

# Portrait of New England

*A Literary Magazine*



Volume 1



**Cover Art:** “What People Do By the Shore,” *Jana LaChance*

# VOLUME 1

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The editors would like to dedicate this issue to the many authors,  
educators, artists, friends, family members, and colleagues who  
believed in us and helped to make this project possible.

We are grateful to you.

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## Reflections on New England

My favorite short story—and I concede such an acknowledgement with the realization that it will make me (at most) one friend and countless disappointed enemies—is “The Summer People” by Shirley Jackson. Written the same year as her far more well-known tale, “The Lottery,” and published in *Charm* in 1950, “The Summer People” follows the travails of an “ordinary” New York City couple, Janet and Robert Allison, who dare to defy convention and remain at their rural New England cottage past Labor Day, when the city folk generally retreat back to Manhattan and leave the autumn countryside to the locals. Over the ensuing days, the Allisons find themselves engaged in a losing struggle with the laconic, stone-faced Yankees of the nearby town—unable to purchase oil or to order provisions. In a typical encounter Mr. Babcock, the grocer, replies when asked if he might continue to deliver their food into September, “Matter of fact...I guess I couldn't, Mrs. Allison.” An entire community seems to echo Bartleby the Scrivener’s “I prefer not to,” and the result proves calamitous for these transgressive outsiders. As a New Yorker myself who has resided for multiple stretches in New England—an early childhood in Branford, Connecticut; years of summer camp in Becket, Massachusetts; college in Providence; law school in Boston; and nearly a decade teaching in Rhode Island—I feel a great affinity for the Allisons and their plight. Not merely sympathy for their frustrations, but or the allure of New England, the “pleasure and a slight feeling of adventure” they feel at the thought of remaining there year-round.

To the outsider, New England’s distinctive blend of libertarianism and community spirit can appear both bewitching and befuddling. Or, to use the language of the Faulkner sisters (of Mandrake Falls, Vermont) in Frank Capra’s *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, New Englanders can seem a tad “pixilated.” Mostly, these complexities require commitment and patience to understand. One can become a New Yorker in three minutes; becoming a Bostonian takes three generations. How many school children across the nation have read Robert Frost’s “Mending Wall” and walked away with the lesson that “Good fences make good neighbors”? These include Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, a New Jersey-born New Yorker, who quoted the principle approvingly in the otherwise obscure case of *Plaut v. Spendthrift Farm*. Of course, that is *not* the message of the poem. Rather, Frost is questioning the value of walls: “Something there is that doesn't love a wall,” he writes, “Before I built a wall I'd ask to know / What I was walling in or walling out.” New Englanders have long given considerable and serious consideration to what they are walling in and walling out—divided between their instinct toward privacy, their inclination to live-and-let-live, and their keen sense of duty to others. This is a region that gave America both Calvin Coolidge and John F. Kennedy, “Live Free or Die” and Brooke Farm. These tensions between individualism and collective action, between walling in and walling out, are especially striking in the realm of literature. From Ralph Waldo Emerson to William Dean Howells to John Updike, the historic gatekeepers of the American literary tradition were New England men by either birth or choice. Many of these gatekeepers carried Harvard diplomas and Mayflower pedigrees, as well as rather fixed notions about the boundaries of language and culture. Yet the region managed to generate some of the most diverse literature in the world.

Ask the average reader to free associate on the subject of New England literature and one is bound to cover familiar territory: Edith Wharton’s *Ethan Frome* and *Summer*, Cheever’s Wapshots, Thoreau’s *Walden*, the slant rhymes of Emily Dickinson. Maybe Thornton Wilder’s *Out Town*—though Wisconsin-born Wilder wrote the play while teaching in New Jersey. Or the poetry of Robert Lowell and Donald Hall. But New England is also Edwin O’Connor’s Father Hugh Kennedy and Eugene O’Neill’s hard-drinking Tyrones, the intimacies of Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, Robert Coover’s post-modernism, the arrow-sharp stories of Edith Pearlman and Lucy Honig, the wondrous and inexplicable genius of Carolyn Cooke. And



even though I look out an apartment window into a New York City airshaft each morning, I continue to set many of my own stories in the New England of my imagination.

On the surface, New England may not appear as distinctive as it once was: The folks who say *bubbler* for water fountain dwindle by the year, and increasingly the words father and bother tend to rhyme. Vermont and Maine no longer vote against the national trend—as they did in lock-step in 1936, favoring Alf Landon over Franklin Delano Roosevelt. As more and more Americans celebrate Thanksgiving, fewer and fewer honor Miles Standish or John Alden or Plymouth Rock. Yet New England remains a region distinctive in its passion for inquiry and civic discourse, where one can still encounter liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats and lots of free thinkers in between. New Englanders preserve their traditions without standing in the way of progress and uphold a rich culture without the stain of chauvinism. In that sense, the New England spirit shines as brightly today as it did when Paul Revere hung his lanterns.

—*Jacob M. Appel*



mountains

I'm pretty sure

the mountains that shrug themselves blue

over there

\*pointing\*

are getting taller

since I was a little girl in a back seat

being tossed between them

as my mother drove

with two hands

on top of the steering wheel.

On the way home yesterday

we wondered what it was

that makes a mountain

a mountain—

a certain height maybe?

An achievement of a particular number of trees?

Upon looking it up

I've found that they gave up classifying mountains

(in the US at least)

nothing profitable about mountains,

especially with all these damn wildlife protections.

I sit in the middle of the back seat on car rides,

because I don't mind

being caught between two other people

but it also means

that I can't rest my head against the window

& think about what it would be like

to open the door & roll out—

They're an illusion,

the mountains—

if I really got out



they'd only be the size of stepping stools—  
up to my knees maybe,  
like the little plastic step  
my dad uses to change light bulbs in the bathroom.

If there's no requirement for a mountain,  
do you think I could be one, then?  
See if I sit out in the backyard  
no, someone else's backyard—  
kneeling, maybe, or raising my hands over my head—  
Would they mistake me?  
put a plaque at my feet & name me  
Mount Honeysuckle  
Mount Scabby Knee  
Mount Girl-Who-Cut-Her-Hair  
Mount Wishing Stone  
What's the difference between  
a mountain & a wishing stone?

I'm thinking about the Appalachians  
& how they're getting smaller  
& if God is whittling them down  
so that they can be used  
as desk paperweights  
or maybe flat enough  
to get skipped three times in the creek  
before dunking deep down between  
algae & crayfish—  
the mountains that we drive  
through on the way back  
to Kutztown from Hanover don't have names  
& I feel bad for them  
because no matter how much they ache & grow  
no one hangs a dog tag from their necks--  
they build bridges & gazebos by the creeks  
but no name—  
does the mountain look up at the clouds  
& ask them—

saying—  
give me a sign  
as to what I should call myself  
but the clouds just laugh  
that's what they did to me when I asked—  
the clouds are useful for many things but not for answers

They move too fast—  
swarming the faces of mountains—  
these white lacey veils  
are the mountains getting married maybe?  
turning grey in their faces  
as their marriages erode  
same as their bodies—  
oh mountain if you promise to love me  
I can find you a name  
& I will sit at your  
base every day until  
we both turn to bones—  
your limestone skeleton—  
my calcium carbonate femur & vertebrae  
I'll pick flowers from behind your ears  
& kiss your moss pebble feet—  
oh mountain is this what  
it's like to be loved?

I just want someone like you—  
someone who doesn't mind raising one hand to hold the sky up  
when it's your turn—  
I'll climb up you & help—  
someone whose old trees  
could dig their roots  
deep into my back—  
oh I just want to find you in the horizon  
the pink-orange of sunsets  
like halos over our heads—



I could stay here

I could stay here

teach me how to reach

I want to be a mountain with you

& when they see me

out the car window

they'll remember that

I used to occupy back seats

used to swallow paperweights

used to skip stones three times

Before they dropped

heavy in the creek water—

Can a mountain drown

if it's not careful?

—*Robin Gow*

## ONE MORE MORNING

*for Robert McCloskey, 1914 - 2003*

At first,  
each dawn shines toothless  
misty with loons  
and fish hawks. Later,  
we smile bright for a time,  
then finally; falsely.  
As our spark plugs sputter  
and our feathers molt  
we grow vanilla spotted,  
buying art and arthritis  
medication.

When the cold nor'easter comes  
and pine trees lean  
till they soil themselves  
yellow memories fog to grey,  
orange duckling feet make way  
what wouldn't we give  
for one more chance  
to dig clams?  
One more morning,  
just one; to talk to seals  
to say, to feel, to learn  
to love, to be

Sal and Jane,  
gripping wishes in their fists,  
bouncing to a future  
full of chowder.

*—John Jay Speredakos*





*"Mary Lyon Hall," Em Harriett*

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## History Of Short Bipeds' Hillocks

*Two feet on the ground,*  
is what Harvard's dorm  
supervisors espoused  
from on-high Victorian  
hypocrisy during our  
weekend Parietal Hours--  
whatever they meant.

Chosen for presumed  
*Both feed on the ground*  
role-model qualities,  
the graduate student  
in charge of Gray's  
Hall (where I slept in  
John Updike's old bed)

himself a stuck-up  
St. Paul's Prep goy  
-- it was started by  
some Episcopal Church  
in 1856 -- looked down  
on public school boys,  
particularly us Jews

but hid one in his room.  
Wink & nod gobbledygook  
governed that frosh world:  
we are told to put ties (yes,  
there were still requirements  
to wear them plus jackets  
"where gentlemen dined")

on corridor door knobs  
to warn everybody not  
to interrupt in this case  
awkward unsuccessful  
attempts to hobnob  
or if lucky play footsie  
with warm Wellesley girls.

Same time "The Board  
of Overseers" listed  
underage consumption  
of alcohol a "severable  
offense," getting bud-bud  
with my hot "proctor,"  
he bought me six-packs.

I carried a pocket dic  
to grok Cambridgese.  
But 1st time asked by  
a Bailey's soda jerk  
if moi wanted "jimmies"  
at no extra charge on  
sugar cone, I panicked...

Above free association  
came back when after  
a friend fell then died;  
his wife exhorted, *Elders*  
*please don't take feet off*  
*the ground if no one's*  
*holding your ladder.*

—Gerard Sarnat



## Celtics Legacy: Long Bipeds Ascending The Mountain To NBA Championships

1963

Genius

Jew Coach

Red Auerbach

lighting cigars

after he'd beaten

logo Jerry West's

Lakers like drums,

those were the days

right before native son

JFK got shot and before

Boston Garden's parquet

floor -- each bounce of which

hometowny last season Cousy

knew like the back of his hand

-- was replaced, era when the first

game was maybe Rochester/ Syracuse

who got bussed in, then for the night cap Pettit

of St. Louis is roughed up by Jungle Jim Loscutoff.

During halftimes all four teams would sign autographs,

and the ushers allowed us to move down from the nosebleed

seats to camp our butts down on the corner of that bumpy court.

Those were the times before tape delay -- the games were not on TV.

Now that was all groovy for me but it clearly wore on Tom Heinsohn,

once star forward then Louise Day Hicks of other bussing fame's pretty boy,

and eventually announcer, now summer of 2017, almost 83, lookin' broke down.

—*Gerard Sarnat*

Because of Tom Brady

*At Sunday mass in Boston,  
There's a prayer of thankfulness uttered,*

*Regardless of beggar or businessman,  
All pray the prayer, as if the entire flock were anchorite monks:*

Let it be backyard playground, or  
Let it be a Sunday Night stadium,

Let it be a dog-day autumn,  
Or snow-day, sandlot chaos,

All will be steady  
With No. 12 in the Pats' huddle:

The man of hawk-eye vision,  
And golden-arm shoulder.

*Amen.*

—*Matthew Johnson*

## Park, After-Hours

A wood sign sunbleached to an afterthought  
Inscrutably insists the hilltop park  
Closes at dusk. No one pays it mind  
But the town's third policeman,  
Whose newbie route each night  
Cruises the backroads. He's dutiful enough  
To spot parked cars, dim his headlights and creep up  
Like some declawed housecat tilting at stilled birds  
To measure whether soul has taken wing.  
Yet not so perspicacious to inspect  
The hill's dirt path, where bicycles  
Eased into the low hedge  
Stall like watered horses.

The first few spotted leaves commence  
The ritual of return, wherein  
They brighten in a vibrant fit, and kite free  
To catch among the roots, dull and lose  
Shape, their breakdown there  
A nourishment to future flights.

Some yards off, the old Town Pound,  
A colonial remnant – now a granite rut –  
Crumbles under lichen warp and weft.  
Its acre once penned livestock escapees  
Who roamed the tractless woods, and ate  
The work of white men's stolen lands.  
The town would board them at their lord's expense  
Until the shamefaced farmer showed himself  
To corral them, and reduce their nuisance  
To bored lows in his garnished holdings.



It goes overgrown; the town's part-time hand  
Ventures no farther than his contract stakes.  
Beneath a frayed and briny cap, he levels  
Hillside crabgrass, hacks at drooping boughs  
Bent out of shape and line, and slinks off  
To his rented room one county over,  
Which affords life's basic dignities.

Nightly on the hillcrest, unlicensed teens  
Lie at the height of their stunted world.  
They purse glowing buds in rosehip scowls  
And blow smoke at a thousand pinprick lights  
That promise distance from a worn hometown.  
Rooftops shrunk to toys stud swaying fields,  
The plaything lives within beneath their notice  
Like outgrown dolls. There's nothing here but us,  
They say. Soon not even that. Once the job comes through,  
Or college letterhead from anonymizing coasts...

Wearied even of this before long,  
They pick the dry weeds clinging to their hair,  
Rub the scratch of grasses from their skin,  
And wrest their tangled bikes out of the hedge.  
Tomorrow they'll return, as certain fish  
Trace suggestive currents, or faint upticks in heat.

Some won't ever leave this hated place,  
And soften toward it, like bruised fruit.  
Some who flee won't understand  
Why nowhere else holds them.

—*Alexander B. Joy*

## What We're Doing Here

Vera stopped and instinctively grabbed her mother's arm, interrupting the story she was telling.

"What?" The alarm in her mother's voice cut through the dark cemetery they were walking through. Vera pulled her back and somewhat absurdly aimed the long neck of the lighter she was holding out into the night, as if it were a weapon that could protect them. Like a rapier. Or a flamethrower.

"There's somebody over there," Vera said.

She waved the evergreen tree boughs she was carrying in her other hand at the far end of Maple Hill Cemetery. Her eyes adjusted, separating lightness from darkness, and the moving shape in front of her took the form of a tall man, breaking through the deep snow. He stopped and turned toward them, and Vera made out the thin face of a young man. Maybe a teenager. He wore earmuffs over an army hat and a long, dark coat. The presence of another in the cemetery made Vera feel vulnerable. She wondered if she would have felt this way if this young man had been a young woman.

But who was she to judge? After all, they were here in the town's oldest cemetery, too. At night. On Christmas Eve. All the same, Vera was certain her own black wool jacket was not nearly as creepy as the duster worn by the figure beyond, an image that called to mind the Columbine boys. And their own intentions were pleasant: they were including the family's matriarch in their holiday celebration by constructing a Christmas tree on her grave. Not weird at all, though her brother might disagree. Unconventional, perhaps. But not creepy.

Having conveyed the presence of another to her mother, Vera started walking again toward where she thought her grandmother's gravestone was. Her mother followed. A quick wind whipped up the hill in front of them, blowing the cold winter air in their faces. They squinted against the bluster, trying to keep the snow out of their eyes.

When Vera spoke again, it was in a hushed tone.

"But, Mom. That's weird. What's he doing here?"

She was partially irritated at being intruded on, and partially nervous at an encounter with a stranger in a cemetery at night. She looked up again to find the young man moving slowly up what would have been, save for the snow, a road between the rows of graves. He lifted his long legs out of the snow, slowly and deliberately, then punched his feet back down through the crust.

Despite the silly earmuffs, this kid unsettled her. She knew it was because of the stereotypes of teenage boys in dusters armed with anger and guns. But, the earmuffs, she tried to remind herself. Who wears earmuffs? Goofy kids. Ones stuck between youth and adolescence. Vera herself had worn a pair of earmuffs in her own teenage years. Pink and fluffy. She had loved them.

"Yeah," her mom puffed in between breaths. "That is weird. I mean, it's Christmas Eve. Ten o'clock. He's all alone. What's he doing here?"

Vera felt her mother's hand reach for her elbow as she unsteadily struck through the snow. She was out of breath quickly, lifting her feet high out of giant post holes in the snow, taking big steps.

"You know Blake said," her mother puffed. "Blake said there was that kid. Did you hear? About that kid that...?"

She teetered a little and her grip on Vera tightened. Vera waited while she regained her balance.

"I know," Vera said, filling the pause so her mother could catch her breath. "The kid with the bong. That dug up the skull so he could make a bong. I know. That's messed up. He's totally screwed up. Blake told me, too. But that wasn't around here, you know." Her brother would never have revealed that kind of information about anyone in his jurisdiction. He was a police officer in Mettowee, but he was no gossip. He never had been. And now that they were grown up, Vera knew this first hand through her job at the courthouse where she was a side judge. Blake was a vault.

"No. But really. I wonder what he's doing here?" her mother persisted.

"Well. We're here, I guess," Vera answered. She knew she needed to play it cool. She knew exactly where she got her own alarmist imagination and did not wish to set that off in its source: her mother. "And anyway," she told her mom bravely, "it wasn't really fair to make judgments in light of our own holiday ritual." Her mom laughed nervously in agreement. Vera didn't know if she believed that herself though.

Then Vera remembered another disturbing young man who lived in their town and who, it was recently discovered, took a delight in burning down houses and barns. The rumor was that this young man kept a journal detailing his past quests and cataloguing future and very specific plans to target people in town. Her mother probably didn't know about that yet. As the guardian ad litem hired for the case, Vera herself didn't know much about it. The kid was scheduled to appear in court later that week, after Christmas.

"Let's just give him a wide berth," her mother whispered. She steered Vera southward, opposite the direction the young man seemed to be going. Vera kept her eyes on the solitary walker, but kept her head down pretending not to watch him.

She tugged her mother's arm and kept moving. As they passed over what must have been his trail, she lost sight of his silhouette as it was absorbed into the dark row of pine trees bordering the cemetery.

When they reached her grandmother's grave, they did what they had done for the last five years since her grandmother's passing. They pushed the tree boughs into the snow, arranging them into a Christmas tree-like shape. Setting a few tea lights underneath it, they lit the candles, and after a few moments of silence in the warm glow, commenced their tradition of what Blake joked to his son Jack was "Christmas vistin." The death of Vera's grandmother, despite her advanced age, was a sudden shock to the family. The idea to trek to her grave on Christmas Eve was born of the discontent on the first holiday dinner after her passing. Despite a roomful of people, it had been too quiet. Vera and her mother locked eyes several times throughout dinner, reading each other's minds. And when everyone left, they sat in front of their Christmas tree and talked of the quiet dinner. At the overwhelming absence. They talked of what they should do about this and of the Civil War tradition of the vacant chair at the dinner table to honor those who did not come back. And then, inspired by the glow of the tree's lights, they decided to head to the cemetery with candles, boughs cut from the Christmas tree, and a bottle of the family's favorite whiskey, deciding they would bring Christmas Eve to her.

Blake said he would never come to the cemetery with them, declaring visiting the dead in such a way a ridiculous tradition and they knew that before Jack got too old, before his innocence was gone, they wanted to take him with them. Vera, who had no kids of her own, worried about Jack, knowing from her job the ill effects of the expectations placed too soon on little boys.

At six years old, Jack was a little young to take out on such a social call, and Vera was sure Blake was settling him into bed by now.

The cold crept into their warm layers, and Vera nervously kept her eye on the row of pines where the teenager had disappeared into the darkness. Was he lingering there? Were they alone now? She tried not to think about him as her mother produced a small bottle of Crown Royal whiskey from the jacket of her parka and, after a nip and a gargle, they toasted her grandmother, wishing her a Merry Christmas and lamenting her absence another year.

Vera shivered as she remembered that tonight they weren't exactly alone. Her eyes drifted to the border of trees, where she faintly made out the dark silhouette of the young man. She wished that he would light up a cigarette or something, anything, that would give him a reason to be out there. She would have kept his secret for him—for she was certain he had one—as long as it meant he wasn't a wildly deranged kid.

*I've got to stop thinking like this,* Vera thought. She wiped her nose with the back of her mitten, the woolly fabric scratching her already raw skin. When she looked up again, the young man was on the move. They watched him in silence as he moved slowly through the snow, one foot after another, methodically, the crust that had given them so much trouble seemingly easy for him to pass through.

Vera shivered. She did a quick sideways check to see what her mother's face revealed. Her focus was fixed ahead when a look of confusion came over her eyes.

"Look," her mother whispered.

Vera looked back toward the young man who had now fallen to his knees, his hands up, palms covering his face. The street lights behind him offered a spotlight. *This kid had to have known we were here,* Vera thought, and suddenly felt trapped. Their car was parked on the other side of the cemetery, on the other side of Center Road, on the other side of him.

"What's he doing?" Vera hissed.

"Oh. He's in pain," her mother whispered softly, drawing Vera close.

Vera grabbed her mother's arm, her grasp weak through her mittens. She squeezed as tightly as she could. Her heart raced.

"Let's get out of here."

Without waiting for her mother to answer, she pulled her in the direction of their car, the vast, snowy stretch before them. *What might this kid do in his grief?* Vera wanted to be inside the safety of their car as quickly as possible. Even if it meant they had to walk right by him. She started off at a fast pace.

They were breaking trail again, silently agreeing to forgo the path they had made to get to the grave in favor of one that would not bring them as near to the young man. It had snowed already several times this winter and the changes in temperature through the month of December had transformed each snowfall into layers of alternating crust and powder that thrashed painfully at Vera's shins with every step. She ignored it. She locked her mother's arm in her elbow, put her head down and pushed forward, her own heavy breathing joining her mother's.

When she looked up again, she saw that the young man was also on the move. His pace was slow and methodical, heading back down the hill. His eerie indifference to their presence coupled with the ghostly ease with which he appeared to glide



through the hard snow was unsettling. She felt panic rising as in a dream where your body turns heavy and slow in the face of a threat. It seemed likely their paths would intersect.

Vera held the long lighter in her left hand, her right hand firmly attached to her mother's arm like a tugboat towing a ship into safe harbor. She thought about what lengths she would go to protect her mother, imagining that she might need to use the lighter to gouge out the young man's eyes with one hand, hold him off with the other, positioning her body protectively in front of her mother's. Yes, she thought, this is exactly what she would do. She'd seen this move executed a million times in action movies and she was certain she could pull it off, if necessity dictated.

As they neared the lights of the parking lot, she lifted her head and looked for the young man. Her eyes adjusted, revealing that he was now walking parallel to them, also headed for the road. Her heart beat faster.

Pushing on, despite the exertion of breaking through the crust, of pulling her mother, of her own body working hard, of the sound of her mother's heavy breath beside her. Her legs were pistons, driven by something fiercer than that childish fear of the dark, of the thing that certainly must live under the basement stairs. She wondered if this would give her mother a heart attack. She pulled her mother forward anyway. Another glimpse for the young man revealed he had finally veered off downhill and was below them now, moving on, earmuffs and all. Vera slowed her pace slightly.

And then, somehow, they had made it to Center Road, clear of snow. They sprinted across the pavement, not caring what the young man might think of them.

Quickly and without talking, Vera ripped her mitten off, shoved her hand in her pocket for the keys and, finding them, unlocked the doors. When they were safely inside the vehicle, Vera locked the doors again.

He had made it nearly to the road as well, slow and constant in his pace. Vera turned the key in the ignition and the car roared to life, groaning against the cold. She no longer thought about the chill, her ears and neck were hot. She just wanted to get home.

Pulling onto Center Road, Vera pointed the car down the hill, pressing on the gas. The dark figure stood ahead of them, at the distant crosswalk, patiently waiting for an absurd amount of time for them to pass.

"He could have crossed, like, a million times already," she muttered. She saw a slight nod from her mother out of the corner of her eye.

"Why did he go to the crosswalk, anyway?" her mother asked. "Nobody is around. No other cars. He could have crossed anywhere. It feels like he's waiting for us."

Vera shuddered. A frightening thought sprung into Vera's mind, reminding her of a book she in grade school where a group of teenagers mowed down a man who had jumped in front of their car, mistaking the look on his face for derangement instead of fear and help. Vera's gaze locked on the young man at the crosswalk. It was too late to go in any direction other than the one they were headed in.

Then, lights flashed in the rearview mirror, and Vera recognized two police cars charging down the road behind them. She instinctively pulled over. *This moment?* she thought. *I'm getting pulled over right now?* She watched as the cars approached and then looked ahead out the windshield at the young man. He was still. She braced herself.

And then, to her surprise, the police cars raced past her. But she was still frozen, hands at ten and two on the steering wheel like she had been taught back in high school. Her emotions were still coursing through her: fear at the thought of having to stop her car now that they were finally safe inside it, fear that she had been caught after having been up to no good (though this was ridiculous, she knew), and the feeling of relief that if anything had or would happen, the police were here now and they were supposed to save you.

Her mother gasped, interrupting all her illogical thoughts.

Ahead the police cars had stopped, one on each side of the young man who remained motionless. Four police officers poured out of their vehicles, a wall of uniformed bodies surrounding. One officer took the lead, moving toward the teenager. Vera felt the tension, both parties unsure of the other's intent. Another officer turned on the large flashlight he held in his hand and lifted the beam of light.

And for the first time all evening, Vera got a good look at the young man. Stringy brown hair peeked out from the hat, framing a thin face. An empty look in the young man's eyes filled her heart with sadness.

"Oh, Mom," she whispered, "He's so young." An image of Jack flashed in front of her. She pushed the thought aside. Jack was six. This was a teenager. Jack was home tucked into his bed; this young man was out here. Alone in a cemetery. On Christmas.

The young man lifted a hand to shield his eyes from the light and the movement ignited the charged moment. Suddenly, the officers were on him. Vera's hand flew to her heart as she watched one officer swiftly grabbed the young man's wrist and swing it behind his back, twisting his body around in one smooth motion while capturing the other wrist. Another officer moved the young man toward the police cruiser, pushing his head down and into the back seat. His body folded into the car and an officer slammed the door. In a moment, the officers were loaded up and the cruisers were headed down the hill toward the quiet village.

"What the hell is going on?" Her mother leaned forward, eyes glued to the scene in front of her. "What just happened?" She turned to look at her daughter.

"I don't know." Vera's hand was still covering her heart. "Maybe it was the skull bong kid. Maybe it was the barn burning kid. Maybe it was someone else. Maybe we can ask Blake. They must have thought he was going to do something." I mean, she thought, *we thought he was going to do something*.

Vera and her mother were left in the darkness again.

When her mother didn't answer, she said, "Maybe we should have talked to him."

Her mother looked at her like she was crazy. "Are you crazy? That kid was just hauled off in a police cruiser. You never know what's going on with someone. What their story is."

Vera nodded. She put the car into drive and eased it back onto the road. "I wish I knew his name though."

—Darcie Abbene

broken Arab Mustafa habibi English

now look

it's my fault

i sound just like you

i say i'm from Lebanon

you think it's the one in New Hampshire

that's okay

there's no magic

but i can't stop tricking you

my "perfect" English sneaks up from behind my slightly brown face

and just stands there waving hello

like an inconspicuous ass

i think and dream in English

it's disgusting and easier than you think

i sound like i can't speak any other language

that's code for white

i am white though

i whitewashed myself

wiped the Arabic off with Frasier and Friends

every day i wonder

what it would have been like

had i spoken a thick

broken Arab Mustafa habibi English

but it doesn't matter

because in these Vermont mountains

anyone can freeze to death in any language

and that's not magic that's a disaster.

—*Jad Yassine*

Meditation at Sleeping Giant, Hamden, CT

Still myself among  
tall pines,

*my mind* rises  
as a mist

in morning. Clear  
motes fall,

mute needles  
glissando

along an endless  
fingerboard,

carillon bells  
call gospel

songs, sonorous  
in depth,

as if they had  
avowed

to disinherit  
the earth.

Mind is  
a crystal glass,

tipped on end,  
ringing,

even before  
the touch.

—*David Capps*



Horseshoes

*Livermore, Maine*

There was something sacred  
about their Sunday ritual:  
The solemn march from the bench  
to the pitching box.

The communion of steel mouths  
clanging like bells beneath the  
stained-glass sky.

We stood in our pajamas  
at the kitchen window  
as the flashes flung towards heaven  
came down with a thud,

sending dark clouds of dust  
across the old dirt road.

—*Frank William Finney*



*“A Farm in Maine in the Fall,” Jim Ross*

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## Making a New Home

My husband and I were born and brought up in India. It was decided in September that we would move to the USA in a few months. Moving from one's home is scary, but we had another dilemma: in Mumbai, a city of 18 million, there still wasn't a single day I stepped out and didn't see someone I knew. All of Connecticut held only 3 million, but not one was a familiar face.

I worked from home and made life simpler for my husband by dealing with the things that needed to be taken care of. Life in the empty new home and the big new country was slightly intimidating, but a few things had to be fixed. We called one maintenance guy to fix a leaking tap and the sink. The office told me that he would come by 10 a.m.

*Will he understand my accent? Should I tip him? How long will he take to work?* ...were some of the thoughts that ran through my mind since 9 am that day.

Needless to say, I stood by the window at 10 am that morning. A small, golf-cart-like vehicle pulled in at 10:05, and while I tried to breathe deeply, the impatient doorbells made me more nervous. I opened the door and looked at the man who was twice my size.

"Are you 161 B?"

"Yes," I mumbled.

"I'm here to fix a leaking tap."

I let him in without saying anything. Most Indians don't wear shoes inside the house, and we didn't have a vacuum cleaner yet.

"Would it be okay to remove your shoes?" I asked.

"No, it's against our company policy," he firmly replied.

All I could muster was "Oh!"

I tried to smile but it was difficult.

He continued, "Yes, because if I slip in your house, I could sue you."

*He could sue me because **he** carelessly slips?* I continued to stare at him, trying to figure out my words.

I was about to say, "It's okay, then. You can come with the shoes." But before I spoke, he left, saying, "I guess I can't come in."

I didn't know what to do as I saw the door close. *What would I tell my husband?* I should have verbalized my thoughts, but what could I do now? Just as my nervousness began to overcome me, I saw him come back.

I opened the door and he said, "Look what I found" and held up a pair of booties for me to see.

I smiled wearily.

He said, "I respect your religion and beliefs."

I replied, "It is not just religion but the fact that I don't have a vacuum cleaner yet and..."

He intervened, "I have a spare vacuum cleaner and I will gladly give it to you for free."

Quite honestly, I didn't believe him.

Sensing my hesitation, he immediately explained, "Some tenant had left it before, and I can give it to you if you like."

It sounded too good to be true. I didn't know what to say, but I managed to squeak out an "okay" and smile timidly.

He worked on the tap as I nervously stood outside. He asked a few questions about my husband and his work. Slowly, I spoke to him and my fear subsided. He was done in a few minutes and left. As I saw the golf cart screech away, I messaged my husband.

When my husband returned in the evening, I recounted the whole incident.

“Do you think he will give us the vacuum?” I asked.

“We will know that tomorrow.”

The next day, I found the vacuum cleaner at my doorstep. New England, which had felt so alien and cold, suddenly felt warmer.

—*Sunayna Pal*

## My Parents, Painting Rooms

My middle-aged parents are upstairs, painting a room. And I wonder how many rooms they've painted together over a lifetime. Perhaps one in a fixer-upper home or apartment of their own first, squabbles over perfect trims settled over pizza and beer with their high school buddies. Next probably would have been in an office building of their first business, expensive taste resented later in the bankruptcy. After would be a stream of different homes, the fighting probably more over the children set to occupy the rooms than the art they had now perfected. Later on I can see them working in stiff silence, as they smear the cheap stuff over low-income apartment buildings purchased in a failing Rhode Island city to get our heads above water. Finally they paint alone: my father trying to discern the right colors in his lakeside rental, my mother biting her lip over the nauseating candy-purple I chose for the big room in my stepfather's house. And now here they are, helping me in my home. Airy discussions about old friends pass between them.

—*Emily Fabbri*





*“Roof,”* George E. Clark

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## Old Portland

Where Longfellow had reared his pen  
Between the bay and ancient fen,  
I walked the cobbled east end path  
And found my soul in old Portland.

Where cold and noble ocean's wrath  
Concealed eighteen-twelve's aftermath.  
That city, hope to heart did lend,  
And armored 'gainst despair's attack.

Beneath the frosted pine trees' bend  
Where Levett's settlers' vanished wind  
Still haunts the wintry squall's combat,  
My weary bones learned hope again.

—*Andrew Thornebrooke*

Downtown Boston

*for Jennifer Maiola*

1.

This disheveled amalgam of groped-for American life  
is an incredulous American lie: CNN flatscreen,  
eclectic bustling street corner, aimless pedestrian zone  
of some nameless flag-lined avenue.

Morning-fogged and tactless, tan-suited executives  
wheedle prospective clients on BlackBerries,  
past the boarded-over emporium on Bromfield  
next to whose steps a merchant-mendicant rattles his pitcher  
at the base of the Italian sausage concession.

Bright-faced Samuels, 5'6, once the adored,  
soft-spoken gofer of the suburbs, fingers his thinning cowlick  
then stumbles through the Back Bay Fens, seeking end  
to an errant in-house feud. The target site, replete with  
surface parking lots and mangled automotive warehouses,  
is preparing to bequeath its last gas station,  
and the aged-out editors and newspapermen  
have resigned to blogs and podcasts.

Still, official business convenes in small circles.

Clutching a worn copy of Alice Munro's *Selected Stories*,  
fingers yellowed with callouses, Jennings delights  
in his ankle-tight jeans, perking forward ever slightly  
as someone just beyond the curtains  
knew enough to plug his classical station  
during a battery of tests. Less seen, through his  
foreboding and composure, is his gratitude.

2.

Just like the gardener grown weary, these over-idled  
natives feel untroubled as they wait for something  
more than knowledge to enter their lives.

Time's mist, breathing beneath the soles of hot feet,  
mingles below the fold. The noise in the photo,

bled through overnight rain and stoop rot, disfigured  
your unmistakably accented-freckled mayor, statured under  
the vaguely Victorian derelict's sunken oriel  
and showcasing some thirty years' sobriety at a fold-out desk  
beside office-groggy interns along the fiercely trafficked  
eastern terminus. All had seemed to wince at once when,  
as cars flashed by, the whispers of some remote  
demonstration made rounds on social media,  
and these raw, unprocessed minutes became hours, then  
days, as if each would turn ruefully to another to say  
*I impart some effort, I know not what...*

O market-hot gateway parcel, lodged in between  
frayed neighborhood fringes, unclaimed and ill-dreamt,  
what geodesic feats will furnish the skyline Proper?  
The sun is dipping below the willow's untrimmed  
canopy, and there is just enough noonday light  
left for the cooperative to work—and for Lowrey,  
nursing an aortic rupture, to convalesce.

3.

Soon there will be little more than is read about  
and even less to take with on a personal holiday.  
The Hotel Buckminster stands still as a grandfather clock,  
scandalously reticent, one which is handed down through  
fatherless sons, its banquet ghosts roam and sink,  
seeking Georgia. They are untraceable, except through the few  
unjacketed compendiums circulating underground,  
and for a singularly disconsolate graduate student  
whose precision and long-form are no longer marketable.  
But this pledged activation, boasted about, yielded to  
in a caldron of collective fatigue, will soon employ children  
who can't afford to live here; who too will roam and lean  
against the panes, heaving their unspoken drama  
toward another anguished, Prouty-deprived vista.  
The scattered filings await the final process, as do their

sloppy-haired overlords, who themselves shuffle past company  
logos, bloated, rose-wristed, the malingering mass  
of sleepless vainglory, ghosting to and fro in a froth  
of vaporized smoke, the urban festers of an open wound,  
no closer to each other than they are  
the feeling at the bottom of their lives.

4.

Who is the ambulance coming for, and will its sirens  
reach the railings of HUD-snubbed suburbia?  
Miles from the many still on their way: your well-dressed,  
ear-budded passersby, eminently forward-looking,  
the endearingly residential Deli Haus' and Rathskeller's  
consecrated into memory, swirling in the dust,  
where civic propriety now paraphrases its groupthink,  
exhaling an endless panorama of corporate  
consolation. The same sleek, mile-marked district  
is rife with exhibits to itself, walls adorned with  
monochrome portraits of the centuries,  
of a once-commercial crossroads, colonial:  
culler of staves, measurer of boards, viewer of bricks,  
tithingman, hogreeve, 'cradle of American liberty,'  
'hub of the world.' Now, material longing;  
statelessness of wandering; the dissatisfaction of having too  
much pleasure, too much freedom to live dissatisfied.  
And ruddy-faced tourists would pass on by,  
beguiled in their leisure, past the playfully refined  
sensibilities of the retired retailer-professor,  
who by now is well into his 90s,  
rose-cheeked, un-remarried. He sits past sunset,  
perched beneath the shade of his modest lilac bush,  
his face cartooned on some remote highway billboard,  
where a man is stopped in the dust,  
wondering what more waits for him at dawn.

5.

The mums should still sell out in the fall, it's hoped,  
as baseball gives way to the quiet, evermore observable  
landscape, its inching 6PM solitude. The field is a glade,  
a whisper coughed up in mush, sliced at its edges  
by the rough pulley of the city as it wends toward  
a chandelier drawbridge. The pocket-parks will begin to  
slump down and slide like an untidy room,  
leaves gathering by grates, steam rising from stoves  
in windowless kitchens. Suddenly all is, or was,  
language, that which becomes, like the slimy fish  
unwrapped on the subway on a day in which  
only a few people notice that everyone around them  
is a stranger, a thing that cannot hide itself as unobvious before it  
is again nothing so unusual, like the mind secreted  
in its own corner, a blue-grey tempest engulfing  
whole trees and their stewards as projectiles shoot past  
the spalled off debris, splintering and exploding  
around us. Meanwhile Bryant, picking at his skin,  
is still trying to spend the ten dollars he's had in his pocket  
for more than a week. The Black Seed circle is at last  
hoisted into advertising visibility, a recognition hanging  
Christlike over all the commotion and precarity—  
the sunset beyond the staggered rooftops,  
garnished with tufts of green—if for a moment.

6.

Swooping over patches of milkweed, Elizabeth jars  
what will emerge the last monarch to fold itself  
delicately on the windowpane to die.  
One day some foppish urbanite will pass through the woonerf  
into the crowd-seized Great Hall, before he too  
will check his Apple Watch and see that he is late,  
again. Did he know there was a minaret capping  
this time last year, when he was rushing to meet a deadline?

He has his enemies, who dine in the same five-star  
restaurants week after week, blinking dusty stars  
in their sleep, rhyming their indifference with  
the endless pagination of their dreams' heights.  
All've carved out a piece for themselves in the city,  
a place with an ending, 'which have it must  
in being, having been.' That end in which a beginning  
rests, waits, in which children race to their lives.  
O Royko, you harebrained rascal!lion!  
Say again what's on the mind of every taxi driver  
reading your column. It's about time  
the laborer rise to build his city again.

—*Tanner Stening*



## The Robins in Connecticut

Atop the statue of a Founding Father,  
Weathered and cracking from time and modern perspective,  
I saw a trio of robins in Connecticut,  
Nestled snug atop the head of William Samuel Johnson.

I like to imagine those three little birds  
Reflect the activities of their New England neighbors:  
Meeting the golden autumn with joyful song,  
Pouting at the snow in October, and sharing waterhole gossip.

I wonder in the rust and moth of a sleepy town,  
Does the world notice the bird nest atop the head of William Samuel Johnson?  
If they look up to see dots of orange honey,  
Do you think they believe they are ghosts, pretending to be the Sun?

*Won't you come on down?* ask the citizens.

*Why don't you come up here?* reply the dots. *It's much more clear.*

—Matthew Johnson



*"Gravestone,"* Jennifer Weigel

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## Lady of the Dunes: A Cold Case

In 1974 on Cape Cod,  
That harsh assaulting song of gulls masked screams.  
Long red hair placed on a bandanna, jeans,  
Nude body on a towel, looking odd,  
Both hands removed, jaw open as if sawed  
By killers who pulled teeth, destroyed the means  
Of learning her identity and cleaned  
The crime scene. Now she's only known to God.

No missing person's report. No one sought  
To claim or bury her. There was no sign  
Nor clues that someone witnessed her demise.  
Her mutilated corpse lay in the morgue,  
Anonymously sealed in its cold shrine.  
Justice is those monks chanting for her rise.

—LindaAnn LoSchiavo

*"Lady of the Dunes" is the nickname for an unidentified woman discovered on July 26, 1974 in the Race Point Dunes, Provincetown, Massachusetts.*

## First Dance at Stoughton High

I am grateful that your top lip quivers  
as it did when I met you in 1987.

I want to have met you a year earlier  
so that I could say, today and years from now,  
that I have known my wife since we were teenagers.

I want to have tracked you down in Stoughton,  
and to have found you at your prom,  
and to have asked for just one dance.  
I would have been slight and insecure and unpracticed,  
but still, as that little guy, unpoised and squeaky,  
I would have stood next to teenage you,  
even if I would not have known where to put my hands.

You would know just how to slow dance,  
while I would just have been slow,  
and wobbling a bit, hesitating, perhaps too polite,  
rather than meandering  
towards increased closeness like the other teenagers.

But I wouldn't care.  
Lionel Richie would be filling  
the Stoughton High gymnasium,  
and it would be dark,  
with people standing on the perimeter,  
staring dejectedly,  
and for once I would not have been dejected.  
I would have been right where I always wanted to be,  
grateful to be rocking next to you,  
with only a few layers of polyester and taffeta between us.

I would have imagined a world  
where those eyes would sleep next to mine,  
where they would wake slowly,  
and casually behold me.  
I would have wanted our life to start immediately, impossibly.

As I look at you now,  
London is behind us.  
London and Boston and Chicago and Berkeley are behind us.  
Consider the children and the heartbreak and the fathers dying.  
Consider the vacations and the fights.  
Consider the mountain cabin.

Consider the beach house with plantation shutters.  
Glorious rentals!  
Consider our children who made it, and those who didn't.  
Consider our gradually improving pillow-top mattresses.  
These are all part of our familiar story.

But must we follow the rules of time?  
Can we challenge the authority  
of the Stoughton train station clock tower?  
I want always to have had that dance,  
the dance that risked everything we would become,  
the dance that would have been worth it.  
I keep it with me, that imagined dance,  
full of possibility and hope and preemptive love.

I imagine that we could have made sparks  
long before I had found the flint.  
When I return to that single epochal teenage dance,  
I see that your eyes still widen in perpetual surprise.

And your mouth, your top lip,  
I looked it up, that part of your mouth  
that I named in London:  
It's called your philtrum.

I will travel the world  
and the decades  
to stare into your unfathomable eyes,  
to behold your face  
and all its nameable parts.

—*Andy Jones*

## The Rail Trail

The rail trail in my home town runs along the Quinapoxet River where 150 years ago there chugged a textile mill in the middle of woods with no road: only train tracks to transport raw materials in, finished products out, and young Italian ladies (who worked and lived there) in and out. I know all this because now, mid-trail, rising from its ruins, an outdoor exhibit with plaques and storyboard signs tells the tale of the Springdale Mill. On maps, the surrounding area of Holden is occasionally labeled Springdale; whether the village named the mill or vice versa, I don't know. But the trail that has replaced the tracks has quickly become a popular place to jog, power-walk, or bike. It also invites you to stroll with a friend and talk about nothing in particular, anything at all, or everything you can possibly think of. Or with my nephew.

\* \* \*

Even today at 32, Douglas rarely volunteers news of his own life, so my brother fills me in behind his back. That way, when I see Doug and ask *What's new?* and he says *Nothing much*, I remind him *What about such-and-such...?* and start him talking. But when he was fifteen he rarely spoke to grown-ups like me at all. Fortunately, I knew that *surly*, *sullen*, *taciturn*, *inscrutable*, and *enigmatic* are all synonyms for *teen-age male*, having been one once myself. I also knew that Doug was suffering from justified "anger management issues." He flunked a couple of courses in high school— all right, four courses— and saw the inside of a jail cell a time or two—all right, three.

But whenever he'd have a sentence commuted to community service, he insisted on completing his hourly commitment, even when—especially when—some angry dad of a cohort raised a stink and threatened to sue the cops so his own kid would get released and be saved from the scourge of hard, physical labor—i.e., from being seen wearing plastic gloves in a public place. Doug would say *That's not right, when you owe forty hours you owe forty hours*; then he'd put on the gloves and put in his forty hours. His devil, you see, suffered from a dose of decency; his hellion half, a moral compass leading him to the light. Like all teens, then, and all of us, Doug was a work in progress. So I was surprised when I invited him to go for a hike with me, and he said *yes*.

It was approaching the Springdale Mill with him—where the rail trail had installed brand new, big, black designer-benches of iron—that I steeled my resolve and tendered some pertinent platitudes, which are observations that like to exploit parallel structure in their verbiage to press their point. *One thing I've realized, Doug, is that there are two kinds of people in the world: those you're happy to see coming, and those you're happier to see going. In other words, those who leave the world a better place for their having been here, and those who leave it worse. The choice of which one of these you want to become is yours.*

Suddenly he sat. I sat too. And we were quiet for a good few minutes. Now, I was used to six-mile jogs and eight-mile jaunts and knew that he wasn't, and didn't think anything much of this reaction of his at the time. So when I broached the silence with *Tired?* he said *Yes* then *No*, he was and he wasn't. A Zen response, but he was having a Zen moment, or so it would seem.

Now, looking back, I think what happened was that he had heard.



The rail trail is part of a statewide project that will eventually allow you to bike from Concord all the way to Oakham. This particularly well-tended section comprises 2.8 miles of hard-packed dirt, wide as a one-lane road, flanked by a lush ground row of mayflowers, mosses and ferns, assorted evergreens, oaks, maples, rushes, and incorrigible brambles. Meandering to the left and right and occasionally underneath, the Quinapoxet babbles with its trout and occasional heron, then opens onto the equally picturesque Wachusett Reservoir, which spans the towns of West Boylston, Boylston, and Clinton. The reservoir's rim is likewise laced with verdurous trails and vistas.

The two bridges that span the river and allow access to these once-remote woods date only from the current millennium. This explains why I had not explored all of this forested area as a youth. For the last decade and a half, though, I have been unable to walk over one of them without pausing to ponder on the bubbles below, soak in some salt-free spindrift, listen to the luscious rush of swirling rapids.

Most forest trails are wilder, not nearly as wide, and wind much more. They tend to be spiked with splotches of soggy soil and unruly roots and rocks that reach up right where your feet want to go. I have twisted an ankle more than once for love of a jog in such woods. But they really are for hiking and biking—the kind of hiking where you don't much mind soaked feet, stubbed toes, and scraped ankles; and the kind of biking where you expect to wipe out every now and then. But the rail trail is free of roots and rocks, and is slightly convex, like a road, so rain flows off to the gutters at either side. These features make it quite simply the best of all the places I've ever jogged, which span several time zones, terrains, latitudes, and altitudes.

The ambulatory bibliophile enjoys an advantage, too, in the intermittent benches, picnic tables, and stumps—a handy resource should a poem or passage of prose, like an ornery uncle, compel you, in a sudden spurt, to sit. One time a lady spotted Seamus Heaney in my hands and told me that she used a poem of his in her classes. *O, where do you teach?* — *Quinsigamond Community College*. — *Ah, do you have my nephew in class?* I told her his name without the least bit of worry because he had told me he loved his English class: I was certain she wouldn't suspect his sordid past.

You see, since our rail trail stroll, Doug had been seized by a desire not to turn into a “loser” (his word) like his best friend Tyler who *had a good heart*, Doug said, but dropped out of high school freshman year only to bounce from one entry-level job to another with no possibility of promotion or advancement beyond minimum wage. Doug had reported all this to me two years later on our second marathon stroll, which was in Venice, Italy, of all places: He had decided to make something of himself—and help save the planet too, perhaps. Or try. The angel inside him was tossing the devil right out of the ring.

But back to the professor. Alas, she did not recognize my nephew's name. She did turn me on, though, to what would become my favorite Heaney poem.

Another time, at the West Boylston end of the trail, where the river widens into the reservoir, with Carl Sandburg in my hands, I spied a great blue heron taking flight. I then lit upon a pear-shaped bear of a man wading with a fishing pole and asked him if he'd seen the thing. *All the time*, he said, and we chatted on. I wrote a poem, struck by the ironic synchronicity

of the event—or *coincidental*, rather, because this episode doesn't actually involve two opposites, which, Doug has informed me, is required to make something *ironic* rather than *coincidental*. (He *really* loved his English class, obviously.) Anyway, while I was conversing with the angler that morning, the fog was creeping in on "little cat feet," which is exactly what happens in the Sandburg poem I happened to be right in the middle of when I lit upon him! I kid you not. My reading-Carl-Sandburg-on-the-rail-trail poem got published, by the way, and you know if it's published, it's got to be true. OK, now I'm kidding. But you can check it out at [sleetmagazine.com/selected/nicola\\_v4n1.html](http://sleetmagazine.com/selected/nicola_v4n1.html) if you want.

\* \* \*

One time when the woods were not too crowded, a vital, mature gentleman took me aside to tell me how much he enjoyed the rail trail, especially now that he was up and about after a horrible bout with Lyme's disease. He was convinced he'd contracted it here since he never hiked in any other woods. Remember, the brambles and ferns that provide a launch pad for insects on narrower trails were confined to the remote flanks of the flat-and-broad rail trail. But he told me that ticks lurk in dirt, too, at times—even well-packed dirt. This is something I hadn't suspected before. *It only takes one bite from the wrong tick to put you on your back for months or years*, he said. So now, on his recommendation, I wear light-fabric, long-sleeved shirts and ankle-length slacks whenever I walk in the woods.

After bidding adieu to the guy, whom I was sure I'd never see again, I suddenly had to sit: This man had gone out of his way to alert a total stranger—to save me the wretched intermission from life that he had endured. This made me think of Loren Eisely, who ran into a guy who tried to save a slew of beached starfish by hurling them back into the ocean, with a few words of good luck. This encounter is described in a famous essay called "The Star Thrower." And I realized that the generous gentleman I had just met, rejoicing in his recovery and renascence, was also sort of a Star Thrower, compelled to help out folks other than his own, like me. So now I try to pass such information on to anyone I see on the rail trail (or in any woods, for that matter) sporting short-sleeve shirts or shorts, who might not know.

Or to folks like you who might not even have been to the rail trail. Yet.

—James B. Nicola

## New England

There is another kind of capital,  
that western minds sought in the easternmost  
inscrutable traditions—holy, whole.  
The combination lingers as a ghost  
from India and China as it's from  
Amherst and Concord. That is why I come  
back home to Worcester and take trips, to share  
the literary highways, back and forth,  
and find—or forge—the modern-ancient soul  
between New England and New York. My faith  
is secular but ardent as the most  
devout religious, sure of the rebirth  
of ghosts, or at least words to show me there  
are ways already blazed to worlds elsewhere.

—*James B. Nicola*

The Earl of Nostalgia

*for E.D. Clark*

On those Saturday nights

late summers and early autumns—

we drummed on the dashboard

of Earl's '65 Mustang

to every Beatle song we knew

till the beer was gone and the

daylight found us

on High Street Hill

with bags under our eyes

singing "Good Day Sunshine."

—*Frank William Finney*



*"The Colonial,"* Rachel Van Wylen

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## Remember When

“It’s almost winter,” Ben said to Carla. “We have to get ready.”

Carla looked up from the book she was reading and glanced at Ben. They were sitting outside on the patio, their chairs facing a garden of blooming pink roses, lavender asters, and deep red bee balm. Carla could hear the rushing water as it moved unhindered over the Scantic River Dam in Somersville. The sound seemed to mingle with the euphonious symphony of chirping bird calls and the buzz of industrious insects.

In the spring, the river would rise high along the banks, but this late in the summer it was sluggish, lush with unwelcome pond scum. They had always loved the seasonal changes. One year, they followed the country road past the river and into the little town of Somers. From there, they abandoned the car and hiked up a portion of Bald Mountain. It was an easy trail to walk. Ben, who always carried a notebook and pen with him, often stopped to catalog every species of bird they saw along the path. By the end of the summer, the sketchpad was full of endless notations on his bird sightings as well as rough drawings of the various species of small mammals they encountered like the Eastern chipmunk, the American red squirrel and the New England cottontail rabbit.

Carla pulled herself back into the present moment, realizing she hadn’t yet responded to Ben’s statement. A gentle smile crossed her features.

“Ben, you’re always in a rush to get through the year. It’s only August, you know. Autumn won’t be here for a while. Let’s just enjoy the day, shall we?” she murmured.

Her eyes dropped to the book in her lap, but she didn’t return to her reading. With the sun beating down on her head and shoulders, it was difficult to concentrate. A drop of perspiration traveled the contours of her face, caught in a crease along the ridge of her jaw, and fell on the page in front of her.

“Isn’t it hot?” she said, holding the book loosely in her right hand. “Hard to think about winter on a day like today.”

Carla looked up to Ben’s face, searching his pale blue eyes, hoping to see something there, though she wasn’t sure what. He was watching her with equal intensity. Not unexpectedly, of course. Ben watched her whenever they were together, and now, like always, she wondered what it was that he saw. Did he see the wrinkles circling her mouth or the deep shadows under her eyes? She certainly did, whenever she looked at herself in the mirror, which was less and less these days. Did he think about the day they were married, about their family and friends who stood with them in front of the white, octagonal gazebo that sat along the edge of the Scantic River? Did he recall the vows they’d exchanged, the disappointment of hopes unrealized, or the joys they experienced as they faced life’s peaks and valleys together? Did he remember any of the precious moments, which had defined their lives together and now, had brought them to this place, this single instance where it seemed, the only connection they might have was talking about the weather?

From the open window, above and to the left of where they sat, the haunting notes of Alan Jackson’s *Remember When* floated down on them. The words caught in the humid air and mingled with the thoughts already rumbling in Carla’s head: “And life was changed, disassembled, rearranged.” Their lives had been changed, disassembled, rearranged. Hadn’t they? But



she pushed against the sudden urge to cry as the song filled her with memories of too many missed moments. Shaking her head, she turned to Ben with business-like efficiency, willing the sadness away.

"Are you warm? The sun's pretty hot today."

"Not hot," he said, smiling. "Not yet, anyway." His eyes turned to the open window then back at her. He grinned at her lasciviously. "Do *you* remember?"

Carla felt the heat flood her body and redden her face, felt it flow through her limbs and right into her feet.

"Well, do you remember?" His look of anticipation threw off its own heat. His smile broadened as he waited for her response, but seeing the memory cross her features and claiming her thoughts, he knew she did.

"I remember," Carla said, smiling. How could she forget?

"It was a beautiful day, wasn't it? We were walking along the river, and I wanted to find a pink Lady Slipper to give to you. Too late in the season, but we didn't know that back then. There were so many things we didn't know."

Carla smiled, remembering Ben's frustrated search. He had pushed aside soft brush, hoping to unearth a pink bloom hidden in the depths of the dampened green moss and browned thistles from the pines dotting the river's edge. Ben's words blended with the sweet melody still playing above their heads.

"The leaves on the trees were green, but not all of them," Ben whispered these last words as he watched Carla's face. He looked into her eyes, gauging the effect of the memory they shared. "Do you remember the leaf I put in your hand, how it fell from the tree above us? It was beautiful, like you," Ben said. "The first autumn leaf and I gave it to you as a gift."

Caught up in the memory, Carla smiled back at Ben.

"It was our first date," she said.

For a moment, they shared a look of sweet sentiment, which took them back to the river with the tall sheltering trees, the bird calls, the sound of late summer insects, and the touch of his hand on her waist. Yes, she remembered the very moment when they made love awash with feelings neither had ever experienced before. Afterward, Ben had touched the tears on Carla's face, tracing one with a single finger, gently, ever so gently. Then, he whispered in a voice she still couldn't resist, "Of course, we will marry. I love you." And, so, of course they did.

"I still do, you know," Ben said.

"What?" Carla looked up confused. "Still do?"

"Yes, I love you. I always will." Ben smiled. Somehow, he had always been able to read her thoughts. At least, so it seemed.

A shadow passed over his face, and the light seemed to disappear from his eyes. Carla's smile faded too. *Don't go, Ben. Stay with me.*

"Well, how are we doing here?" Ben's nurse, Anne-Louise, called out. She had come upon the couple with her usual determination, but neither had heard her approach.

"Has it been a good day?" she asked, shifting her weight forward to tuck the corners of the light blanket around Ben's slight figure, his frame bent forward at the waist.

"Yes," Carla spoke the words softly. "A very good day."

Anne-Louise smiled sympathetically. "I'm glad. Time for Ben to take his medicine."

Carla watched as Anne-Louise straightened Ben's body. She released the hand levers on both sides of the wheelchair, pushing it forward slightly as she turned the chair toward the front door of the nursing home.

"I'm sure it was a good day for Ben, too. Wasn't it, Ben?" She looked at the top of Ben's head, his gray hair thinned and wispy. Carla's own graying hair had pulled free of the knot at the back of her neck; the strands, damp and listless, seemed to be a visual reflection of the dulled mood, which had fallen over the scene like a curtain lowered at the end of a play.

Anne-Louise stopped and turned back to Carla. "Will we see you soon?" she asked.

"Yes, soon."

"Well, then..." The nurse pushed the wheelchair forward. Then she stopped again. "My goodness! Look at this," she said, bending down to pick up a leaf from the ground. She held up the yellow-colored leaf for Carla to see. The tinted leaf was speckled with traces of green, yet another reminder that summer would inescapably pass into fall.

"The first autumn leaf. Isn't that something? Here Ben." Anne-Louise placed the leaf in Ben's hand. "Beautiful, isn't it? Autumn is coming; winter will follow."

Anne-Louise looked at Carla. "A bit of my mother's wisdom, I'm afraid." Then she smiled. "You know, she was never wrong. Winter always comes, doesn't it?" The two women watched, as Ben, with just a trace of a smile, looked down at the leaf in his hand.

"It's beautiful," he whispered.

Carla came around to the front of the wheelchair and knelt down, both of her hands covering Ben's hand as he held the yellowed leaf. She looked into his eyes, once again searching for the Ben she knew and loved. He smiled back at her.

"Beautiful," Ben said, lifting his right hand up to touch her face. "So beautiful. Just like you. Do you remember?"

"Always," Carla whispered. "I will always remember...for both of us."

—Ricki Aiello

Love Sonnet

Let's not forget;  
when we went to that grocery store on the Cape  
(the one in West Dennis, the one with the crop  
of New England fruit)

it wasn't me who left the trunk unlocked.

Cranberries covered the street.

And apples. And dates.

It wasn't me who left the trunk unlocked

but when you cried, apologized for crying,  
and tried to clean the seeds and pulp  
that littered the road, I stood there. You picked up  
the damaged fruit alone. Why should I pine

to be saved when you stoop to save a currant?

It wasn't me who left the trunk unlocked.

—*Sean Whitson*

To Reach A Mountain

No mountains outside  
my window, only naked trees  
and suburban splits—the sky,  
an afterthought.

To reach a mountain  
requires a journey outside  
this insulated den  
of dust and comfort;  
once, I drove north, alone—  
ecstasy mounting at each crest  
of highway: the Green Mountains bore  
the spectrum of an Italian fresco.

The windshield,  
like safety goggles,  
dimmed their art,  
reduced the threat  
that mountains imbue  
just by existing—

By rising up like trouble  
in a flat, safe land  
where dust settles and I am

an afterthought.

—*C.V. Blaisdell*

## THE HORRIBLE BAND

An innocent enough beginning,  
the sun a lone ornament radiant  
over Ipswich Bay, pacific waters  
lapping the headland with the rhythmic  
slap-slap of incipient high tide. Gulls,  
  
terns soaring in elliptical loops, nose-diving  
for chum scummed in the wake of a rusty trawler  
laden to the gunwales with a day's haul.  
Beach roses swaying to the wisp of a breeze  
off the Atlantic...a halcyon day,  
this day of Independence, this day  
of cannon, fireworks, of glut  
in jingoistic revelry. Down the rutted path

clomps the band, *sui nomen* the Horrible Band,  
warming to revelry fueled by cheap beer  
and reefer. Ersatz drums - picnic coolers  
and sticks of driftwood - percuss  
the serenity of the afternoon, rat-a-tat  
rat-a-tat, ... air horns blare...desultory  
explosions of pinwheels, roman candles,  
screaming meemies wage war on tranquility.

A parade at dusk and a bonfire, we are told,  
refuge only in the lee of the headland. Below  
on the rocks spilling to the ocean a doe  
lies splayed - foreleg grotesque, neck  
spiraled, flies celebrating the stench of death.

I imagine her, independent, bounding with sublime  
grace across the high meadow and then the moment  
of instinctive horror, the fatal misstep...had she  
cried out, had anyone heard? I pray for her gentle soul,  
watch the sun slip into the horizon of this, her final  
day. The Horrible Band heads a motley parade  
of Hell's Angels rejects up the path, the music  
a disjointed blather. A teenager boasts loudly  
of drinking mother under the table. Dusk

collapses to darkness, a four-story funeral pyre  
of kerosene-drenched palettes and old lobster crates  
sets the night air ablaze in pagan bacchanal. Embers  
ride the draft heading for the stars. Like Icarus  
perhaps I had flown too close to the sun,  
sensibilities melted in a Dantean inferno of the surreal.

*Lanesville, MA - Cape Ann*  
*July 4th*

*—Krikor Der Hohannesian*

You might say I was being cruel and unusual, but it was an act of desperation: my wife was already six months pregnant, and I figured that, if not now, it would be years and years before I'd get to see Vermont in the fall again.

To be fair, she said she was feeling up for a trip. I promised I'd make it as easy as possible. We'd fly into Montréal and visit my cousins, then take a train to Québec City and visit my aunt, then take Amtrak south across the border, along the shores of Lake Champlain into Essex Junction. There, we'd pick up our rental car and drive into the little town of Underhill, in the shadow of Mount Mansfield. That was where I spent the best years of my childhood.

When I was ten, my father was transferred from Vermont to IBM's new plant in San Jose, and the move away from what I believed to be the most beautiful place on earth broke my heart. I cursed the very idea of California despite our father's promises we would love it out there. Yes, he was eventually correct, and it is where I met Libby and where we got married. But in many ways, the explosive growth around Silicon Valley that caused IBM to relocate my family to California was also what made San Jose the "anti-Vermont."

For a young, resentful boy, this only made the nostalgic draw of Vermont more powerful. So powerful, I decided, as I faced the all-consuming throes of parenthood, that a trip back to Underhill would be the only balm for this anguished fire within me.

At least that's how I sold it to my wife, who'd empathized. She'd had the chance to revisit her own childhood home in Kansas, so I'd said to her, "Then you understand exactly what I'm going through!"

"Not really," she laughed as we walked in the crisp, blue-sky, mosquito-free coolness of a San Francisco summer day. "I've been back to Kansas enough since I moved away to know that I *like* it here!" But she saw something in my eyes and she patiently, charitably—and pregnantly—agreed to taking this trip in October, 1986.

Montréal was somber. The bright colors of autumn had already moved south, so the city-boulevard maples and thick countryside forests were already as dark and grey as the looming skies, the old stone churches, and the cobbled streets.

"The colors here aren't as pretty as I thought," Libby said.

"Yes," I said. "I guess they've already started to migrate south. Maybe we'll catch up with them on the train to Vermont!"

We bid my cousins *au revoir* and settled into our seats to take in the panorama of the flat farmlands and river villages that skirted the Richelieu River. I was delighted to be right. At the lower, lake-level elevations, the maples, oaks, beeches and birches were in their pinnacle, autumnal glory. The train route only made this even more magic as we crossed long causeways over calm lake waters that mirrored both the cobalt sky and the blazing, multi-colored hillsides.

"It's just incredible," Libby said. "We didn't have fall colors like this in Kansas!" And then she rode in silence, looking out the window, and I saw her appreciation wasn't something I'd have to cajole from her. I saw her as the Kansas girl who was uprooted herself to California and in the excitement, had forgotten she had been missing something, something from her childhood, that these fiery leaves were rekindling.



I smiled. If she liked this train ride, she'd love my village of Underhill. I'd found a bed-and-breakfast just uphill from St Thomas Church. It was remodeled from a huge red barn that once belonged to my classmate. The new owners were about to close the inn for the season until they learned I grew up in Underhill.

"For you, then, we'll keep it open one more week," they offered. Everything about this trip seemed charmed. My optimism buoyed my slightly-more fatigued wife.

"I'd like to just take a long bath," she yawned, "and sleep on a comfortable mattress."

"Then that's what you'll do in Underhill," I promised.

I'd planned ahead and booked a rental car in Burlington because I'd heard that the fall foliage was going to strain the Vermont hospitality industry. I told Libby about how I caught salamanders and frogs with my five siblings in the pond beside our old stone house. She'd heard that we cut down the annual Christmas tree from our own back woods and dragged it home in a sled. That we learned to ski with our classmates in the tiny, local, family-run ski bowl. That we played on the sandy beaches of Lake Champlain in the summer and watched the sap from our maples turn into syrup each spring.

And she heard about those falls, those crisp-as-red-apple falls.

"Maybe it's all changed," she warned me. "Even Kansas changed." And after all, we were living in San Francisco now. Whole orchards at the periphery of the Bay Area were being swallowed by rampant development.

"That's different," I said. Horace Greeley told everyone to "Go West." Vermont is what was left behind.

But in my mind, I worried about the warning from Thomas Wolfe: "You can't go home again."

We got to the Burlington rental car office after dark. Every car was booked.

"It's fall foliage season," said the young woman at the counter. She shrugged, as if that were somehow helpful. Then she apologized that she'd lost my rental car reservations, made weeks ago.

"What?" I panicked, as my now-exhausted wife slumped in her cold seat in the dreary waiting room. "How am I supposed to get to Underhill now? It's twenty miles away. It's 9 o'clock! The innkeepers are expecting us!"

The poor clerk had no suggestions other than to hire a cab. I agreed and walked out to the curb. We didn't wait long.

"I can take you there," said a skinny, pale, cab driver with curly dark hair and a sparse mustache. "Hop in!"

It was only going to be about \$20. We didn't really need a car once we were in Underhill, I figured: the innkeepers would provide us breakfast, and the country store with produce and deli supplies was a short walk.

"As long as it has hot water and a comfortable bed," Libby reasoned, "I'll be fine."

We threw our bags into the trunk, called the inn for the updated ETA, and Libby and I settled into the back seat.

"Underhill, huh?" our driver asked. "Now, that's just a few miles from here, right?"

"About twenty miles east. Past Essex Junction," I said.

He was young—animated and chatty. When he learned we were from California, his eyes lit up in the rear-view mirror.

"California? Do you know Frank Sinatra?"

We told him we didn't. He was too excited to listen.

"Look," he said, using his right hand to fumble in his front seat for some piles of folded paper, which he handed to us.

"Look at this. It's my idea for wrapping paper. It's pretty cool, isn't it?"

Libby and I studied the paper in the dim light of his cab as we drive through the curving road through the black countryside beyond Essex Junction.

"It's ripped-up dollars," he explained, and we saw that it was: sheets of glossy paper filled with the black-and-white collage of photocopied torn dollar bills.

"Cool," we said.

"If you bring this back to California and show it to Frank Sinatra, he'll buy some and use it when he send his friends presents. And they'll want to buy some. And then I'll sell a ton of this and get rich."

I looked at my wife, who was grinning at me. I smiled back.

"California, huh?" He asked again and we nodded. "Have you heard of the Pothole Bandit?"

We shook our heads visibly enough for him to see in his mirror.

"Well, you see, Burlington has some of the worst pot holes in its streets of any city," he explained. "And City Hall wasn't doing anything about them. They just left these holes in the streets that were ruining all the cars. Drivers were getting in accidents."

I nodded. I'm a city planner. I'd heard similar stories in just about every city I'd ever worked.

"So one morning, people wake up and start driving down the streets and there are these trees planted in every pot hole. All over Burlington. The *Free Press* runs a story about it and it's hilarious. The newspaper calls the guy who planted the trees the 'Pothole Bandit!'"

We laughed. It's a good story, entertaining us as we wound through rolling farmland and quiet towns that were, unfortunately, too obscured by the dark night to appreciate.

And we knew there must be more to his story. There was.

"Guess who the Pothole Bandit is," he challenged.

"The Mayor of Burlington?" I asked.

"Frank Sinatra?" Libby giggled.

Our driver laughed. I think he enjoyed us as much as we did him.

"You're looking at him," he announced, pridefully. And we gave him a round of applause. Silicon Valley would love this guy, I thought: he was an entrepreneur, a disrupter, a flagrant non-conventionalist. Out West, people were taking it upon themselves to revolutionize technology with flash and bravado. The Pothole Bandit took it on himself to revolutionize the way Burlington's Public Works Department undertook street repair, with just as much flair.

But it was almost 10 o'clock and we were still not in Underhill. Our driver stopped at a multi-way intersection, controlled by a lone flashing signal, with no other cars around and a complicated set of directional signs with arrows in all directions, pointing to Jehrico, Westford and Fairfax.

"Umm," he said, "Where do I go from here?"

My wife looked at me with panic. But I was seized by another feeling: I'm suddenly ten years old again, in the back seat as my mother is driving back home from Burlington.

"Go to Jehrico," I advised. He made a right.

We came to another intersection, in Jehrico. The driver studied the options. I remembered the brick house at the center of the fork.

“Left,” I said.

We drove through more quiet curves in blackness. Now we were in the town of Underhill, but this wasn’t quite my town, I explained. We needed to go to Underhill Center.

“Where now?” the Pothole Bandit asked me at the next crossroads. I saw a Sunoco Station. I remembered.

“Right,” I said.

“How do you know?” My wife asked, weary but grateful, and as surprised as I was.

“I just do!” I said, and quietly I admonished Thomas Wolfe.

We entered the little crossroads that mark Underhill Center. “There’s Bolio’s Store,” I pointed out. “There’s St. Thomas...and that means that’s the Kellner’s house!” I pointed to the white clapboard house of my best-friend in fourth grade. If I spent Saturday night at a sleep-over there, that meant I’d have to wake up early to go to Mass with them, and, if it were winter, arrive earlier enough to shovel snow off the church walk.

We pulled into the driveway of the red barn just uphill from the church. The keys were where the innkeeper said they’d be, the porch light was on. Outside, the air was so frosty that when we inhaled, our nostrils pinched shut.

“Thanks,” I called out to our driver, and added, “You know how to get back to Burlington?”

He waved. “Say *Hi* to Frank Sinatra,” he laughed and drove off into the night.

“It’s freezing!” Libby shuddered. “I forgot about how cold it can get!”

I opened the door. The barn interior was a marvel: a cozy sleeping nook. A bathroom with instant hot-water. From the high ceiling of the open center of the barn hung a rope swing. We sat on it together.

“The innkeepers live across the road,” I said. “The note here says breakfast is anytime between eight and ten. Pancakes. With real maple syrup.”

Libby smiled as she got off the swing and got ready for bed.

“I’m exhausted,” she said, and then cooed in delight at how immediately the warm water came to the faucet. She amazed me: a trooper, part little girl, part lovingly indulgent wife, and very much the imminent mother of our soon-to-be-born daughter.

I assured her: “You can sleep in.”

I didn’t sleep in, though. I was up the next morning for a jog, before the sunrise. The hard frost had painted the green fields silver, the edges of ever red/orange/yellow leaf a furry white. I jogged past the church, my school, the Kellners, the Lindes, the Caseys. I ran up Pleasant Valley Road, past the broad meadow where we used to sled.

From this clearing, Mount Mansfield stood sentinel, impossible to miss, impossible to forget. The morning light gilded some of the peaks of its rugged profile: they would be grey in the cold midday, but in the morning, they were a lovely rose color. Something about a mountain, I realized, jabs through the haze of memory and offers that clarifying perspective. It might be one compelling reason why I chose San Francisco, I considered: everything there is mountains.

Then I was enclosed again in a dense stand of maples that our bus driver, Mr. Potvin, used to tap for syrup. Soon, I was at my house. It was an old stone house, attached to a wood-clad annex, big enough for my huge family. The pond was still across the street, and ice was forming a thin crust at its willow-hedged edges.

A young woman was walking out the front door to get the paper as I jogged in place, keeping warm, sizing up the scene. She greeted me, and I told her my story. She invited Libby and me to come by that afternoon.

I jogged back to the barn, transfixed by the warming morning sun, the autumn smells its gentle heat unlocked, and the memories that came flooding with them.

*Indeed*, I argued with Mr. Wolfe, you *can* go home. You just need a bit of luck. In my case, I was lucky to ride with the Pothole Bandit.

—*Peter Albert*





*"Old Stone Church in Autumn,"* Jamie Fay

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Hungerford Terrace, Burlington, VT

Bells from a church I may never enter  
echo through the half-asleep street,  
the wind like a faint yawn of someone  
more physically exhausted than tired.  
Their tones seem no longer the results of human hands,  
and I cannot picture a faithful old man  
mounting stair after creaking wooden stair  
to join his calloused hands to fraying rope  
in a downward dance to silent counting.

They sound low, steady, certain as a map spread before me.  
It is like longing, the way they drag themselves out:  
sound offering solace to the night,  
bouncing off bare walls of lonely apartments;

so many of us unaware  
of how grace reverberates through bone.

—*Jennifer Edwards*



White Mountains' Sundown

Ridges and bushes  
become ink lines, dyed  
on the Grand Canvas  
half sky, mellowed red.

The firing flame slides  
                  through  
                  the vista, the heat  
                          vanished and the whispering  
  hushed  
                  in a trice — I freeze  
                          in time  
                          and space.

The day, mere noise  
the sun escapes sight —  
Yang, Yin sync-ing  
everything in darkness

that dilutes my mind —  
then I forget you,  
forget all, and settle,  
curved into the horizon.

—*Xiaoly Li*

## ***Back Page Book Review Feature***

### **“The Liars’ Asylum”: A Book Review**

I first heard of Jacob Appel about two years ago, when a good friend of mine sent me his Wikipedia profile, asking me to take note of his degrees. Appel—a doctor, bioethicist, and writer—has about ten, and, according to his profile, is working on more.

This suggests two things: an incredible work ethic and a deep curiosity about human life. Both, I’d say, come through in his collection *The Liars’ Asylum*, which was published by Black Lawrence Press in 2017.

A quick word about the title. I know the book shares it with one of the stories in the collection. I couldn’t help but think, though, of the absurdist writers and playwrights. The collection is filled with big, booming characters, many of which are more than a little off-kilter—as if we, the readers, are peering into a madhouse.

But are the characters really off-kilter? And, are they mad? Appel, I think, wants to suggest that, when we’re away from the scripts of daily life, pushed there either by trying or romantic events, we can loosen up a little bit. We’ll say things that are funny or crazy or morally repulsive or revealing. Or all four. When we’re in love, we can be ourselves.

Appel’s themes come through clearly in the title story, in which we meet a psychiatrist, Ian Shaddock, who must figure out if (what many patients are calling) the “God-rain” is genuine. The patients, who have all been caught in drenching summer storms, have suddenly been hit with the urge to tell all of their secrets. Shaddock is skeptical, but he is also a little afraid, especially since he does not want to get caught in the rain and admit to his wife that he does not want children. (He also does not want to tell her about an affair he has with an attractive coworker.)

Another story, “Good Enough for Guppies,” features Gene and Sheila attempting to stop Glenda, Sheila’s mother, from marrying Adolpho, a much younger man whom she meets at a pet store. Gene comes to realize that Adolpho is not such a bad guy, that Glenda is genuinely happy. Sheila eventually blurts out the real reason why she’s against her mother’s new marriage: she’s afraid if she dies, Gene will replace her.

Many of the stories in *The Liars’ Asylum* are structured in this manner: a sort-of “out there” premise navigated by funny and strange characters, followed by a big reveal. But not all of them. Appel also does nostalgia well. My favorite story in the collection was “When Love Was an Angel’s Kidney.” There, we meet Maddy, a young girl whose parents operate a camp for kids with severe illnesses, located in the Berkshires. She falls in love with one of the campers, Aaron Buck, an aspiring professional baseball player who is also on dialysis and may die. She says she’d like to donate a kidney to him. Her parents—who are losing money and fighting constantly—are skeptical of the idea. Narrated by a much older Maddy, the story ends with a nostalgic punch, one filled with such longing and power that I put the book down and said: “That was a strong story.”

Another of the nostalgic, longing variety: “The Frying Finn,” in which a Finnish-American soldier, though married, falls deeply in love with a woman who is engaged to be married. All of that comes to an end when her enraged fiancé threatens to kill him.

One of Appel’s strengths is his dialogue. It’s tight and sharp, like something you’d see in a play. Unsurprisingly, Appel is also a playwright.

One criticism I’d like to offer, and it is a mild one, is that I found myself wishing for a bit more variety in how the stories were structured. All were in the first-person. I’m a writer myself, so I know we all have our preferences. (I tend to do a lot of writing, especially my poetry, in the first person.) But I think a few third-person stories would have provided a bit more variety.

Overall, this collection is solid, funny, shocking, highly readable, and, at times, moving. I’ll be seeking out more of Appel’s fiction.

—Jon Bishop



*"Signpost at Hogback Mountain Scenic Overlook, Marlboro, VT," C.V. Blaisdell*

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## CONTRIBUTORS

JACOB M. APPEL is a psychiatrist and bioethicist in New York City. His recent books include *Millard Salter's Last Day*, a novel about euthanasia, and *The Mask of Sanity*, a character study of a sociopathic physician. His collection of ethical dilemmas, *Who Says You're Dead*, will be published by Algonquin in October. More at: [www.jacobmappel.com](http://www.jacobmappel.com).

JOHN JAY SPEREDAKOS is a NY-based professional actor and writer who has spent some of his best days between Madawaska and Greenwich...He has a BA from Muhlenberg College and an MFA from Rutgers University. John has performed on and off-Broadway, in films, TV, commercials and radio, and is a devoted daddy to his daughter, Calliope. Recent publications include poetry in *Bluestem*, *Rue Scribe*, *Prometheus Dreaming*, *Typishly*, *Chaleur Magazine*, *Cathexis Northwest Press*, *River Heron Review*, *Gravitas: Volume 18 Issue 1*, *Tiny Seed Literary Journal*, and upcoming in *Alternating Current* and *Duck Lake Journal*. More info, photos, etc. can be found on IMDb at: [imdb.me/johnsperedakos](http://imdb.me/johnsperedakos).

GERARD SARNAT won the Poetry in the Arts First Place Award plus the Dorfman Prize, has been nominated for Pushcarts plus Best of the Net Awards, and authored four collections: *HOMELESS CHRONICLES* (2010), *Disputes* (2012), *17s* (2014), and *Melting The Ice King* (2016), which included work published by Oberlin, Brown, Columbia, Virginia Commonwealth, Johns Hopkins and many publications, including *Gargoyle*, *American Journal of Poetry* (Margie), *Main Street Rag*, *MiPOesias*, *New Delta Review*, *Brooklyn Review*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *San Francisco Magazine*, and more. "Amber of Memory" was the single poem chosen for his 50th college reunion symposium on Bob Dylan. *Mount Analogue* selected Sarnat's sequence, "KADDISH FOR THE COUNTRY," for pamphlet distribution on Inauguration Day 2017 as part of the Washington DC and nationwide Women's Marches. For *Huffington Post*/other reviews, readings, publications, interviews, visit [GerardSarnat.com](http://GerardSarnat.com). Harvard/Stanford educated, Gerry's worked in jails, built/staffed clinics for the marginalized, been a CEO, and Stanford Med professor. Married for a half century, Gerry has three kids/four grandkids so far.

ALEXANDER B. JOY holds a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of Massachusetts Amherst. He was born and raised in New England and now lives in New Hampshire. Jane Kenyon and Edgar Lee Masters currently top his fluctuating list of favorite poets.

PETER ALBERT is a San Francisco-based city planner who drew inspiration from his childhood in places like Pittsburgh, New York, Montreal, and rural Vermont. He and his wife Libby raised two children to adulthood via San Francisco public schools, and he currently draws inspiration from the grade-school children he tutors at the 826 Valencia Afterschool Center in San Francisco's largely-Latino Mission District.

ANDREW THORNEBROOKE is a writer from Portland, Oregon. His work spans the gamut of poetry, speculative fiction, and historical scholarship. He lives in Rhode Island with his magnificent wife.

JAD YASSINE is a Lebanese poet whose work is published in *Franics House* and *Bellevue Literary Review*. He graduated from Vermont College of Fine Arts in Montpelier with an MFA in Writing & Publishing.

ROBIN GOW'S poetry has recently been published in *POETRY*, *Furrow*, *carte blanche*, *FIVE:2:ONE*, and *Corbel Stone Press*. He is a graduate student at Adelphi University pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing. He is the Social Media Coordinator for *Oyster River Pages* and interns for *Porkbelly Press*. He is an out and proud bisexual transgender man passionate about LGBT issues. He loves poetry that lilts in and out of reality, and his queerness is also the central axis of his work.

Born and raised in Mumbai, India, SUNAYNA PAL moved to the US after her marriage. A double postgraduate from XLRI and Annamalai University, she worked in the corporate world for five odd years before opting out to embark on her heart's pursuits; she decided to raise funds for NGOs by selling quilled art and became a certified handwriting analyst. Now, a new mother, she devotes all her free time to writing and heartfulness. Dozens of her articles and poems have been published, and she is a proud contributor to many international anthologies. Her name has recently appeared in *The Fathom Mag*, *Dear Anonymous*, and *Cecile's Writers*. She is part of an anthology that is about to break a Guinness world record. Know more on [sunaynapal.com](http://sunaynapal.com).

MATTHEW JOHNSON is a poet, a grad student in North Carolina, and an irrational fan of the New York Giants. He spent a large portion of his childhood in Stratford and Fairfield County in Connecticut. His poetry has appeared in *Sport Literate*, *The Roanoke Review*, *Maudlin House* and elsewhere. He is a Best of the Net Nominee (2017) and his debut collection, *Shadow Folk and Soul Songs*, was released in June 2019 by Kelsay Books. You can find him on Twitter: @Matt\_Johnson\_D.

JAMES B. NICOLA'S poems have appeared in the *Antioch*, *Southwest* and *Atlanta Reviews*; *Rattle*; *Tar River*; and *Poetry East*. His full-length collections are *Manhattan Plaza* (2014), *Stage to Page* (2016), *Wind in the Cave* (2017), *Out of Nothing: Poems of Art and Artists* (2018), and *Quickening: Poems from Before and Beyond* (2019). His nonfiction book *Playing the Audience* won a *Choice* award. His poetry has received a Dana Literary Award, two *Willow Review* awards, and six Pushcart Prize nominations—from *Shot Glass Journal*, *Parody*, *Ovunque Siamo*, *Lowestoft Chronicle*, and twice from *Trinacria*—for which he feels both stunned and grateful.

EMILY FABBRICOTTI has lived in New England her entire life and especially treasures childhood memories of playing in the snow until dark, her education in Worcester, and the hurry everyone is always in. She lives in a tiny house by the sea with her boyfriend, where she tries to force herself back into writing as often as possible.

JANA LACHANCE is an artist and painter who grew up in New England on the seacoast. She uses her experience living in New Hampshire as the framework for the concepts behind many of her paintings.

C.V. BLAISDELL has lived in and loved New England all her life. She writes, plays, photographs, and resides just north of Boston. Her poetry and cover art most recently appeared in *The Writers Next Door: An Anthology of Poetry and Prose*.

SEAN WHITSON earned his MFA from Emerson College in 1999. He is now a political consultant living with his wife and son in the Washington, DC area.

Native New Yorker LINDAANN LOSCHIAVO, who recently won *Inkwell's*, *F[r]iction's*, and *Wax Poetry & Art's* poetry contests, has been published in *Measure*, *Not Very Quiet*, *Flatbush Review*, *Panoplyzine*, *Peregrine*, *The Healing Muse*, *St. Katherine's Review*, *Windhover*, and anthologies such as *World's Best Poems*. Poetry chapbooks *Conflicted Excitement* [Red Wolf Editions, 2018] and *Concupiscent Consumption* [Red Ferret Press, 2020] along with her collaborative book on prejudice [Macmillan in the USA, Aracne Editions in Italy] are her latest titles. Her novella-in-progress is set in Massachusetts in 1992.

TANNER STENING is a journalist based in Massachusetts, writing for the *Cape Cod Times* and covering, among other things, issues of Native American sovereignty and the opioid crisis. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Grey Sparrow Journal*, *The New Guard*, *Portrait of New England*, and elsewhere. He is an MFA candidate at Goddard College.

KRIKOR DER HOHANNESIAN lives in Medford, MA. His poems have appeared in over 150 literary journals including *The Evansville Review*, *The South Carolina Review*, *Atlanta Review*, *Louisiana Literature*, *Connecticut Review* and *Natural Bridge*. He is a three-time Pushcart Prize nominee and the author of two chapbooks, *Ghosts and Whispers* (Finishing Line Press, 2010) and *Refuge in the Shadows* (Cervena Barva Press, 2013). *Ghosts and Whispers* was a finalist for the Mass Book awards poetry category in 2011.

FRANK WILLIAM FINNEY was born in Massachusetts and educated at the University of Massachusetts and Simmons University (formerly Simmons College). He currently lives in Bangkok, Thailand, where he is a senior lecturer at Thammasat University.

ANDY JONES is a poet, professor, and talk show host. He resides in Davis, California.

JENNIFER EDWARDS, MS, CCC-SLP is a Pushcart Prize (XLIV) nominated poet previously published in *The Poets' Touchstone*, *The Ekphrastic Review*, and other journals. She is originally from Vermont, where she attended the University of Vermont (with her first apartment on Hungerford Terrace) and now resides in Concord, NH. She enjoys spending time with her family and brindle boxers and working as a speech-language pathologist in schools, skilled nursing facilities, and her private practice. She's active with the Poetry Society of New Hampshire and other writing groups. She can be reached on Facebook, Instagram (jenedwards8), and Twitter (@Jennife00420145).



EM HARRIETT is a young artist and author from Connecticut who has spent her life loving New England and its beauty.

DAVID CAPPS is a philosophy professor at Quinnipiac University. His poems have been featured most recently in *All the Sins*, *Mantra Review*, *Peacock Journal*, and *The Nasiona*. He lives in New Haven, CT with a luxurious Maine Coon named Purrbasket.

XIAOLY LI is a poet, photographer and computer engineer who lives in Massachusetts. Prior to writing poetry, she published stories in a selection of Chinese newspapers. Her photography, which has been shown and sold in galleries in Boston, often accompanies her poems. Her poetry is forthcoming or has recently appeared in *Rhino*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *The Mantle*, *The Olive Press*, *J Journal*, and elsewhere. Her poem "Reeducated in a Rural Village in Beijing" was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Her poem "Spiral" was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Xiaoly received her Ph.D. in electrical engineering from Worcester Polytechnic Institute and Masters in computer science and engineering from Tsinghua University in China.

RICKI AIELLO is a lifelong Connecticut resident with work-related sojourns in Maine and Massachusetts, including the Cape. Having lived in New England all her life, she has a particular fondness for the beauty of the seasons and its changes. Though her professional work required a good bit of writing, she turned to more creative endeavors in retirement. This is her first attempt at fiction. She can be reached at [revricki3@gmail.com](mailto:revricki3@gmail.com).

DARCIE ABBENE is adjunct faculty at Northern Vermont University where she teaches writing courses. She also serves as the Managing and Nonfiction Editor at the *Green Mountains Review*. An occasional freelance writer and editor, Darcie is working on her first novel.

GEORGE E. CLARK is a librarian, poet, and artist living in Metrowest Massachusetts. He has degrees from New England institutions: Clark University and Simmons University. His photography has been published in *The Resource*, the personnel newsletter of Harvard University, *The Stow Independent* newspaper, and *Weathering Change: An Anthology of Art in Response to Climate Change*. See: <https://green.harvard.edu/campaign/weathering-change>.

JENNIFER WEIGEL is a multi-disciplinary mixed media conceptual artist. Weigel utilizes a wide range of media to convey her ideas, including assemblage, drawing, fibers, installation, jewelry, painting, performance, photography and video. Much of her work touches on themes of beauty, identity (especially gender identity), memory & forgetting, and institutional critique. Weigel's art has been exhibited nationally in all 50 states and has won numerous awards.

JAMIE FAY grew up in Shrewsbury, MA. She has been interested in the arts since she was a child. She graduated from Assumption College with a minor in Studio Art. She loves to take pictures and especially loves using reflections from water, including puddles, and has yet to fall into one while setting up the shot.

JIM ROSS resumed creative pursuits after retiring five years ago from a career in public health research. He's since published creative nonfiction, poetry, and photography in over one hundred journals and anthologies in North America, Europe, Asia, and Australia. His publications include *Columbia Journal*, *Friends Journal*, *Gravel*, *Ilanot Review*, *Issues in Science and Technology*, *Lunch Ticket*, *Kestrel*, *MAKE*, *The Atlantic*, and *The Manchester Review*. In the past year he wrote and acted in his first play. Based on one of his nonfiction pieces, he has a featured role in a soon-to-be-released, high-profile, limited documentary series. He and his wife are parents of two health professionals and grandparents of four wee ones.

RACHEL VAN WYLEN is a painter from New Hampshire whose work investigates the human form and the landscape. She is interested in places, spaces, and the way we inhabit them. She works on-site whenever possible and considers the experience of being present in a location essential to understanding it.

## EDITORS



**BRETT MURPHY HUNT** is a Lecturer of English at Northeastern University, a Doctoral Student at Northeastern University, and the owner of Brett E. Murphy Tutoring & Consulting. She has written for a variety of publications, from the more casual *The Huffington Post* to the peer-reviewed *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* and *The Teaching Professor*, along with *River, River*, a literary journal.



**JON BISHOP**'s work has appeared in *Laurel Magazine*, *Fourth & Sycamore*, *Boston Literary Magazine*, *the Arts Fuse*, and *Write City Magazine*. His first collection of poetry, *Scratching Lottery Tickets on a Street Corner*, was released in 2018. He lives in Massachusetts. Follow him on Twitter @jonjosephbishop.



**SMRITHI ESWAR** is a student at Tufts University. She has previously written for the *Times of India* and the Chelmsford Alumni Magazine through *The Lowell Sun* newspaper. In the future, she hopes to pursue a career in the legal field.