying our hair side by side
In smoky dorm bathroom mirrors
Someone always throwing up or crying
Not ready until we're flammable, she liked to say
Handing me the curling iron like a joint

The paper said the driver turned himself in

Cooperated, complied with authorities
Officials reminded us of the risk intoxicated pedestrians
Pose to themselves and others
Toxicology reports forthcoming

After the parties, after Denny's, back at school
We turned up *"Like a Prayer"* in the parking lot
Opened the car doors wide
And danced
Until Sister Sue switched on her bedroom light
Our stilettos making ellipses in the snow

Life is a mystery
Everyone must stand alone

Our fifties a land we would reach by mistake, looking for something else

And here I find her
A snow angel, gazing at the night sky
Blank blue eyes capturing a glimpse of what had eluded her
All these years
Before the sirens, the tape, the police radios
The crowds, the ambulance
The light in her eyes
An outline in the slush, a sign hard to see
And harder to translate
In a parking lot
Under the moon on Hennepin Street

One Fall in Wakefield, Massachusetts
Kathleen Aponick

That October we'd taken the train
to Wakefield with Mother
to visit her friends, the O'Briens.
And as they talked in the house,
the three of us climbed a tree in the yard,
an apple tree by railroad tracks—
a magical place, so different from
our city yard by two three-deckers.
Were we eight or nine? Ten?
Sitting in the boughs we heard
apples land on leaves and breathed
in the sweet dying scent.
How long were we dreaming there
before the train approached,
its deafening roar barreling closer?
I gripped the bough, the train flew past
speeding by us toward other towns,
by children we'd never meet.
We played in the yard until Mother
came out, with the O'Briens, who asked
about school, our plans for the holidays.
What remains of that day never leaves me—
images of Mother, our friendly hosts,
our young bodies perched in the boughs,
but more than that: the scent of the apples,
the train shattering the silence,
the sudden nearness of death.

An Ode to Vermont
Sarah Calvin

"Where's home?" everyone asks, unfamiliar accents and faces in an unfamiliar place.

In an instant, I know I'll either fit in perfectly, or feel hopelessly out of place. My fellow freshmen are mostly city people, from Los Angeles, Houston, New York City, and other American metropolises. A few, like me, are from New England. "Vermont," I say, conscious of the dropped "t"; knowing, somehow, my acknowledgment of my small-town roots immediately marks me as "other." A country girl in Beantown. "Oh, cool!" they say, surprising me, and the conversation moves along without a hiccup, our various places of origin no longer of concern. We're all Emersonians now, residents of Boylston Street, united as newly christened Lions.

I am rendered invisible as I move among the nearly 1,000 new members of the Class of 2025. We've been crammed into Boston's Majestic Theatre like sardines for the grand kickoff of our week-long orientation. An eager buzz fills the theater as new friends are made, social medias are exchanged, and our prospective majors are discussed. It's a strange feeling to be surrounded by 18-year-olds who will someday become the brilliant creatives of our generation. It's even stranger to wonder if, one day, I will become one of them too.

******

Home, for me, will always be an 18th-century farmhouse alongside a potholed dirt road. Behind the historic farmhouse rests 21 acres of land, my own personal wilderness I'll have never fully explored. There's a rusted barbed wire fence, sagging by the wall where the cows used to roam long before my parents bought our house; the brush-covered "islands," patches of exposed bedrock, and small bushes that my mom diligently mows around; the maple grove that we tap each February; and, most importantly, the treehouse and zip line tucked away in the woods. My dad, ever the engineer, drafted the plans for the treehouse one winter's night, and as soon as spring warmed the air, he set to work, buying pressure-treated boards for longevity and drawing my mother's criticism for spending so much.

"They won't use it forever," she'd said, all four of us (my parents, my brother, and I) standing underneath the nearly-finished creation. My parents glanced over at my brother, nearly six feet tall at fourteen, a visual reminder that youth is finite and children one day grow up. Yet,

even as time marched along, the treehouse summer stretched on forever as COVID halted some of our plans and drew me back to the construction as my dad and brother hammered away, the resounding echo of their tools disturbing the quiet as nature met man.

Home, to me, is the roar of the woodstove we keep in the basement. It exists in the rumble of the tractor as it leaves the pole barn, its tires splattering our gravel driveway behind it. It is visible in the charred scars left behind on the beams from a fire that nearly ruined my house.

Home is also found in the play my brother and I wrote together; the strange shout of "Galen Longbeard!" (our lead villain) still sends my mother into fits of laughter every time she hears the name. Home is where my brother and I harmonize in song, where the crescendo of the piano emits from the dining room, where music and creativity exist inside and nature and exploration wait impatiently outdoors.

I did not find my home in Boston. The constant commotion of city living proved to be a far cry from the quiet calm of my Vermont home, and I felt unsettled and adrift. I shall never be fully at ease in a city, for they require a person to forgo their manners and move through their day without so much as a pleasant greeting to passersby. Although I enjoy going for a visit, I could never stay, for in a city, you can't see the stars. You can't hear the crickets chirp at night or the songbirds sing in the morning.

Although I am still searching for home, I know I'll always be able to return to the friendly communities of my native Vermont. The people here are warm and welcoming, with good stories to pass the time and good food to fill your belly. They are creative folks, skilled tradespeople, hard-working farmers, and dedicated small business owners. They share a love of this place's rugged beauty, and proudly drop their t's. I may be young still, but I know I will remain grateful this beautiful place was my first home.

Early Morning on The Cape
John Grey

A northeaster
blows mist off the dunes
like smoke from a pipe,
diffuses the salt-spice of the sea
among pines and beach grass
and there, high on rocks,
ring-billed gulls
bob in place, strain at the wings,
as I stroll the long narrow beach,
all flailed-hair and footprints
that duck in and out of the chilly waves,
by spiral shell and driftwood,
past the affluent houses
beyond the public swimming area,
smiling at icy faces
that look out from their verandas,
until I reach the chasm,
where breakers thrash hellish
but I can speak loud and clear
into its vortex
and listen to my voice
talk back to me,
hollow and vibrating.
Every day, same routine,
same reveries.
I cannot praise
this time of morning enough.

Birds
Jon Bishop

I just want to be loved, you say
to the almost-empty street. It's 5 pm,
near dark, and it's all painted with rain,
gray on gray, like the dove crying to the sky
as it fights the wind, its wings
and body shivering to a crumb,
then gone, erased, and if you ask people now,
the few, if they've seen this bird,
they'll say nothing or they'll stare,
or maybe they'll answer who,
like the dove and its friends,
the ones emerging from every building,
now taking flight, twirling in air,
like leaves loosed from late-autumn trees,
who, who, who, who,
in time with the streetlights and the shoes
sloshing through wet sidewalks,
trying hard not to slip,
because it's hard to be loved,
because, sometimes, here
on this forever-spinning earth,
the only things that acknowledge you,
however indirectly,
are the birds.

Eighteen Below
Robbie Gamble

All night, the thwack of tree limbs self-amputating,
their surging saplines ambushed in this snap of cold.

I dreamed of the man I once treated, who passed out
across a manhole cover, discovered next day stuck

to the embrace of his steel pillow, eventually losing
nose, cheek, and forearm in blackened frostbite slough.

Nights that dismember us
irretrievably, and a dawn so still

I could forget to breathe
in spite of the daybreak,

as if all verbs on this slope
are ceasing to activate,

nouns grinding
to naught.

land of forever
jsburl

(winter ascending)

the snow arrives flying quickly
from here to where?
will there be a resting place?
parting around last year's corn stalks
creating dunes and valleys
here and there which
forever change shape
at the whim of the wind
it flows by white yet iridescent
solid to see impossible to hold.
shimmering like diamonds in the sun
sultry as smoke in the evening half light
tufts of grass stand on patches of ground
blown bare by the buffeting wind
a reminder amidst the white endlessness
of a time when color abounded
forever locked
in the frigid air of winter
it's hard to remember
a time of warmth
a time of sweet scents
and bird songs
in this land of forever...

Buyout
Don Noel

His first reaction, he told Betsy that evening, was anger; he'd felt choked by the hot blood at his collar. "I've worked 42 years at that newspaper, and the damned company doesn't even have the decency to talk to me man-to-man. Put a letter in my mailbox while I'm out to get some lunch, for God's sake!"

"Dear Harry," the letter he brought her began – a letter easily recognized as pseudo-personalized by a computer – "You are eligible for an unusual opportunity. . ."

Ordinarily, Harry was imperturbable, phlegmatic, a man who handled deadline crises without even seeming hurried. "I'm a newsman," he told a young colleague who marveled at his unflappability on one occasion. "You gotta like the heat in the kitchen."

He looked the part: big-boned, a bit overweight despite working out five days a week – just a bit, not quite a paunch. He could put on a suit just back from dry-cleaning and look rumpled five minutes later. His hair, decidedly graying, seemed perpetually to need a comb. He'd worn glasses since his teen years; they were thicker now, with half-moons at the lower edge of the lenses.

His uncharacteristic anger, he told Betsy, dissolved almost immediately into foreboding. "I'm 64 years old. Planned to stay at the paper until 70, and save money for a decent retirement. Who in hell is hiring people my age? Everybody's downsizing!"

He didn't tell her that his hands shook, there in the office, as he re-read the letter. They had financial obligations: Willie – no, Will now – back in college for an advanced degree, Marcie and her husband may be needing help with grandkids' education. And not much by way of savings. They'd moved to a more modern house a decade ago; there was a mortgage. They prudently had enough term life insurance to see Will through, and to pay off the mortgage if something happened to either of them; but apart from planning against such a catastrophe, he'd never imagined a day when he might be unable to provide.

Nor did he tell his wife of the vivid image that had popped unbidden into his mind, of a crumpled automobile at the bottom of a ravine. Years ago, he'd been on the police beat – the cop shop, they called it, one of his stops as he traversed most of the beats a metropolitan newspaper offered. There was a fatal one-car accident: A man had gone off a steep cliff.

"Could have been a suicide," the sergeant had told him. "There's no way to tell. Didn't have his seat belt fastened. Or maybe just distracted by something. Can't tell."

"Can't tell?" Harry remembered asking.

"A lot of suicides are obvious," the cop had said. "But insurance policies don't pay off on suicide: put a gun to your head and kiss the insurance money goodbye. A death like this goes down as an accident; there's no way to prove otherwise. If this guy meant it, though, it's a hard way to go. You could end up crippled for life instead of dead. Messy."

Although that cliff was on the road he traveled every day from the newspaper over Ragged Mountain to their suburban home, he'd almost forgotten the incident. It came back now in granular detail.

Getting through the rest of the day at the paper had been hard. His mind kept wandering back to the letter, and then he'd have to begin again whatever he'd been doing. He wanted to talk with his boss – Charlie had always been supportive – but wasn't sure he could keep his composure and thought it wiser to talk with Betsy first. He also thought of just going for a walk, but wasn't sure that he'd come back to finish the next day's pages. So he forced himself, step-by-step, through the routine until it was done.

Driving home, cresting the mountain, he glanced at that ravine. For anyone who wanted to stop and gawk at the view back to the city, there was an extra-wide shoulder parking area. At the edge was a stout wooden post-and-beam railing that hadn't been there years ago. He paused at the shoulder for a moment, trying to recall some more recent stop here. He was sure he'd tarried up here, but it wouldn't come. After a time, he eased back onto the road and drove home.

●

Betsy, sensing his mood, curled up against him on the couch so she wouldn't seem to be reading his face. "What are they offering?"

"Oh, they probably think it's generous. A year's salary, health coverage for another year, and an extra two years toward my pension. That doesn't cost them a damned thing; it comes out of the pension fund, which the government protects, and the company's bankers have invested well.

"But even with that extra," he added, "we can't afford to start drawing down that pension yet. I'll have to look for a job."

There was a time when he'd have set out with cocksure confidence. He'd been a good reporter, his byline known all over the city. He'd done general assignments, the cop shop, and features, and had worked his way up to cover City Hall and then state politics. There'd been some journalistic prizes to hang on the wall. He had a reputation for accuracy and fairness;

not everyone in the news business did. A lot of important people felt he'd done them a favor by not hyping a story. He'd been a good writer, good with a catchy lead paragraph, but not a sensationalist.

He'd been on a first-name basis with a hundred or more movers and shakers in this town. Back in the day, he could have telephoned any of them to look for a job. In fact, years back, some had sniffed around to see if he'd take a PR job, or even a senior advisory position. He'd had more than one solid offer, but he'd stayed with the paper, with the craft he knew best.

Then, as an editor, he'd become a faceless technocrat; he no longer had much direct contact with news sources. "If I were still out on the front lines, I'd have a better chance," he told her. "But I'm not, and I don't." She turned her face up to him, and he managed a lips-closed smile.

"Is nobody hiring?" she asked.

"Damned few. I read the other day that the number of working journalists in the nation is half what it was 20 years ago."

He was a good editor. He'd begun back when news stories were hammered out on a manual typewriter – later, an electric – and editors marked up copy with a thick No. 4 pencil, hollered for a copy boy, and sent the story upstairs. There, in his first years, it was set into type by men and women at Linotype machines, half of whom were deaf because that was an advantage in a racket-noisy composing room. He still kept an engineer's protective plastic insert in his shirt pocket. It was part of his persona, even though nowadays he rarely used a pen or pencil. It was all keystrokes now.

He'd managed the transition to computers easily; he had one at home before the company went digital. Editing copy was neater and easier: Mark a few words for deletion, type in better words, write a headline, send it back with a keystroke to the reporter for review, maybe argue a bit over nuances of language, then send it upstairs to be set into type – not by deaf fingers, but by a robot.

There was nothing robotic about the editing. You had to know the news and the names, recognize an error, maybe call the reporter to get more details or clarify a point. The newspaper's dwindling institutional memory would die a little more when he left. They couldn't replace his sense of history, his knowledge of who did what a dozen or three dozen years ago, and how that affected today. "They don't care," he told Betsy. "Only about the bottom line."

The company surely couldn't complain about his adaptability. In the last few years, he'd learned pagination, assembling multiple stories, and creating whole pages on the computer. There had been layoffs and reductions in force by attrition upstairs, as people like him first replaced

the Linotype operators, and later the men and women who pasted "cold type," into pages to be photographed into printing plates.

He'd known them all, even the deaf-mutes. Handicapped? Hell, no: perfectly suited to the din and clatter of that day's composing room. They could communicate easily without shouting; he'd learned some sign language. He'd also learned to keep his hands off the lead bars of type, which the union insisted could be handled only by its members.

The hushed quiet of the composing room today might be a sign of progress, but at a human cost. He'd attended retirement parties for those back-shop men and women as the union relented, letting the company modernize but winning decent early-retirement packages for its people. He saw some of them occasionally, working at the post office or driving people to work when he dropped off his car for service. It made him sick, seeing people make no use of a lifetime's expertise, earning a fraction of what they'd been worth as skilled craftsmen. He'd felt for them, but he'd taken comfort in the assurance that he was not so easily replaced.

Now it turned out he'd been wrong about that.

Until today, there'd been a comfortable rhythm to his life. He got up early and went to the basement for a half-hour on the rowing machine while he watched the morning TV news. That was mostly a repeat of the 11 p.m. news after he'd gone to bed; he watched to see if there had been a late-breaking story or something the paper had missed. He was in the office by 8:00 a.m., read the morning paper carefully before the phone started to ring, and often called reporters still at home to suggest a new angle to explore. He worked until late in the afternoon.

Fridays were especially long, preparing pages for Saturday and Sunday and Monday, usually keeping him until a late dinner. He was good at suggesting stories a reporter could write Friday morning that still sounded fresh on Monday. He no longer earned overtime; he was an executive, part of "a prized management team," they told him at an annual dinner. He and Betsy had come home from all those events feeling more secure, bearing a fresh plaque or memento of the company's confidence in him.

Hard to square with today's letter.

Family life had suffered, but Betsy was understanding and filled in capably. She was a schoolteacher, so her day began not long after his. At times, she'd made breakfast for the children, but left before their school bus arrived. He'd tried to do his share: visiting with teachers at open houses, taking Willie to Little League and Marcie to track meets, even serving a few years as Scoutmaster when the troop and the boys needed him.

She read the letter again. “Do you have to take the buyout? It’s an offer, right?”

No, he didn’t have to take it, but the handwriting was on the wall. “They don’t want me anymore. If I don’t take this, they’re just as likely to lay me off a year from now, without the sweetener. I’d just sit around waiting for the ax to drop. I don’t even want to think about it.”

The paper had been independent when he started. Then a chain bought it. Now the chain had been swallowed up by a bigger chain. The new owner wanted to combine print journalism with television; it owned one of the stations in town. There was already a vest-pocket TV studio in a corner of the newsroom. There, reporters and editors stared into a robot camera, pretending to be face-to-face with an evening news anchor in a studio halfway across town, describing the stories to be printed the next day.

He didn’t know a damned thing about television. Over the years, the TV stories had grown shorter and less informative, yielding to viewers’ short attention spans – or more likely, he thought, fostering that taste for brevity. He couldn’t remember a television story that had satisfied him; he was always left hungering to read the newspaper’s account.

And he wasn’t telegenic: the glasses, graying hair, sagging midriff, rumpled look. The boob-tube audience wanted young people, sex symbols, or else the, rare man whose trim figure defied age, whose angular jaw and carefully coiffed gray hair suggested avuncular wisdom. He’d occasionally joined a Sunday morning panel on public television, where an un-suave appearance was a badge of expertise, but even in that relaxed setting he spoke hesitantly. His voice was too high-pitched, conveying insufficient macho.

He had a month to decide. Time to look around, to see if there was, somewhere, an insurance company or bank or industrial corporation looking for an experienced man who had been on the receiving end of PR, so would know how to spin a story, put the best face on the company’s latest move.

He’d had friends go into public relations. They made more money and had better hours, but he’d felt a bit sorry for them, settling for a life removed from the real work of news. Ironically, some of them had recently been downsized, too.

It wasn’t a good time to go looking for PR jobs, either.

And he’d have to submit to a physical. He felt in good health, but his cholesterol was high, and he carried those extra pounds. He had an enlarged prostate, although no sign of cancer. He found himself thinking of reasons a company might find to avoid hiring him.

It wasn't a good time to look for any kind of work.

"Make up a list," his schoolteacher wife advised, as though she were giving him a homework assignment. "Write down all the people you've helped over the years. A lot of them remember you."

Good advice; sensible Betsy. He went up to the computer after supper. His Rolodex was years out of date; not being on the street, he hadn't kept it up or put it on the computer. He had to use the phone book and the yellow pages, but he put together a list of people who might remember him, names and addresses. He printed it out and showed it to Betsy, who thought of a few he'd forgotten. "Don't hurry it," she said. "A few more will pop into your head. There's time."

He tinkered with a letter: "Dear XX. It's been several years since we worked together. Now I need your help. Downsizing at the newspaper has reached me. . .."

He tried the first paragraphs three times, comparing the words on the white screen. How to phrase it and put the best face on it? Plead for a job? Or try to brag about a supposed opportunity to snag a skilled veteran? He saved all his draft versions and set the task aside.

Talking to the kids always cheered him up, feeling their youth and vitality. He got Betsy on an extension, and phoned each of them, not mentioning the buyout business, just chewing the fat. Will had a term paper that wasn't going well. "Keep at it, son," he advised. "Keep plugging. The words will come. You've got enormous potential, guy."

The words stuck in his throat: too much like advice to himself, but at his age, he didn't have Will's potential anymore. He managed to voice a cheering chuckle for Will, but had to end the conversation and hang up before he lost it. He took off his glasses to wipe his eyes; he was glad that Betsy was down in the kitchen.

She came upstairs, bringing him a glass of Scotch that he usually denied himself on weeknights. "Relax, honey," she said. "You don't need to solve it all tonight. Come to bed."

He was too upset to think about romance, and he couldn't face trying to sleep. "You go ahead, honey. I'll just poke around at this a little longer."

She made a face. "Don't be too late."

●

Where was that insurance policy? He thumbed through the file drawer and found it. Yes, enough to get Will through his Ph.D. and let Betsy pay off the house, plus some left over. Maybe he could buy a little more coverage. No, that would arouse suspicion. Act now, before his resolve weakened.

The shot glass was still half-full. He set it on the counter, went to listen at the bedroom door for Betsy's steady breathing, glad that she was such a sound sleeper, then eased down the stairs. He turned off the chime on the alarm system – a quick *beep* – so she wouldn't hear him leave the house.

He hadn't put the car away, so he didn't need to open the noisy garage door; he eased into the car and backed out. Two blocks, then onto the highway, and up the mountain to the spot from cop-shop days. The precipice was on the homebound side, but there was no traffic, so he veered across lanes to park and get out of the car. Just scoping it out. Looking straight out, the downtown lights were off to the right.

The ravine was deeper than he'd remembered, steep-sided, huge boulders at the bottom. The highway department had put up that timber rail, but maybe hadn't brought enough material because there was a gap midway. He paced it: comfortably wider than a car, but one would have to steer carefully for the opening while keeping the foot on the throttle.

He hurried back to the car; didn't want a cop on routine patrol to remember his being parked there, let alone stop to ask what he was up to. He started to fasten the seat belt, thought better of it, and eased back onto the inbound lane and down the hill toward the city.

Traffic was so light enough at this hour that he could have done a U-turn at the foot of the hill, but it would be just his luck to have a cop come into view. He drove farther until he saw a housing development he could turn into and then come around the block to start back.

He tried to concentrate on the road and not think about Betsy and the kids. The thoughts came anyway: sweet Betsy, who would half-waken if he came to bed and murmur encouragement as she fell back to sleep. Will, back at college, and Marcie and the grandkids.

No, put them out of his mind. This was for them. Halfway up, he nudged the speed up, clenching the steering wheel with both hands, steadying not the wheel but the hands.

And then it came back, the more recent time he'd parked on top of this hill. Years ago, with a frighteningly despondent Will, whose fourth and final Ivy League application had just been turned down.

"Son," he'd said, "state college isn't a disaster. Do well there, and you may be able to transfer up. This won't be the last time life gives you a kick in the ass instead of a boost. The measure of a man isn't how lucky he is; it's how he overcomes bad luck." Turned out to be good advice: Will had buckled down at State, ended up at Harvard, and now was back for advanced study.

And good advice for himself, too. He reached the crest, the panoramic view of city lights off to the right, almost behind him . . . and held to the road.

He felt the sweat in his armpits as the tension drained away; he was limp as a dishrag, and almost that wet. He felt relief as he turned into the driveway. He left the car outside again and tiptoed into the house.

Past one, but not ready for sleep yet. He found the Scotch, went to the den to turn on a tiny desk light and then the computer. He had a resumé somewhere, begun years ago; he searched. There it was; it seemed ancient. Must be from the last time someone offered him a job: It described a younger man, one he had difficulty remembering. There had been promotions since then, added responsibilities, and a few prizes.

He began brushing it up. It felt good, at first, recalling good times. Then it hit him again how unlikely this was to do any good.

He shut down the computer, turned off the light, and stood.

Standing on the Edge of Some Crazy Cliff
Terence Patrick Hughes

It all began when Mazel Hubbard showed up at town hall for a school committee meeting. At first, it was to no one's particular care or interest, she was just one of a half-dozen townsfolk spread across the ill-arranged metal folding chairs that sat before, but not near the two long, time-worn tables at which were seated the committee's chairman and his cohorts. They were big people for such a small town, a justice of the peace, a retired college professor, albeit early retirement for dubious reasons, a married couple who are the longest-tenured teachers at the high school, and a grocer, a boisterous and slightly creepy old man who is rumored to backdate milk. This disparate yet dedicated committee governs over the only school in town, which presently serves around 196 students from K-12, all hived into one poorly designed, yet soundly built travesty of architecture abutting the woods near the rail depot. They're well-meaning folks who all sent their own kids through the system and now do their best to give back to the community, a noble gesture in my professional opinion, which is solely based on three months of covering the meetings for the town's only newspaper, *The Weekly Warbler*. Bad name, worse job.

The expiring afternoon was warm, but the first chill of approaching winter had crept into the room as the radiators rattled to life and the last bit of daylight eased from blue to black outside the windows, while the justice of the peace, Reggie, called the meeting to order. In the midst of much paper-shuffling to figure out where the hell they had left off, the denizens of the dusty room were collectively startled as a woman stood from her seat in the second row, just behind Hairy Tom, who has been waiting months for fund approval to fix the school's toilets, and ironically, Hairy Tom is bald so it was above his shining dome that we first caught sight of the furious face of Mazel Hubbard.

"I want to know what this committee is going to do about Huckleberry Finn!"

In all honesty, the committee was prepared to do nothing about Huckleberry Finn, as he was not on the agenda; item one would be arguing about the pros and cons of adding a single snow day to next year's calendar and, if time permitted, item two would be arguing the pros and cons of paying Hairy Tom, who was not even a licensed plumber, but a jack-of-some-trades and may have been responsible for the leaky pipes to begin with. But any question posed to the committee does set gears of responsibility in motion, creakily, unsteadily, yet onward.

“Whaaat?” Reggie stopped shuffling papers and looked over his bifocals at the source of surprising disruption.

Mazel Hubbard was known by some folks in town, but rarely seen. She lives up on the mountain in a cabin handed down by her grandfather who was once accused of barn burning before it was found to have been the fault of a cow who ate fireworks. She was not married and had no children. She was not an old woman, nor was she young. Not heavy in stature, but certainly not slight with a frame that appeared to be regularly exercised, but likely in a fashion such as splitting wood. Her face was classic in features, while not anything to remember. The dress she wore was plain, but certainly not homemade. However, it was not through appearance that she captured the committee’s attention, but with invective served from a scorching cauldron within.

“I said,” Mazel Hubbard fell into the tone of one who expects to be not only heard, but heeded, “What is this committee going to do about Huckleberry Finn? Our high school sophomores are being taught this book by Mr. Tom Sawyer, who is a pornographer and a supporter of child abuse and promoter of the desecration of The Bible.”

No one responded for a few long moments as the committee members exchanged searching glances, and we few spectators sat in a hush, wondering if it were our place to correct the authorship of a book being pilloried for such offenses.

“I think you mean Mark Twain,” offered Susie Hunt of the long-tenured teaching Hunts.

“I mean business!” Mazel shouted and kicked a heel against the folding chair behind her, which caused Hairy Tom to crane his neck around further than it seemed comfortable, “This committee condones the pollution of children’s minds and Mr…the *author in question’s* book is a source of toxic education.”

Again, a long silence, which I felt compelled to break, after all, I’d been to college; you can’t spend all that money and not add to a burgeoning debate.

“Hemingway said all American writing comes from ‘Huckleberry Finn’.”

Mazel Hubbard turned and laid the curse of the ages on me with her eyes. I was sure she was going to physically assault me, if not immediately, then quite soon after.

“I’m not voicing the concerns of American writers,” she hissed, squeezing her eyes so tight that they were simply two thick lines of blue mascara, “I’m voicing the concerns of the American people!”

The last part she fired at the still confused committee, who by now, were sensing storm clouds on the horizon and did some more glancing at one another before Jeffrey Hoswax, the greasy grocer, attempted to negotiate an end to the matter.

"You know I read that book as a boy," he smiled and assumed his best come-on-in-and-buy-some-carrots posture, chin up, chest out, "I didn't find it offensive. In fact, it was rather touching."

It was a poor choice of words on the grocer's part, for Mazel Hubbard heard nothing but "touching," which set her off on a tirade of wild accusations against the committee, the school, the teachers, and the town government, meaning Steve Mower, who had been town manager for roughly forty years and rarely comes out of his house. Some of the words were very harsh, others were unprintable, but I got it all down until the cramp in my hand forced me to quit taking notes.

My story recounting that evening's proceedings appeared on the front page of the *Warbler* just below a poorly lit photo of Jan Wolfscrent's 400-pound pumpkin, with my own devised headline, "Huckleberry Finn vs. Decency - Never the Twain Shall Meet?". Not many got the joke, but everyone bought the paper and the newly minted scandal took off across the broken land like a dreaded summer wildfire as folks, previously content with spousal or employment hostilities, now became incensed that the "filthy" book in question remained in the school's curriculum. As expected, the next committee meeting, four weeks later, was standing room only with a line out the door and spectators fighting each other for space to look into the windows. I may be a cub reporter in a scrub town, but I know how to stir a pot, all right. Inside the hall, a reasonable decorum was demanded with seats given to ladies and the men discouraged from smoking, while amongst the very large crowd outside, someone had produced a keg of beer and the atmosphere was soon drunk with excitement and intoxicated townies.

Mazel Hubbard had prepared herself in such a fashion that few doubted she would run against Mower next spring and win in a landslide. There had been some kind of makeover, and although she was not a classically pretty woman, nor modernly fetching, some might venture "handsome," this evening, she was expertly primped, blond hair pulled back in a bun, the hard cheekbones having their first acquaintance with some rouge, and the wood-chopper body was smartly dressed in a dark pant-suit, like a capitalist on a mission. Following a chorus of whoops and hurrahs outside, all eyes were on her as she entered the building; similar cheers and chatter arose as she made her way to the exact folding chair that she had

occupied in the first meeting, which was being guarded by the occupant one seat over, a silver-haired older man who had the appearance of a giant bird of prey stuffed into a pinstriped suit. It seems that Mazel Hubbard had lawyered up.

After the crowd had quieted, leaving only the muffled sounds outside of the pop-up tavern which had added a banjo to its din, Reggie attempted to call the meeting to order when Mazel Hubbard stood up, also dragging her lawyer to his polished-leather feet.

"We have a list!"

For some reason, the crowd decided to erupt in cheers, not knowing what was on the list, but expecting it to be for the preservation of the soul, they supported it with a long round of hurrahs until Reggie waved a white handkerchief, not to surrender, but to get a word in.

"We haven't even called the meeting to order and…"

Mazel Hubbard launched the first of many boos, a low guttural moan that lasted a mere moment before the entire room was raining their discontent upon the committee in gleeful excitement.

"All right, all right!" Reggie shouted, now mopping his brow with the white kerchief, "Let's hear it!"

Mazel Hubbard waited for the room to calm; boos having turned into a crescendo of cheers, then she held out her hand as her lawyer produced a manila folder from his briefcase, snapping it open and shut with authority, and out of the folder, came a two-page document from which Mazel Hubbard read aloud.

"We the people demand that the following books be removed from the shelves of our school system immediately for the good of our student's education, citizenship, and spirituality. Number one, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mr. Mark Twain which promotes indecency, child abuse, and interracial perversions. Second, *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger due to obscene language, deviant morals, and heresy. Third, *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck, which is a work of Russian socialist propaganda that fouls the pure and courageous spirit of the United States of America!"

Cheers, shouts, and a brief chorus of the national anthem ensued until Reggie was compelled to stand on his chair and wave the by-now-sopping handkerchief in the air. The crowd quieted, but outside things were beginning to sound unhinged, so nervously the chairman attempted to move forward with protocol.

"As we advised Ms. Hubbard at the last meeting, the reading lists for K-12 are considered and approved in August of each year and…"

"So you approve of racial, social, and sexual perversions taught to our *children*?!" Mazel Hubbard screeched.

With that one loaded question fired at the entire committee, she took them down. As the crowd erupted into a tirade of accusations, demands, and threats, the members were forced to sequester to the bathroom, and there they remained for a full ten minutes before reappearing in unison and handing in their resignations, clumsily written in sharpie on a long sheet of toilet paper. To the last of them, the committee members would agree that it wasn't a question of culture, race, or sex that forced them to quit. After all, outside of the high school musical in the spring and the always tepid end-of-year band performance, there was no culture in the town. Hardly anyone spoke of sex unless in the throes of it, and as for race, the town was 98% white on the census and for the life of the 98% they had no idea where the other 2% were hiding. It was simply a matter of personal safety, and the fact that none of the committee were paid for their services, sealed the deal.

Upon the collective resignation, Mazel Hubbard called for an immediate election to replace the "quitters" and nominated herself and two others who were conveniently seated next to her, Karen Simmons, a mother of twelve whose husband had died heroically the year before fighting off a moose that invaded Guffy's Tavern, and Ralph Stokes, the deputy sheriff who had spent five years in the military after high school and six months in the penitentiary after the military, everyone agreeing that the adjustment was hard for Ralph, but deep down, he's just a good boy with a bad haircut. The crowd didn't even have to put a vote to paper, as soon as the three were nominated, they hoisted the new committee members' chairs aloft and carried them out to enjoy what little was left of the beer.

Even before my next story hit the presses, this time appearing at the top of the front page with the headline "Take Heed! Don't Read!." the Hubbard Three had removed a total of six books from the high school curriculum and a whopping twenty-three from the K-8 libraries. The count was to be twenty-four, but a last-minute bid to defend, *Archie the Lonely Pelican*, as having no references to the libidinal desires of birds, was successful. Within the course of the next several months, the committee had additional books removed from library shelves, hats of any kind were forbidden on school grounds; even for the baseball team, a dress code was enforced, causing a bitter end to the opened-toed sandal and disappearance of tee-shirts except for one's that carried uplifting messages in reference to the afterlife, and what was considered by Mazel Hubbard to be a personal victory, the Pledge of Allegiance was recited in the morning, again before

lunch, and put to music with the insistence that children should sing it on the bus rides home.

When spring arrived with its scents of flowers, grass, and trees freshly abloom, as pollen allergies raged through sinus cavities, the Hubbard Three announced that the high school's production of "Kiss Me Kate" was canceled due to sexually suggestive language in the title alone. This was soon followed by the announcement that the free lunch program for the children of poor families would no longer be offered, as Mazel Hubbard was convinced that it was a gateway to drug abuse. By the end of the school year, when graduation took place without the traditional caps and gowns, for caps were forbidden on school grounds and Schaeffer's Uniform Supply refused to cut a gowns-only discount, the town's education system had gone through such drastic changes that an article appeared in a city newspaper. After waiting days for a copy to arrive on the *Antler Express*, I could only stare with envy at their headline, itself lifted from a Mazel Hubbard quote after she had sacked the head of school for questioning her authority, "God is My Principal." Soon flags, posters, and tee-shirts appeared with that slogan emblazoned in red, white, and blue on the chest and back. At the final rally of the school year, for the committee began holding monthly rallies in the evenings on the football field with Mazel Hubbard as the final speaker, whipping up the crowd into a blessed, wild frenzy with promises of big changes, none ever specified, none ever questioned.

This is why it was so strange that after the ribbon cutting ceremony in front of the high school before the next fall's classes, the ribbon being in honor of the washed and dried curriculum as the building was still its crumbling old self, Mazel Hubbard quite suddenly retreated from public life. She could have easily run for office and won, her massive following was a dedicated, frenzied bunch, but that had seemingly never been her goal. Mostly, she retired to the cabin up on the mountain, still holding on to the school committee seat and hand-picking replacements whenever the other members grew tiresome to her, but otherwise, allowing the many followers to straighten and steer the town in the same manner in which she gutted the school library, quickly, just barely legal, and with pure hellfire.

As time wore on, the very act of townsfolk criticizing any tenant of Mazel Hubbard's philosophy of life became suspect and quite often punished immediately, not in the court of law but in less rigid environments, such as at barber shops, church suppers, and Little League games. Occasionally, parents would come to blows over hotly controversial issues such as child literacy, fascism, and allowing a girl to play shortstop. This ultimately led to a contingent of families picking up and leaving town,

only after attempting to start a home-school group that was instantly labeled socialist and disbanded through aggressive intimidation by neighbors. Even before the homes were sold and moving vans loaded, Mazel Hubbard suggested that the "quitters" were all secretly Canadian. Other than appearing to make such brief yet volatile statements on town matters, Mazel Hubbard was only otherwise seen buying groceries and occasionally going to church, fully content that her work on the public school system's books, classes, teachers, and administration had scrubbed the filth and danger from the town. The students now had a clear path to learn their lessons and embrace a future as pure and prosperous citizens of this great nation.

The town's new direction seemed to be blessed from above, as just prior to the winter holidays, news broke, by yours truly, under the headline, "New University = Jobs Aplenty," that a prestigious college from the next state over was eyeing our town as a site for their new campus. It seems they had grown out of their cramped urban location and the founder of the college, Reginald Shat, now almost one hundred, was a Bible-thumping, oil-claim-jumping millionaire whose own school's rigid curriculum could challenge Mazel Hubbard's soul-cleansing traditions. One of his quite possibly last demands was to relocate the college to Mazel Hubbard's backyard, and I was privy to this information by my reassignment to the zoning board's bi-monthly meetings, as the school committee now conducted their business behind closed doors.

It was as if the town had been vindicated in its ongoing battle against the evils of society and suddenly the zoning board reporting beat was the hot spot for scoops. The university enrolled twice as many students as the town's population, so diners and restaurants immediately applied to double their seating space, old farmhouse owners demanded to be listed as Bed & Breakfasts, a new bank specializing in student loans planned to install ATMs in the dormitories, and everyone's brother, sister, aunt, and uncle were applying for trade licenses to be involved in the boon of construction that was to kick off after go-ahead by the zoning board. The approval itself was a no-brainer, as the planned grounds were mostly pasture and woods just outside of town next to an old armory. The armory used to be a busy and prideful location for troops to perform basic training before going off to fight wars, back when that was a good thing, but now, it was nearly empty, except for one recruiting officer who manages to snag a few high school students each year and ships them off to God knows where. Many folks were happy to offer their barn or garage to the officer so that he could

continue to troll the list of graduates each spring, thus allowing Shat University to strike the ground and launch the town into the next century.

It was with giddy and gleeful expectation that a crowd rivaling Mazel Hubbard's early school committee meetings in size gathered within and outside of Pepper's Hardware Store as the zoning board met to approve the college's permit applications. Even Mazel Hubbard arrived to massive fanfare and was ushered to a front-row seat, just a good spit away from the single table around which the board's smiling faces welcomed her. Tim Mattucks, a mean yet talented carpenter, first harangued the crowd into semi-silence with some salty language and then called the meeting to order. Mattucks' cohorts were the Heffner Brothers, who owned all the gas stations, and Bill Pepper, the store's owner, and he moved to proceed right to the vote for approval of applications.

"All right then," Tim Mattucks shouted above the rising crowd chatter, "if everybody can shut their yaps, then we'll get this goldmine approved."

A good, long peel of laughter followed this touch of humor because it was rare to come from the meanest man in town, but also because deep in everyone's being, they knew it was true; happy days were almost upon them. Then just as the laughter died down and Tim Mattucks began to read the prepared language to hasten approval of the contracts, someone stood and screamed with tremendous force and fire.

"I want to know why this committee is closing down a military installation so they can build a college for immigrants from a *liberal* state!!"

All eyes were on the seat in the front row, and instantly, many angry voices bellowed from the crowd with similar damning questions about the roots of true patriotism and evils of foreign perfidy for at the moment of the town's new and prosperous dawn, it appeared that Mazel Hubbard had come home to roost.

An Ad Interim God
Kushal Poddar

The tree we worshipped as God
is found dead once the gale subsides.
Wind shows no faith in
the curtains, panes
or in any other fence we made.

My father crumbles dirt and cast
the dust into the pit
of 'Everyday I wonder why
I am the only one alive in that picture
taken in seventy-three. '

The day belongs to the petrichor.
Leaves of the old belief already
looks like an obscure manuscript.
I make the whistling kettle
our ad interim God, serving tea
the appropriate communion.

Tomorrow we can decide on the testaments.

Just Her Name
Randolph Purinton

My child stopped here the other day.
She did not have a word to say.
But bowed her head and gently wept,
Then shuffled home, her vigil kept.

How loving that my child came,
To see a stone with just my name,
That marks the hillock where is found,
Her absent mother underground.

The time will come when I shall be,
Like my companions next to me.
Expecting in the coming years,
Fewer visits, fewer tears.

My child will grow without my care,
I'll wonder how her fortunes fare.
If she returns unto this place,
I wonder if I'll know her face.

Other stones help fill a need,
Psalms and verse that people read.
Willows, skulls with angel wings
Words and art some comforts bring.

No gifts of wisdom grace my stone.
No ancient prayer to take home.
A line that might have dried her tears
And offered hope won't linger here.

I want to bless her coming years,
but silence haunts my child's ears.
God of meter, rhyme and tone,
Carve a blessing in this stone.

In Conversation with Eric D. Lehman

MJ: One of my favorite aspects of your short story, "The Day on Which the Days Depend," was your description and design of Nature, and how it impacted the characters, specifically, Harris. Does Nature typically play a role in your writing? What did the process look like as you were creating these spaces for the characters to interact with?

EL: Yes, nature is a constant subject in my work, from my memoir of hiking, *Afoot in Connecticut: Journeys in Natural History*, to the anthology I co-edited, *New England Nature*. I often write fiction about places I've actually been, and the idea for this story came after I stayed in that little Quebecois town and hiked up Mont Jacques Cartier in the Chic-Choc mountains. I use my travel notebooks to provide little details and local color that I hope gives a sense of lived reality. If I hadn't taken those notes, I might have forgotten to include how terrible the mosquitoes were!

MJ: You were published in the last issue of, "The Portrait of New England." That issue featured your short story, "The History of Architecture," which dealt with a similar theme of grappling and reflection of the past, just as your story in this issue does. Could you talk about that idea of past versus present with the characters and worlds within those two stories, and where that concept may have sprang up from? Has that been a theme you've explored in your other works?

EL: I write in several different modes, and one of them in historical nonfiction. So the topic of history is certainly on my mind when I turn to fiction, where I often explore the effect of past events and actions on present circumstance and personality. In "The History of Architecture" [Eric's story published in the Second Issue of *Portrait of New England],* I intentionally gave the main character the opposite side of the argument I usually take as a member of the local historical society, that of the needs of the future. And of course the Harris character in "The Day on Which the Days Depend" is someone whose life is not necessarily sympathetic to everyone, both because of the dreadful action he took (or was forced to take, depending on your point of view) and because of the choice he made to flee to the cabin. Exploring characters like these is a way for me to see how the other half lives, so to speak, and hopefully a way for readers to consider their own pasts and choices.

MJ: In your bio, you've mentioned several of your publications, including, New England at 400 and A History of Connecticut Food, so you've written a lot in the realm of academia and research. Does your academic writing sometimes cross into your creative writing, and vice versa? If so, how would you describe that relationship?

EL: That's an interesting question, because I see everything I do as creative writing. I had to unlearn the "academic writing" that I learned to do in graduate school for the most part, in order to make my work accessible to a broader audience. I was told by one particular historian that I wrote "popular" history books. He meant it as an insult, but I took it as a compliment. Meticulous research does not mean that something has to be boring. You mentioned, *A History of Connecticut Food*, and the research that my co-author and I put into that book was incredible. But I don't think any reader has ever thought it was anything but a fun book to have in the kitchen or on the coffee table.

MJ: Being that you've researched and studied a lot about New England, what's something that you have discovered in your explorations about the New England Literary Tradition that most people may be unaware of?

EL: Over the past two centuries, New England has kept producing good writers. There is a reason for that. We have a fantastic blend of nature and culture. We have a great support system. We have educated and wealthy readers. We have bookstores, libraries, and archives. We have editors, magazines, and publishers. And we have all these things in incredible numbers, far more than our limited space and population should allow. That is why not only do "famous" authors by the dozens choose to live and work in New England, but the hundreds of less famous but often just as talented writers (like the ones featured in this magazine) thrive here.

MJ: Who would be some of the New England writers and texts that have most influenced you as a writer?

EL: Many of the writers and texts that I love are ones that almost everyone loves. I think Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* is a brilliant work of applied philosophy, I think Sarah Orne Jewett's *Country of the Pointed Firs* is a vivid and subversive novel, I think Wallace Stevens wrote some of the most fascinating and complicated poetry ever written. But I will mention a few that maybe your readers aren't familiar with, like Marilyn Nelson, whose

poetry books deal with one of my favorite topics that you mentioned above – the messy interaction between past and present. Another author that I love is David K. Leff, whose non-fiction I consider to be some of the best contemporary "New England" writing, like his masterpiece, *The Last Undiscovered Place*. And finally, my favorite poet happens to be my wife, Amy Nawrocki, whose collections like, *Four Blue Eggs, Reconnaissance*, and *Mouthbrooders*, I read over and over again. I got lucky there!

MJ: What are you currently reading?

EL: I am working through Louis Menand's multiple biography, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America*. I like books about groups of writers – see my answer to question 7.

MJ: Are you currently working on any projects? If so, could you explain the work you are doing? Where can people view your latest short stories and publications?

In 2024, I have a memoir of the writing life coming out from independent New England publisher, Homebound Publications. It is partly about my friends and colleagues in contemporary Connecticut literature, some of whom I mentioned above. It also details many of the vicissitudes of the "author life" that some memoirs of the craft do not. I can't give away the title yet but look for it in bookstores a year from now.

Contributor Biographies

Kathleen Aponick is a native of Cambridge, Massachusetts. After attending Framingham State College, she taught school in Cambridge, overseas for the U. S. Army, and later in Andover, Massachusetts, where she currently lives with her husband. She has lasting memories of spending summer vacations in rented cottages on Camp Cod and later camping with her husband, son, and friends along Somes Sound in coastal Maine. Her poetry collections include *The Descendant's Notebook* (2020), *Bright Realm* (2013), and two chapbooks: *The Port*, and *Near the River's Edge*. Her poems have appeared in many journals, including *Notre Dame Review* and *Hollins Critic*.

Jon Bishop is an MFA candidate at the University of St. Thomas, where he studies poetry. He holds degrees from Assumption College and Salem State University and has published poetry, fiction, and essays in a variety of journals.

Sarah A. Calvin is a Vermont-based writer, poet, and playwright. Her play, *Dick and Kitty, or All in Good Times*, was a 2020 semifinalist in Hollywood's the Young Playwright's Festival. She has written numerous newspaper articles, and is in the process of completing a novel, which can be found on Wattpad (@theuniqicorn). She also is a creative writing major at Castleton University in Castleton, Vermont.

William Doreski lives in Peterborough, New Hampshire. He has taught at several colleges and universities. His most recent book of poetry is *Dogs Don't Care* (2022). His essays, poetry, fiction, and reviews have appeared in various journals.

Emily Fabbricotti lives in the South Shore of Massachusetts with her handsome husband and their little rascal blue heeler. She was previously published in *Thoreau's Rooster* (2011) and *Portrait of New England* (2019, 2022). When she isn't enjoying the natural beauty of New England outdoors, Emily works on a collection of poems and an anthology of short stories set in a coastal neighborhood much like her own.

Robbie Gamble (he/him) is the author of *A Can of Pinto Beans* (Lily Poetry Review Press, 2022). His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Lunch Ticket, Northern New England Review*, *Salamander, The*

Sun, and *The Worcester Review*. He worked for many years as a nurse practitioner caring for people caught in homelessness, and he now divides his time between Boston and Vermont.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *Stand, Washington Square Review and Floyd County Moonshine*. Latest books, *Covert, Memory Outside The Head,* and *Guest Of Myself* are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in the *McNeese Review, Santa Fe Literary Review* and *Open Ceilings*.

Gloria Heffernan's *Exploring Poetry of Presence* (Back Porch Productions) won the 2021 Central New York Book Award for Nonfiction. She is the author of the poetry collection, *What the Gratitude List Said to the Bucket List*, (New York Quarterly Books), and three chapbooks: *Hail to the Symptom* (Moonstone Press), *Some of Our Parts* (Finishing Line Press), and *Peregrinatio: Poems for Antarctica* (Kelsay Books). A Pushcart and Best of the Net nominee, her work has appeared in over 100 publications including the forthcoming anthologies *Poetry of Presence* (vol. 2) and *Without a Doubt: Poems Illuminating Faith* from New York Quarterly Books.

Terence Patrick Hughes writes fiction, poetry, and drama. Recent short stories were published with the *Stonecoast Review, Ignatian Literary,* and *Fleas on the Dog*. His theatre work has been developed and produced around the USA and internationally, and published in university literary magazines, as well as Best Contemporary One-Act Plays. The New York Times noted that his work "…explores heavy subject matter with humorous dialogue and strong characters". Born in Lawrence, MA, Hughes lives with his wife and two children in Woodstock, NY.

jsburl, a hemorrhagic stroke warrior, is an artist of words and other mediums. She loves reading and sharing with all ages. She is writing a children's learning series, the first book release May/June 2023. She is finishing a stroke memoir/diary, and other genre works. She's a member of Sigma Tau Delta International English Honor Society, and The National Society of Leadership and Success. Her works can be seen in the *BeZine, Prose-n-Poetry, Theatre of the Mind, Adirondack Center for Writing, The Sunflower Poetry Review,* and she won journalism Quill & Scroll. She says, "make every day an extraordinary day."

Frank William Finney is a retired lecturer from Massachusetts who taught literature at Thammasat University in Thailand from 1995 until 2020. His poems have appeared in *Constellations, Green Mountains Review, Portrait of New England,* among others. His most recent poetry collection is *The Folding of the Wings* (Finishing Line Press, 2022).

Eric D. Lehman is the author of 22 books of fiction, travel, memoir, and history, including *New England at 400, History of Connecticut Food, New England Nature,* and *Afoot in Connecticut*. His biography *Becoming Tom Thumb* was awarded the Henry Russell Hitchcock Award, finalist for the Housatonic Book Award, and an American Library Association outstanding university press book of the year. His novella, *Shadows of Paris,* was Novella of the Year from the Next Gen Indie Awards, Silver Medal in the Foreword Review Indie Awards, and finalist for the Connecticut Book Award. Find him at www.ericdlehman.org or Instagram @afootinconnecticut

Sara Letourneau is a poet as well as a book editor, writing coach, and writing workshop instructor. Her poetry has won first place in the *Blue Institute's Words on Water* contest and has appeared or is forthcoming in *Didcot Writers, Amethyst Review, Soul-Lit, Full Mood Mag, Living Crue, Arlington Literary Journal, Mass Poetry's Poem of the Moment and Hard Work of Hope, Muddy River Poetry Review,* and *Constellations*, among others. Find Sara at https://heartofthestoryeditorial.com/, on Facebook at https://www.facebook.com/heartofthestoryeditorial/, and on Instagram at @sara_heartofthestory

Giulia Napoli lives in Washington, DC, where she works in science research and spends her free time biking, rock climbing, reading, and exploring. She has strong family ties to Vermont and New Hampshire and is always looking for an excuse to return.

Don Noel is retired from four decades of prizewinning print and broadcast journalism in Hartford CT. He took an MFA from Fairfield University at age 81, and in the decade since, has since published more than 100 short stories or other pieces.

Kushal Poddar is the author of, *Postmarked Quarantine*, and has eight books to his credit. He is a journalist, father, and is the editor of, *Words Surfacing*. His works have been translated into twelve languages.

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Matthew Pramas is a Brooklyn-based writer originally from Gloucester, MA. He studied Media and English at St. Michael's College in Vermont. You can reach Matthew at big_dadddy_p on Instagram

Rev. Randolph Purinton is a retired Congregational minister born in Waterbury, Connecticut, a graduate of Yale Divinity School and was ordained in Newfane, Vermont. He is the author of *It Hasteth Away*, about the Civil War correspondence of Wesley and Sabrina Brown of Islesboro, Maine. Rev. Purinton lives in Amherst, Massachusetts.

Kirsti Sandy teaches creative writing at Keene State College and lives in Southwest New Hampshire. Her essay collection, *She Lived and the Other Girls Died,* was awarded the Monadnock Essay Collection Prize in 2017 and her essay, "I Have Come for What Belongs to Me" won the New England Review's Raven Prize for Nonfiction. Her creative nonfiction, poems, and short fiction can be found in *Split Lip, the Boiler, Under the Gum Tree, Natural Bridge, Book of Matches,* among other publications.

Gerard Sarnat's a Pushcart and Best of Net Award nominee. Gerry's work's been widely published in magazines and journals, including *The Brooklyn Review, Tokyo Poetry Journal, Slippery Rock, The New York Times*; Northwestern, Pomona, Harvard, Stanford, Dartmouth, Penn, Columbia, North Dakota, McMaster, Maine, British Columbia, Chicago, and Virginia university presses. He's a Harvard College and Medical School-trained physician, Stanford professor, and healthcare CEO. Currently, he is devoting energy/ resources to deal with climate justice, and serves on Climate Action Now's board. Gerry's been married since 1969 and has three kids, six grandsons — and looks forward to future granddaughters. gerardsarnat.com

Laurel Sharon's fiction has been published in *Carte Blanche, Cosmonauts Avenue, Santa Ana River Review*, and other literary magazines. She has a Certificate in Creative Writing from Fairfield University. She is currently working on a collection of short stories.

Keri Stewart is a 20-year-old writing minor at UNH who is an editor for *The Graveyard Zine*, an upcoming editor for *Main Street Magazine*, a poet columnist for *Outlander Zine*, and the founder of *Meadow Mouse Zine*. Her

work has been featured in *Outlander Zine, Potted Purple, Pastel Serenity Zine,* and *Soul Talks Magazine*. You can find her on Instagram (keri.27).

Evelyn Walsh has lived in New England for practically her entire life. When she isn't writing, she enjoys reading fantasy novels and collecting antiques. You can view her blog at: https://piscataquacryptid.tumblr.com

About The Portrait of New England

Portrait of New England is a regional-based literary magazine, accepting poetry, fiction, and creative non-fiction submissions from writers with ties to New England (for example: former resident, current resident, attended school in the region).

After being on hiatus for several years, the magazine relaunched in December of 2022.

Submissions open back up between August 1, 2023-October 31, 2023 for Issue Four.

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