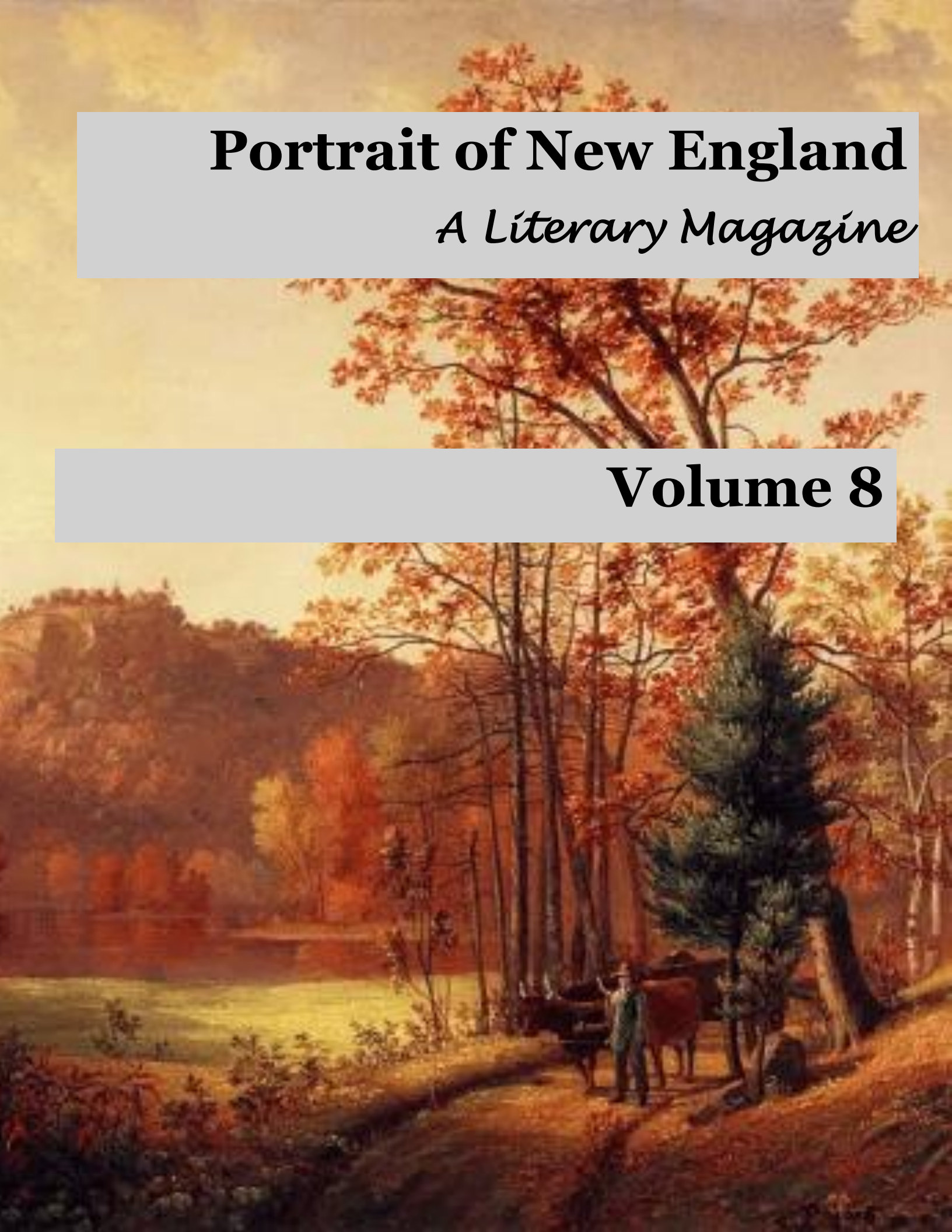
Portrait of New England

A Literary Magazine

Volume 8



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

We are thankful to you.

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COVER ART BY SAMUEL LANCASTER GERRY,
"NEW ENGLAND AUTUMN"

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Editor's Note:

We're closer to Christmas and New Year's than Thanksgiving, but for my Editor's Note in this issue, I wanted to focus on giving thanks. Not just for not the wonderful writers who have contributed to *The Portrait of New England's* eighth issue (three years and seven issues strong since our return from hiatus!); the writers who work and support this magazine are truly the lifeblood for this publication. But I wanted to focus on two staff members who played a significant role in the publication of this issue.

If you follow our social media platforms, you would know that Melissa "Misty" Dione McEwen joined the magazine in September as our new poetry editor. And throughout the fall, Rachel Goldman has been an intern for us. Both of these individuals contributed more than what I can say on one page, but if I could to summarize it in a line: their efforts were truly invaluable to the success of this issue.

Having served as the primary editor of the magazine these past few years, while reading, editing, and organizing the issue and spreading the word about it is very rewarding, it is a lot of work to get done. And this current issue, thanks to the help and work of Misty and Rachel, this issue came out excellent, and this truly reflects the collaborative effort behind this magazine.

Misty reviewed and provided insightful feedback on our poetry submissions this issue (which get larger after each issue), and for our contributor spotlights through the fall, Rachel created the images and captions for each of the social media posts. Rachel also did a fantastic job of helping to develop a contributor's archive page which we hope to have up over the coming weeks as well.

Their work speaks about the importance of teamwork and community within the space of this magazine. Through their dedication and collaboration, they allowed the process to feel more supported and shared. I am incredibly grateful for their commitment and the sense of community they have brought to this issue, and I hope they take pride in and enjoy the finished issue as much as I enjoyed working with them these past several weeks and months.

Peace,

Matthew Johnson

if there were a place I would pray
Heidi Greenwald

it is here, in this glen of hemlocks
branched arms open, raised in symphony
heads bowed under last night's snow.
Do you know snow crackles as it falls?
It collects on my lapels. I stand
shin-deep, snow swallowing skis,
yet I push on and through,
trusting ground is there to meet me.
Right foot, left pole, left foot, right pole.
Repeat. If I come here enough
I will smell yesterday's fallen tree –
limbs cut, pushed off trail – rising
sharp pine scent. I know where I
need to slow, that Crooked Brook downhill
where stream cuts trail. I cross mindfully.
Tomorrow, melt will force me on foot.
But I do not know that yet.
Gray yields to insistent blue,
the snow, mica-like. I tried
to explain that to you once –
words didn't come. I am alone.
Right foot, left pole, left foot,
right pole. There is much
to say. Right foot, left pole, left foot,
right pole. This is how I find faith.
Tomorrow, I will fly arms wide
down Gilmore hill. But I do not know
that yet. What I know is that mine
are the only tracks on this trail.
I see where I have come.

Generational
Susan Zelie

Never forced on me, but caught
solid as a fly ball at Fenway
this love of New England.

My French-Canadian grandfather
poultry farmer and first selectman
his love of your fields and freedom.

My swamp Yankee father an oil painter
his canvases under whose gaze I grew up
those beloved bottom-sagging barns
and covered bridges mirrored in brooks.

Woods I roamed stitched with stones
their gray borders a meek
frame for the fiery portrait
of your annual death.

Did I try to pass it on?

I have a son who, living in the shadow
of towering Douglas Firs, pines
for your raggedy white pines.

A daughter who stayed up all night listening
to a radio in London to hear the Sox win their
first series in 86 years. We cried together
over a crackly phone call.

A daughter who artfully stacks and string-lights
her husband's lobster pots to pay
a Christmas homage to the waters
he fishes, a Downeast tree.

A daughter who raises her boys
in the womb of it all, where the Mayflower
docked and your winter dealt out death.

I cannot shake your dirt roads and hidden cellar holes
your gap-toothed graveyards
and your crisp-sliced autumn air
your first flakes and mud season madness.

I see another generation driving
their tent stakes into your ground.

Invisible Road Maps
Hannah Bottigheimer

The morning after my mother's fiftieth birthday, I stepped out of my childhood bedroom and made my way to the single upstairs bathroom in our modest home. The wall opposite the sink, bidet, and toilet was papered in giant waving ferns—just as it had been when my mother, father, brother, and I all shared it.

In their reliable style, my parents had thrown a big party at the Old Field Club. While my mother marked her milestone birthday, I was quietly celebrating a milestone of my own—the early bloom of a promising new relationship. With a fresh college degree, a handsome boyfriend, and a pretty new dress, I felt proud to bring honor to my family.

It was 1989. I was twenty-two, barely upright in adult life — a few false starts behind me and a new boyfriend ahead. Somewhere in that chaos, I started dating Andrew—an athletic, outdoorsy guy. Embarrassingly, he was my first real boyfriend.

But now I was late. Late enough to need a pregnancy test. I went to the drugstore where my dad always took me when it was time to stock up on sale items—always demanding a rain check on the sale price if the advertised items were out of stock. It was familiar ground, except for the family planning aisle. And now, the morning after my mother's big soirée, I was sneaking into my childhood bathroom to find out if I was pregnant.

That was a long time ago. I'm 58 now, and last weekend, my husband and I spent Memorial Day in Maine at our tiny cottage on the cove of scrubby little Loon Pond. Our lake house is compact and charming, with just enough rustic beauty and modern touches to make it feel homey and inviting.

The cottage sits above a series of terraces, each one planted with bright green ferns, creeping thyme, and clusters of white, lavender, and fuchsia phlox spilling over low stone walls. On the lowest terrace, a black lattice-top fire pit is ringed by five lawn chairs, almost level with the lake.

There was only one real reason we chose this spot. When I was 17, I left Long Island for a women's college outside Boston and quickly befriended two girls down the hall—roommates and fellow New Englanders. Niffy was

funny and flirtatious, a blonde preppie from Connecticut. Cindy, from nearby Reading, Massachusetts, was the youngest of six and the only one of her siblings to graduate college. She was tall, dark-haired, and sharp-witted—and she'd grown up spending summers on a lake in Maine not far from the New Hampshire border.

Over the next decade, Cindy often invited friends—and sometimes boyfriends—to spend weekends at her family's summer place. Her dad and stepmom were usually there, along with older siblings and cousins. We boated, made s'mores, swam out to the wooden raft, and tanned our bikini-clad bodies. Cindy dazzled us with her expert water skiing, and if a boyfriend was around, some hot-dogging was bound to follow. It felt like a parallel life, a glimpse into a family tradition entirely different from my own.

Growing up, I didn't know anyone with a second home. I'm not sure my parents even understood the concept of a family vacation. Recreation wasn't in their vocabulary. They were academics, devoted to culture. While I dreamed of swimming and boating, they preferred classical music, art, and avant-garde theater. If we did anything as a family, it was likely to be a museum visit or maybe a theater production at the university where they taught. I definitely remember a stylized version of Fiddler on the Roof. This was their form of leisure.

In college, I discovered there were all kinds of families. Cindy's played badminton and cornhole, cheered on by beer-drinking hecklers leaning over the deck railing. Their rhythms—barbecuing and boating on sunny days, puzzles and card games when it rained—were foreign to me, but oddly comforting. Over the years, I watched Cindy and her family settle into their familiar rituals with practiced ease.

When my first child turned one, I joined Cindy and Niffy at a beachfront rental in Connecticut for a week with their four kids. By the time we'd all finished having babies, there were nine between us. Though none of us owned a vacation home, we gathered every summer—renting lake houses around New England or staying at Cindy's family camp in Acton, Maine. We were a roving circus of six parents, nine children, and a rotating cast of friends and cousins, all part of our lakeside crew.

After my twenty-year marriage ended, I began a new relationship with a wonderful man. His name was Nick. From the start, we were devoted to each other—but blending our families proved harder than I expected.

Three years in, we found a place to live together—and the chaos of our shared household panicked me. On more than one occasion, I found myself battling a powerful urge to flee.

In one of those moments, I decided I needed a place of my own. As part of my divorce, my ex-husband and I had sold the house where we raised our children and split the proceeds. Nick and I were renting—which, to me, meant I could afford a little lake cottage. Naturally, I imagined it would be in Maine—maybe even on Cindy's family lake.

Nick gently redirected my flight impulse into something more rational. If we were serious about each other, he reasoned, we should be thoughtful—find a place together. So, with almost no research, we bought the first house we saw. It was meant to be our sexy little one-bedroom escape. But the moment the ink was dry, our seven children descended. We've had the place for five years now, and though there's still only one door that closes, the kids love it. They invite friends, swim in the lake, kayak, and build roaring fire pits. What was conceived of as a tiny love nest has instead become an unlikely spot for family retreats.

On a recent Sunday afternoon, Nick and I were driving down Route 109—the busiest stretch between Acton and Sanford—trying to reach the hardware store before it closed. He wanted a new grill. As we passed the familiar lineup of shops, the memory of my mother's 50th birthday surfaced unexpectedly. The hum of the car, the scent of pine through the window, the clutter of roadside stores—it all collapsed time. I pictured myself on this same road, not as a wife beside her husband, but as a 22-year-old. Cindy was driving, and she was taking me to the hospital.

I felt a floating sensation—caught in that same odd mix of backwoods Maine decay: sagging gray Victorians beside shiny new plazas, Mom-and-Pop restaurants tucked between the pink-and-orange pop of a Dunkin' Donuts drive-thru.

My mother turned 85 last July. It's been 35 years since I found out I was pregnant for the first time. I don't remember telling Andrew. I do remember sitting on the pale yellow kitchen counter by the wall phone,

coiling the long, cream-colored cord in my hands, waiting for our family friends to leave so I could talk to my parents.

Andrew is almost invisible in my memory. I can't recall our conversation or his reaction. But I remember exactly what my parents told me to do.

"These things happen, Hannah. As soon as you're back in Boston, you'll make an appointment and end the pregnancy." They were clear, united, firm. I don't think I said anything but "OK." There was no room for ambivalence. No space for nuance.

I nodded as they spoke, but I didn't want an abortion. I didn't want a baby either. The case for ending the pregnancy was strong—I could barely support myself, didn't want to be a mom, and had no partner to rely on.

I didn't have religious convictions about the sanctity of life, but I didn't feel great about abortion either. I was scared, confused. I knew my parents were right—but still. Abortion. I felt like a spectator, watching myself standing at a fork in the road with no idea which path to take.

Back in Boston, I told my friends I was pregnant and asked where people went to end it. I called a clinic the next day and made an appointment—even though I knew I wouldn't go. I didn't want to be a mom, but there was no way I was having an abortion.

A few weeks later, Cindy invited Niffy and me to her family's camp in Maine. We all had serious boyfriends, but this was a girls-only trip.

It was a warm July afternoon, and the three of us were swimming in the lake. Cindy's dad was nearby, tinkering with the boat, while her stepmom puttered around the waterfront. I was standing in knee-deep water when I felt a sudden cramp—the kind that signals a period's arrival. Puzzled, I waded out and headed to the cabin bathroom, its rustic wood walls adorned with cutesy signs like "Here in the land of sun and fun, we never flush for number one."

I rolled down my bikini bottom and sat on the toilet. To my surprise, there was a whoosh and a plop as a large clump of bloody tissue fell into the still water. *I'm losing it,* I thought. There wasn't a cutesy sign for this.

I changed into dry clothes and told Cindy and Niffy what was happening. Did we tell one of Cindy's parents? Would we have confided in her

stepmother? On someone's advice—maybe a parent, maybe a doctor—we drove half an hour down Route 109, past the hardware stores, crumbling homes, and Mom-and-Pop restaurants, to Sanford Regional Hospital, where I learned my first pregnancy had ended in miscarriage.

Eight years later, I had my first child—a son. By the time I turned thirty-nine, I'd had four babies and four miscarriages. I rarely think about the pregnancies that didn't work out; the ones that did have filled my life with a deep, gratifying sense of abundance.

I was surprised by the sudden return of that long-ago memory as Nick and I drove down Route 109 that Sunday. This time, I gave myself permission to imagine a parallel life unfurling, the one in which I didn't miscarry or have an abortion. I always imagine a girl. I do the math. How old would she be? I try to picture myself as the mother of a thirty-five-year-old daughter, but the image blurs. I shake my head and banish the thought.

Sometimes I wonder if our past carries an invisible road map that we blindly follow. I chose a place on a lake that feels like home—the kind of home I once dreamed of. Today, I'm the puttering stepmom. My husband fiddles with fishing lines while our bikini-clad daughters and their friends lounge on the dock. We've created the kind of lakeside gathering spot where everyone feels welcome. Here, watching the sun's rays dance across the surface of the lake, I feel a quiet peace. Maybe, one day, our kids will find themselves drawn to a place like this.

The Grass
John McBrien

I crouched in the field and reached my hand under the leaves of a tomato plant, then plucked a yellowish-red tomato and placed it in the half-bushel basket next to me. I stood and looked up; the sun was hanging in the blue, unclouded sky, the way it did this time of year before starting to set. I looked down at my hands, green from tomatoes and callused from hoeing the fields. Right then, my cellphone began to buzz. It vibrated against the loose change in my pocket, sounding like the winnings coming from a slot machine.

I answered the phone. A quick, stern but loving voice said, "John, are you still coming to cut the grass?"

"Yes, Grandma, I'm just about to leave the farm."

"Ok, we have a meal for you, see you soon, bye."

I made my way out of the tomato plants and walked barefoot across the brown dirt, which was cracked and formed miniature canyon walls criss-crossing all across the field. As I walked, the soft, cracked dirt mushed and left footprints. I set the half-bushel basket in the open garage to let the tomatoes ripen with the others I had picked earlier. I approached my orange truck, took two wipes to clear the sweat from my brow, and opened the door. The hot, dry air hit my brow, and I regretted wiping it clean. I sat down, and my leg stuck to the seat. I found my gallon jug and took a swig that finished it; started the tuck and hastily got out, leaving the door open so the rest of the air could be exhumed. I placed the empty jug in the bed of my truck. After a few minutes, I was content that the cabin was cooled and climbed back in and headed towards my grandparents' house.

I took a right out of the farm exit and headed past the old mill, past the liquor store, cider mills, and McMansions into Portland. I bounced, turned, and tossed my way along the twisty oil-pressed gravel roads past old country farmhouses and a golf course, where finally I reached my Grandparents. I was really looking forward to eating dinner. I walked into my grandparents' house through the sunroom. My grandfather was quietly reading a paper. "Hey, Grandpa," I said. He folded one corner of the paper down, and from it appeared his head. He looked at me through his reading

glasses and replied, “Heyyy, John.” He folded his paper back, covering his face as I walked into the kitchen.

“Hello, Grandma.” She gave me a big hug and replied, “Hello, John Michael.”

“How is your day going?” I continued.

“Good, I hope you are hungry. I just started dinner, although it isn’t much.”

“That’s OK, I’ll eat anything, I’m starving.”

“Oh?” my grandmother replied.

“I skipped breakfast and forgot to pack a lunch, so I ate a couple of ears of raw sweet corn.”

My grandmother looked at me questioningly.

“You ate raw sweet corn?”

“Yes, it’s actually pretty tasty.”

My grandmother laughed.

“Jackkkkk,” my grandmother called. “Dinner is ready.” My grandfather entered the kitchen and sat down at the far end at the head of the table. I sat at the seat adjacent and on the left to the opposite head of the table. The table, capable of seating six, was intimately nestled behind the kitchen counter and adjacent to the window in the room. The combined kitchen and dining room had a distinctly 1960s feel, but had been updated with blue and white wallpaper, featuring English-style pottery plates as the border. I glanced at the wood cabinets, which my grandfather had handmade when he built the house.

My grandmother set out the dishes and cutlery, then returned to tend to the stove. I looked down at my empty plate, then to my grandfather, and finally to my grandmother. All that could be heard was the clink and clank of the pots and pans as my grandmother was putting the finishing touches on the meal. I decided to try to make conversation. I turned towards my grandfather and asked, “How’s the new tractor, Grandpa?”

“Good”

“The Ford is running, ok?” I spoke.

“Yes”

“Did you get the engine block cleaned up?”

“Yes, and painted the cowls.”

My grandmother placed a new bowl each in front of my grandfather and me. In it was romaine lettuce, a few grape tomatoes, and a couple of slices of cucumber. She sat down on my grandfather’s left. A position that enabled her to be at his side while also being able to get up to attend to the kitchen.

Noticing a pause in conversation, my grandmother said, “How is the farm, John? The work going OK?”

“It’s going good, Grandma, not much left to pick this time of year except beans, corn, and tomatoes.”

“Is that why your shoes are so green?” she chuckled.

“How’s your mother?”

“She’s good, been going to her meetings,” I said.

“Ugh, good, well, at least she is getting help, Lord knows I’ll never forgive her for what she did to your father.”

My grandfather grimaced slightly but did his best to hide it. He continued to look down at his salad.

“I know,” I said.

“The money she lost, ohhhhhh.” At that moment, the microwave dinged. My grandmother jumped up and jaunted towards the noise. She pulled out a covered dish; inside it was the vegetable of the evening. She continued assembling dinner. She took our plates, filled them, and returned them to my grandfather and me.

I looked down and enjoyed the view of chicken, microwaved carrots, macaroni, and cheese.

I ate the chicken and carrots. My left arm cradled the outside of a plate in a half C. I looked to my left and noticed my grandfather doing the same. I finished the rest of my meal quickly, but my grandmother and grandfather were still eating. However, my grandmother, appreciative that her meal was so well received, and noticing that I had finished, offered me some more "John, would you like any more?"

"No thanks," I said.

My grandmother looked at me, staring at my plate. Her eyebrows up, head hung, and lips pursed.

"Are you sure? There's plenty."

"Ok," I said.

As I helped myself to seconds, my grandmother turned reflective, "You know, John, my father died when I was very young, ohh, I could tell you."

"I know, Grandma, I'm sorry."

"It was terrible, but we got through it." She said.

"I was the youngest of the bunch, my brothers were headed off to war, you know, Harold was driving trucks in Italy, and my brother Jack was in the Battle of the Bulge."

"Yeah, I still am in awe of that," I said.

"Stay firm, John, you're still half of us." She said.

I took a moment to reflect on how many family members had been in the war. I saw my grandfather's head hung low as he was eating quietly. I suddenly blurted out, "Grandpa, what was the POW camp like?"

He brought his head up and looked me in the eye. Then he grinned wryly.

"Oh, you know, we played beach volleyball and swam." He chuckled, and his gentle blue eyes sparkled. He then moved his right hand towards his mouth, wriggled his top jaw, and removed a set of teeth. "Lost them in a volleyball accident."

“Oh, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, Jack,” My grandmother spouted.

I didn’t know whether to giggle, laugh, or not, so I said nothing. After a few wordless moments, I said, “Thanks for the meal, Grandma. I was starving.” Immediately after having said that, I looked at my grandfather; the twinkle had faded from his eyes. “I meant, I was really hungry, didn’t eat much for lunch today.”

“Ok, John, once you and grandpa are settled, you’d better get after the grass while there’s still enough light.” Dessert would be after cutting the grass, I thought.

My grandfather and I headed outside. The sun was beginning to go down, but remained high enough to tease the times of longer days. We walked down the hill in the backyard, passed the raspberry bushes, and moved up towards the shed.

“Any berries left?” I said.

“Not much left this time of year,” My grandfather replied. We arrived at the shed, opened the door, and walked in. The shed contained odds and ends, pitchforks, tubing, gasoline, oil, and other oddities used for yard work and tinkering. My grandfather rolled the tractor out of the shed and to the foot of the ramp. He folded the seat back and looked at the battery. He had disconnected the lead so it wouldn’t die. He connected the lead and checked the oil. It wasn’t quite full. He went into the shed, grabbed a container of oil, topped it off, and tried to start the tractor. It didn’t turn over at first, but after tweaking the carb, throttle, and playing with the choke, it finally roared to life. After a few minutes, he placed his hand on the engine block and seemed content. I tried to do the same, but quickly pulled my hand away. “Ow, jeez,” I exclaimed. “John, that’s hot,” he said. With the tractor started, I put the seat down, climbed on, and went ahead to start mowing.

I pushed the left lever, and the tractor jerked to the right. I pushed the right lever, and the tractor turned to the left. I engaged the cutter and proceeded to make my first pass cut. Before I started to move, though, I heard a “phweeet.” I turned and looked, my grandfather was holding a big straw hat and motioning for me to come towards him. I turned the mower around and faced him. He placed the straw hat on my head. I smiled, turned, and continued to cut the grass.

I made a few cuts in straight lines back from the shed through the yard up the hill towards the house. My grandfather stood all the while, watching, with his straw hat on, providing hand commands on where to cut.

I finished mowing with light to spare. We headed back to the shed, put the tractor away, and made our way towards the house. We walked in silence, interrupted only by the sounds of hundreds of tiny wing-like violins chirping in chorus in the distance.

We entered the basement and made our way upstairs to the kitchen. My grandmother had cleared the dinner and set out bowls for dessert. "Jack, I forgot to get cool huh-whip at the store. I'm going to run out and get some."

My grandmother left, and my grandfather and I went into the living room. He sat in his recliner, and I sat opposite in a chair. We heard a "vroom" and the "Dee Dee Dee" of the driveway car alarm, signaling my grandma had left the driveway on her way to the store. It was quiet, and I welcomed it. I was tired and, being so, closed my eyes partially. With one eyelid shut and the other on its way, I noticed my grandfather. He was sitting with his legs crossed, his gaze solemn yet sincere, directed towards the unlit fireplace. After about five minutes of nothing but the creaking and rocking of my chair, I heard my grandfather say, "You know when we were coming back on the march…." I was startled; I hadn't ever heard him bring up the war before. As I jerked awake, I cast my full attention in his direction. My grandfather continued to gaze toward the fireplace.

"We had to leave; the Germans gathered all of us in the middle of the night. We could hear the Russian guns booming in the distance as they made their advance west." My Grandfather paused. The air was dry, the sun was setting, and the light shone through the large picture frame window, casting an orange hue that illuminated the dust particles rising from the floor and partially illuminated the room.

"We had to walk; we had nothing with us but the clothes on our backs, not even our bomber jackets, gloves, or boots. The bread we had was sawdust; we were lucky if the cooks peeled the potato skins extra thick. We walked from close to the Baltic Sea towards France; it was maybe late March and cold. If one guy fell, we would try to get them back up. The Germans were in a hurry."

I continued to stare in awe; my grandfather had *really* never actually spoken to me like this about the war before.

"We spent a night in a local barn," He looked at me with a stern eye. There was no twinkle. He pointed at me and said, "We slept in the hay, one guy decided to light a cigarette, and we said, 'Hey, put that out, ' and we spent the night in the hay in the barn."

As my grandfather finished his sentence, we heard the "Dee Dee Dee" from the driveway alarm, and he stopped talking. My grandmother came into the kitchen through the sunroom. She said, "Got the cool huh-whip." With that, we made our way to the kitchen table and sat down once more in our respective seats. My grandmother put shortcakes and frozen strawberries with Cool Whip into our dessert bowls. We ate silently. Afterwards, I hugged my grandmother goodbye, shook my grandfather's hand, and went to my truck. I started it and headed home, honking as I left the house, driving as the darkness finally enveloped.

Bless This Igneous, Metamorphic-Place
Amber Rose Crowtree

We live with the glitter-sight of the sea in sunlight
eighty-three miles from the coast. Or is it a cathedral
of stars, the Milky Way, matted into our driveway?
Billions of muscovite-mirrors greet us in dust and books.

On bright-moon nights, it could be snow or ice in prisms.
In the heat of spring and summer noontime—blinding.
Saved-chapters bless our windowsills and window-boxes.
Our gardens display matrix rocks like museum pieces.

It's no wonder why mica made it into paint and cosmetics.
It is isinglass, like the scales of fishes and magma-ash.
Perhaps it is also somewhere inside our electrical system,
making our home, indoor/outdoor, one great capacitor.

We live in the vein of mica mines, mined for centuries.
Even our rugged, local excavator-man paused to admire
his addition to our home—our driveway sparkling mica
in the sunshine and said in awe, "*Isn't* that beautiful?"

East Rock Creed
Stephen May

Beneath your igneous
red rock eye
time unspools—
rings within rings
without end.

Pitch pine and scrub oak
burned, blown out,
rise again
after the reed-grass.

Teachers fail
and pass;
their hard learning,
transplanted,
sustains.

Venerable ashes
bored to snags;
beech cankered,
reborn as red
and sugar maple.

Children matriculate
with the seasons—
a ceaseless spill
of cohorts forming,
reforming;
turning,
turning.

In the moraine's mass,
each escarpment,
striation, diabase,

diorite, granite, gneiss—
never more nor less than,
never apart from,
the whole.

Within your igneous
red rock eye,
eras loop and tighten
weather into core—
omega, alpha,
memory into
memory,
turn,
turn,
turn.

Drive On
Charlie Simmons

The state of Vermont has over 14,000 miles of roads. Of this total, just under 200 miles are Interstate Highway I-89, the main artery through the state, which cuts from New Hampshire to Canada. The interstate begins in the lowlands before abruptly rising into the mountains of Southern Vermont, past towns like Randolph and Bethel, where the world turns at a slower pace.

"How long do you think," I asked my girlfriend Phoebe, "it would take these people to notice if the rest of the world had died from Covid?"
We were driving through one of these small towns on our way to connect with I-89 and had just passed through the remnants of a town center, with a crumbling restaurant and auto-body shop that looked like they had been abandoned in the previous century.
Phoebe laughed and turned towards me. Her auburn hair gleamed in the late summer sun as the wind whipped it around her face.

"You shouldn't *say* stuff like that," she said, giving me a playful swat on the arm. "It's nice here. Just kind of-"

"Dead?" I interjected.

"*Quiet*."

It might have just been the light at that time of day, but I couldn't deny that these forgotten outposts do have a kind of quiet beauty that "nice" doesn't fully encapsulate. The roads between them traverse through mountain gorges walled in by ranks of dense pine forests and rocky rivers, which impose themselves on the landscape. In the winter, the water freezes mid-leap, with icy tendrils twisting between snowcapped rocks. These routes upward trace the rivers until they open up onto ridgeline vistas, with mountains and valleys stretching off in all directions. The ride through the flatlands is often marked by moments of more subtle beauty, a deep pool at a bend in a stream with a willow stretching across, or a cabin nestled deep in the woods on the side of a mountain, smoke rising from the chimney.

The "quiet" of these places is a relative condition, one which is highlighted by the rush of traffic on I-89. Before construction began in 1952, much of the state was characterized by a similar seclusion. The project took over thirty years to complete, slowly replacing the lattice of lesser paved tributaries and dirt roads as it carved its way through wilderness and civilization alike. Construction was accompanied by controversy. A short history of I-89 published by Vermont's public broadcasting station described how residents were worried that the road

would bring about “changes to the way of life in the state” and “dilute Vermont's natural beauty.” Thousands of acres of public and private land had to be requisitioned through eminent domain. The highway also brought with it a tragedy of a more personal nature. One farmer set his house on fire the day that “they” were scheduled to demolish the farmland that had been part of his family’s property for generations. His charred body was later found within. Nevertheless, the highway marched on.

There was also the challenge of the elements to contend with. Passageways needed to be blasted through the rugged terrain and berms constructed over floodplains. The harsh winters, bringing with them frigid temperatures and feet of snow, hindered efforts still further. Even today, the interstate occasionally yields to the forces of nature. During the winter, snow accumulates faster than the plows can keep up. I remember one night becoming caught in a snowstorm so severe that I could barely see twenty feet in front of me. The lines on the road slowly disappeared beneath a blanket of white as I tried to adhere to the faint tire tracks of an unseen vehicle. Eventually, my car skidded off the road as I tried to navigate around a tight turn, coming to rest in a ditch. In short bursts, I was able to ease it back onto the highway. I was lucky. A couple miles down the road, I passed a cop throwing down flares around the twisted corpse of an 18-wheeler. I was reminded to check my speed by several other vehicles that had met a similar fate, until finally the snow turned to rain as I slid out of the mountains near Burlington.

Upon its completion, I-89 had the immediate effect of opening the state up to outsiders, leading to a brief moment in the 1980s and the 90s where Vermont’s population shot up, reversing an exodus of young people that had been the norm for decades. It was this highway that first ferried me into the state as a prospective freshman at the University of Vermont. Since then, it has carried me to and from Burlington dozens of times. The drive will always hold an element of anticipation for me; either the vestigial anxiety and excitement of the eighteen-year-old about to move somewhere new, or else the mixed feelings of nostalgia and longing that still accompany any drive back to my childhood home in Massachusetts.

Now, more than four years after my initial foray into Vermont, my feelings concerning the drive are difficult to articulate. Most journeys begin with a clear destination in mind, which remains paramount even along routes such as I-89, which are saturated with natural splendor. One evening, leaving Burlington to drive to Massachusetts, I thought about a conversation I had with my dad a couple of months before. We were hiking Hunger Mountain, a 3500-foot hulk squatting on the eastern edge of the

Mansfield mountain range, and talking about what was going to come next for me after college.

"I mean, my whole life is up here," I remember telling him. "My girlfriend, my friends, my job…it feels weird coming home."

As the white trails carved into the side of Bolton Mountain drew closer and the sun behind me turned the sky a pale, haunting orange, I thought about what I had meant by "home." It is such an abstract construct, yet one that holds an undeniable centrality in the human psyche. I-89 was carrying me between two places that enjoyed the same distinction. One was the place where I was born and raised. The other was the city where I had carved out a space for myself over the past four years. One is kindred, the other is adopted. Both are "home." This is not an uncommon experience, necessarily, for multiple places to carry such a designation. But driving between them tears at the heart, as if ropes are tying it to each place and tugging in both directions, threatening to rip it in two.

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To the best of my knowledge, no one has bothered to calculate the exact mileage of Burlington's roads. One estimate places the total at 95 miles, but this number only covers "publicly maintained city streets," as the unfortunate city official burdened with that mundane task duly reported. This number doesn't include South Burlington, which is separated from the main city by I-89 and is treated as a kind of awkward cousin that shares the name, if not the prestige, temperament, or zip code. I read a story once about a man who attempted to walk on every single street in Burlington. By the time he was done, he had traveled over 190 miles. "Every street will experience changes through the years to come, but I had the opportunity to build a complete idea of Burlington and to know it deeply," he said. "I would encourage everyone to pursue this idea in their own neighborhood, town, or city."

Admirable goals aside, he might have had the right idea by walking everywhere. Burlington is a city designed for an age when cars were smaller and less frequent, and the roads have been further curtailed by the addition of bike lanes. It is not uncommon to become stuck waiting for a left turn as a ceaseless stream of traffic parades past, while the line of cars accumulating behind you grows longer, louder, and more impatient. The city has only 40,000 residents, but on some days, it feels like they are all stuck on the left turn between College and Main Street.

Compounding the issue is the fact that the roads are weathered yearly by snow and ice, which leaves them riddled with potholes and constantly in need of repair. Unfortunately, the only company that appears to consistently land contracts to repair the roads is the S.D. Ireland Brothers Construction Company. I was introduced to them in my sophomore year of college, when they were contracted to repair an intersection next to my dorm. To be fair, I have never worked in construction and have no idea how to fix an intersection. But similar projects are undertaken in Massachusetts, and they usually take a week or two.

I fervently held on to this knowledge as the S.D. Ireland Bros. began utilizing the jackhammer at odd hours of the morning. On one hand, I understood that it was probably easier to do construction when there was less traffic. On the other hand, I needed to sleep. As far as I can remember, construction started in late August or early September. By November, they were still at it. Even worse, it always seemed like next to nothing was ever going on. I would see people in vests and helmets standing around watching one solitary figure with heavy machinery do all the work, and this would be considered a good day. Something was actually happening. At night, when the thudding of the jackhammer would shatter my REM cycle, it seemed as if they were just using the tools for the fun of it. I would groggily peer out of my window and witness the same exact scenario, except the seemingly useless workers didn't have the cover of directing traffic to hide behind.

Eventually, they finished repaving the intersection and moved off to harass some other part of Burlington (on the taxpayers' dollar) and slipped from my mind entirely. I only got a few months of blissful nighttime silence before my sophomore year ended and I moved off campus into a house in the center of the city. This move brought with it a complete reorientation in my understanding of Burlington. For one thing, I was driving everywhere, which had the effect of turning the once-familiar city into a maze. One-ways, side streets, and those hypothetically possible left turns often reduced me to the embarrassing condition of having to use a navigation app in the city I had lived in for the past two years. On top of that, I found myself leaving Burlington more frequently: to Charlotte to work on a farm, to Middlebury to visit Phoebe, across Lake Champlain to spend time with friends in upstate New York. Burlington was becoming the hub in a wheel of destinations that spread throughout the state.

As time passed, I was able to orient myself within the city. I learned which roads would be obstructed at certain times of the day, the one-ways and dead ends to avoid, and the quickest routes between places. It took

around a year until I felt entirely familiar with the surrounding area. This acquaintance with the streets extended to the buildings lining them. Someone could describe a new location to me by triangulating it with other familiar streets, businesses, and landmarks. The process of accumulating this knowledge was so subtle that I didn't even notice it was happening. This acclimation inevitably occurs in any new location, or so I'm told. Burlington is the only place I've lived aside from my hometown. It was thrilling, in a way, to realize that I could locate places I hadn't been before, such as Jake's ONE Market, from "it's just past Taco Gordo," or North End Variety by a friend pointing in a general direction and saying, "you know, the store right by that triangular building on the intersection." The navigation app lay dormant. My ability to navigate effortlessly through the city made me feel like I was becoming a resident, rather than an out-of-state visitor. There isn't a hard line between the two, but the distinction feels important.

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My navigatory bliss was shattered one fresh summer morning. I wasn't even in the car at the time. I was walking down Church Street on the way to work at the Hilton Garden Inn. A warm breeze was blowing, not many people were out yet, all was calm and peaceful, etc. As I drew near the bottom of Church Street, a scraping and banging noise pushed its way through the soft lilt of reggae music in my headphones. In the weak light, I made out a chain link fence cordoning off the bottom of the street. Behind it lurked a collection of shadowy yellow hulks. I made out a green shamrock on the arm of an excavator.

The S.D. Ireland Brothers had returned.

Their task, as far as I could see, was to excavate a large chunk of Main Street, fill the hole back in, and repave the road as shoddily and slowly as possible before moving on to the next section to repeat the process. Eventually, I learned that the pipes below the street needed to be replaced, which was why the whole process took so long. Despite the apparent necessity of the undertaking, I questioned the wisdom of closing the city's busiest thoroughfare during the height of summer. Additionally, this development was irritating on a more personal level. For one thing, the Hilton was on Main Street, and the S.D. Ireland Brothers had positioned themselves on the route I drove/walked to work on. As their position shifted (sporadically, with no seeming coherence) up and down the street, the hotel would occasionally be completely blocked off, and I would need to

take a detour to sneak in a back way. For another, one of my responsibilities at the Hilton was to shuttle guests to and from the airport in South Burlington. The construction altered my usual route, which is a 3.7-mile drive through the heart of the city, across the bridge over I-89, and into South Burlington. This disruption led to a humiliating failure when I tried to take a guest from the airport to the hotel and turned the Hilton's van into an oncoming one-way line of cars, destroying my painstakingly constructed perception of myself as a "local" that had become somewhat contingent upon my ability to navigate. More importantly, however, this change in route disrupted my conversational flow.

The conversation is key to the shuttle ride. Part of it is gauging whether or not the person wants to talk. If they do, adhering to an informal, tried and tested script dramatically increases the odds of getting a tip. When the S.D. Ireland Brothers began construction, my script was perfected to the extent that I began to associate certain passing landmarks with points of the conversation. As we pulled out of the hotel, I would ask the guests about their stay and what had brought them to Burlington. This topic would usually carry us up Main Street and onto the hill, but I would become exhausted by the time the first UVM buildings began to appear, leading the guests to ask if I was a student and, if so, what I was studying. "English and Political Science," I would reply. "My girlfriend likes to joke that I'll be unemployed after college, but I think the skills are applicable in any field, you know? Teaching you how to think about problems."
By the time we had passed through the University and crossed the bridge, the conversation would branch into a few predictable directions. If they had studied similar topics, they would tell me about their own experiences. If they didn't really know what to talk about, they would ask me if I liked Burlington and/or UVM, to which I would try my best to package the nuance of that question into the remaining 5-7 minutes (depending on the traffic). It was a simple formula, yet effective, and I usually got a tip.

The S.D. Ireland Brothers changed that.

I now had to circumnavigate the construction, adding extra time to the drive. This meant that my usual conversational topics would frequently run out of gas before we reached our destination, leading to an awkward silence if the guest wasn't particularly chatty. I had already discovered that such pauses decreased my chances of a tip, and now they were becoming commonplace.

Fortunately, human beings are great adapters, and I soon found that I could compensate for this additional span of time by steering the conversation towards UVM sooner and, from there, into a discussion of my

own impending departure from UVM. This strategy brought with it less predictability, and my ability to correlate landmarks with certain elements of the conversation mostly evaporated; however, I could usually have the guest divulging the story of their own post-college experiences by the time we reached the road to the airport. This kept the guest engaged in a nostalgic haze that (hopefully) reminded them that a young twenty-something would be hard on cash.

"You know, I don't really know what I'm gonna do after college," I would say, turning my head to glance back at the guest(s) with a rueful grin. "I'm ready to move on, but the whole idea of it is kind of scary, you know. There's so much uncertainty."

This was not only a good segue into a profitable topic, but an accurate reflection of my feelings on the matter. In a way, expressing them in the sheltered, temporary space the van provided made it easier for me to elucidate the complex mix of emotions that surrounded my imminent departure from Burlington. I was about to move on from the place that I had learned to call home over the past four years into the greatest unknown I had ever faced. It really was bothering me, no matter how much I tried to frame it as a joke.

Surprisingly, I found that these conversations were providing a measure of relief from my stress. I drove people from all over the country, of different races, ethnicities, ages, and political orientations. Nearly all of them said, in one way or another, that "things were going to work out." But it wasn't just this simple phrase (or variation of it) that I found so helpful. I mean, my parents had already said this so many times that it had ceased to have any real meaning; rather, the wide array of stories that were related in the confines of the van reinforced this sentiment and transformed it into something concrete.

One woman told me about the two divergent paths she and her partner had taken after college. She had gone to grad school and then straight into her field at a corporation where she had been rising through the ranks ever since. He, on the other hand, had spent ten years "just kind of wandering around," and "things worked out for him." She told me not to worry about getting into a career right away, as they both ended up being successful and happy.

"Sometimes I kind of wish I had done what he had," she added, a touch wistfully, as we turned the corner towards the airport.

Another guy told me about how, upon graduating college with a dance degree, he had worked in the music industry, in an office job, and as a comedian. He echoed a sentiment that my dad had long endeavored to

impress upon me- mainly, that your undergraduate degree doesn't determine the rest of your life. On the other hand, another woman I talked to had followed her Political Science degree into political consulting and now worked for the U.S. Congressman Jaimie Raskin as a Special Projects and Grants Coordinator. She gave me her business card, which was embossed with a shiny golden eagle in the upper left corner, and told me to contact her if I was interested in that kind of work.

This and more I heard between the Hilton and the airport- stories of every kind, of successes and failures, straight paths and unexpected turns, all leading to the same destination of "things working out."

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Eventually, I will quit working at the Hilton, hand in my two weeks, and drive my last guest to the airport, perhaps hearing one more story along the way. The route will be familiar, although the S.D. Ireland Brothers will probably not have finished construction by then. Soon after, I will pack all my belongings into a U-Haul and drive it back to Dartmouth, from one home to another. I will round the bend out onto I-89 and, as the road sweeps towards the fold of the Green Mountains, my heart will pull for home.

Franconia Notch
Patrick Bradshaw

These mountains, sitting solid on the earth like a room full of old monks,
ground down by time and glaciers from Artist's Bluff the highway ribbons
through the notch as if it belongs behind the scudding clouds and tree cover
I see the mountains layering in the distance and there's no need to name
them or climb them nothing between the inside and that distant green
outside some rusty seam has let go and I have been gently pried open and
this where I want to be when my bits begin to drift apart scatter my ashes
over Cannon mountain and play the pipes and beat a drum and let the
monks chant on Bald Mountain and the universe will be well pleased.

After the mountains
Hands held palms out to the fire
In grateful blessing

Protection
Matthew E. Henry

A friend once asked how I got so good with a knife. We were working at a summer camp in rural New Hampshire when she asked. She needed something cut, but before she could pull the multitool off her maintenance belt, the handle of my knife was offered to her—extended blade delicately balanced between my pointer finger and thumb—and she was impressed. I explained that I had spent the past half-hour sitting and thinking, playing with my pocketknife one-handed. Forehand opening, backhand closing. Backhand opening, forehand closing. Rotating the handle. Twisting and turning it with smaller and smaller wrist motions. *Practice*, I told her. I spin knives as some use baoding balls, pens, or magic trick coins for stress release or from habit. A way to pass the time. And prepare for known and unknown dangers.

*****

It wasn't a date. Just two friends with a complicated history who might still be in love. It was summer break, and I was back home in Massachusetts. Among other reasons, my teaching in Colorado meant we hadn't seen each other in four or five years. So she drove up from Hartford to talk, to reconnect. She also wanted to see the city. The North End, Faneuil Hall, Boston Commons: the usual haunts for out-of-towners. As always, I was happy to oblige her, to meet her needs. We met at my parents' house—where I hugged her for too long—then drove to the college I attended, and she was afraid to follow; her father wouldn't have approved. The father who mumbled "nigger" at me while I waited in his Connecticut living room to escort her to her prom. Parking is free and unticketed near campus and a short walk to Wollaston and the Red Line inbound to Park Street. We talked as we walked and rode the T, my eyes constantly flitting between her face and our surroundings.

*****

I'm not one of those guys who shops for knives on QVC or some dark web, black-marketplace looking for the best deals on sharp, exotic items. I'm not a collector of edged weapons with a display case in a special climate-controlled room. The guy who makes feeble attempts to impress an unsuspecting blind date with my trove of international blades, desperately regaling her with the history of his bokken and katana, nimcha and takoba,

poignard and an assortment of dirks. I had to run a Google search on "bladed weapons" to come up with that list. I have a couple of pocketknives—one black and one brown, to better match my outfits. When I leave the house, I clip one onto my right pocket after my keys and phone enter.

*****

Boston Common is the country's oldest city park. Its history includes cattle grazing, public hangings, being a staging area during the Revolutionary War, civic protests, and Shakespeare in the Park. I spent a lifetime meandering around these paths and under these trees with siblings, on school trips, as a summer camper and then counselor, as well as on actual dates. So I played her ersatz tour guide, conducting her through sites half American history, half personal memories. Park Street Church. The Mass 54th Regiment Memorial. The State House. The Frog Pond and neighboring playground. The Soldiers and Sailors Monument. The Parkman Bandstand. We made the rounds between people sleeping on blankets—college students and the homeless—dodging ultimate frisbees and hacky sacks, being wrapped in the sweet and sticky scents of the vendors: hot dogs, popcorn, peanuts, pretzels. The young lovers and lunch breakers and scores of summer campers in matching monochromatic t-shirts from all around the city. A colorful assortment of humanity jostling us on all sides. As we approached the west edge of the park, I remembered she wanted to see The Swan Boats and the famous bronze Ducklings. I gestured in the direction of The Bull and Finch Pub—made famous by the show *Cheers* from our childhood—and headed south across the grass to the baseball field, where we officially exited The Commons. We stood before Charles Street, facing The Public Gardens on the other side.

Tourists thronged the space before the crosswalk, actually waiting for an illuminated little white man to tell them when to go. I began to take her hand, but then thought better of it. I told her to stay close and began pushing through the crowd. I waited for a gap in the green-lit traffic and stepped into the road. It's a one-way street, so I only needed to stare down and shield her body from cars approaching from the left. Safe on the other side, we entered through the wrought iron gates and were immediately trapped. A flood of families waiting to pose for pictures in front of the Edward Everett Hale Monument stifled all movement for the rest of us. As if they had any idea who he was—there's no plaque to educate them. I sighed, shot them eye daggers, and began to navigate us through the mass

of morons sporting over-priced Boston™ gear they bought at the airport, a street vendor, a pop-up, or some Cambridge shop at the college their kid won't ever get into—all too crisp and un-creased, tags and sticky tape still visible. I hated everything about this with a passion most vividly seen in YHWH's destruction of sinful cities in the Hebrew Bible. If I could call down fire from the heavens, or request the ground open its gaping maw to swallow them, I would. This was my personal hell.

I'm not the nervous type. Not technically. Technically, I am an ADHD depressive with a generalized anxiety disorder. The last won't be diagnosed for another couple of years. At this point, I only know that I've always lived life in a heightened state of situational awareness. Always listening for the sound of footsteps behind me while walking. Checking cars in parking lots for hidden occupants as I pass. Knowing what's within an arm's length can be used as a weapon if needed. Always paying attention, keeping my head on a swivel, rarely sitting without my back to a wall, knowing the fastest, cleanest way out of a room, watching entrances and exits, checking and rechecking the vibes of the people around me, clocking who has hands in and out of pockets, who's moving toward or away from me and the people I care about. Friends, students, and even my former in-laws have all commented on seeing me switch up in a heartbeat to a real or perceived threat: seeing a change in my posture, my carriage. They mostly comment on my violent stillness: my purposefully taut economy of motion.

All this is why, as we made our way through the sea of screaming children and stressed-out parents, I noticed them. It was their stillness. The way they were watching: a match for my own, but for a different purpose. Two Black youths—teens, 15-16, a decade or so younger than me—posted up just inside the gates. Internally, I acknowledged that this seemed like the sort of racial profiling common to the white grandparents now forcing memories upon their families through the barrel of a camera after watching Fox "news." That I sound like the sort of Black who would vote for Trump in a decade, or consider Kanye West a reasonable authority on social policy, but I know what I was seeing. They weren't moving in time with the music: the pulsing, swaying, cacophonic rhythm of the crowd. They weren't performing a counterpoint to the people as we were; they weren't pushing through or standing annoyed. They were calm. Patient. Waiting in a way I recognized. Predators looking for prey.

She was on my right, slightly ahead, walking and talking as we continued down the path to the Swan Boat dock, but I had no idea what she was saying. I pretended to listen. I turned towards her—nodded and smiled—so I could glance over her shoulder. I saw one youth flick-hit the other's arm, gesture with his chin in our direction. The second youth nodded back, and they began to follow, 25 paces behind us. There were now only three other people in the park: her beside me and these two closing the distance behind. I couldn't blame them: we were tempting. The cute white girl with an innocent vibe simply enjoying the day, her purse casually dangling in the wind off her right shoulder. The assumptions they made about me for being with her. 20 paces away. I moved to her right, putting her purse between both our bodies, hoping to make her less of a target, knowing they would now have to engage me in order to get to her. It didn't seem to deter them. 15 paces. She was still talking, and I had a decision to make.

*****

I started carrying a knife in my junior year of high school. It was around the same time a big brother figure lent me a copy of the novel *Vertical Run*. The plot: a business executive named David Elliot walks into his office one morning, and his boss aims a gun at his head. He survives the encounter, but a band of ruthless mercenaries shows up attempting to put a bullet or 12 in his back. Dave, a Vietnam vet, has no idea why everyone wants him dead, but he's more focused on making it out of the high-rise alive than solving the mystery. It was a great read and became one of the handful of books I've voluntarily read more than once. While the prose isn't Nobel Prize worthy, it did contain a scene that spoke to something in my anxious mind—a flashback wherein Dave's unit receives advice from "the Black Mamba," a colonel they served under. When I later bought my own copy, I dog-eared the page, highlighted the quote, and went about memorizing it.

And what do logic and reason tell us, gentlemen? What they tell us is this: when someone shoots at you, the only rational response is to — with dispassion and dispatch — render that enemy incapable of shooting at you again. There is, gentlemen, no reasonable alternative to this course of action.

It became a mantra, one of the theme songs of my life, constantly playing in the back of my head.

*****

I'm nowhere near as impulsive as some people think. I cull, censor, and excise much of what crosses my mind. Apparently, this makes the things I say and do more terrifying to some because it means my brain decided my action was the most sensible of my available options. My internal dialogue should receive overtime and hazard pay for the warp-speed consultations he's forced to suffer through. He's usually right and mostly appreciates that he is only rarely ignored. But sometimes he's too cautious, too concerned with what others might think.

You're just being paranoid. They could just be walking in the same direction as you.
[No. They're not. You know they aren't.]
No, we don't.
[They're getting closer.]
Wait. What are you thinking?
[You know what I'm thinking.]
No. That's insane.
[Maybe. But it'll get the desired result.]
And if it doesn't?
[Then we have a much bigger problem, and you'll be glad I made this call.]
Think of the consequences if you're wrong!
[I am. They're less than the consequences of being right and doing nothing. Of not being ready.]
But…!
[No time.]

*****

She was still walking and talking. I glanced behind and waited until they were eight paces back. Then five paces. Then…

*****

Most pocket knives are designed with a clip on the back and can be secured to the top of your pocket. Often they are designed so the pocket clip and the drop point blade are facing the same direction—when closed, the blade is nestled into the handle with the tip facing down. This means when removing it from your pocket, you are grabbing the back of the pivot point where the blade meets the handle. To be of use, you must rotate the knife's body 45 degrees backward, towards the palm of your hand. You then extend the blade in one fluid motion: four fingers on the handle, thumb on the left stud, flicking the blade out, engaging the backlock, snapping it into place.

This can be done swiftly, silently, close to the body as you turn to engage the threat. But if you want a spectacle––a show––you wait until they are close enough to hear the *SNAP* of the blade locking into place when the thumb stud is used only to loosen the blade from the handle––begin the turning on the hinge––and you violently, purposefully flick your wrist to the right, away from your body, arm fully extended, in plain sight. From there, it is a simple matter of using your thumb and middle finger to spin the blade over your pointer finger, grasp it underhand in your palm––blade out, tip pointed back toward your elbow––, then reverse the spin so the knife is once again overhand. Pull it back toward your body, hidden from view from behind, and then pretend to pick at the cuticles on your left hand. Never turn around.

With practice, you can perform this entire series of motions in 2.84 seconds. But for the desired effect, slow it down to 5.21.

*****

…I glanced back to see the closer of the two youths had extended an arm across the other's chest, stopping them both abruptly. A warning. Smart. Beside me, she was still talking and walking as I picked at my nails.

The path ahead divided in multiple directions, toward and around the pond. I steered her to the right—we'd be taking the longer path to the Swan Boats. She was still talking. I was still doing my nails. Heading past trees I'd normally stop to identify—reading the little brown-black placards affixed to their trunks—I saw the youths over my left shoulder, heading away. Their body language had changed. I had missed something. I led her further to the right, around the Baheera Fountain. They moved further left, gesturing to someone. I quickly calculated their line of sight and saw a third youth was standing beneath the large tree between the two branching paths—closer to the water, but away from the flow of the crowds. An ideal escape route. The third youth's shoulders and bent arms were raised in the universal shrug of "what the hell just happened?" The first youth signaled back with a right hand bent at the wrist, cocked towards his neck, tracing a fast, invisible line from left to right and back again, waving him off as they moved to join him beneath the tree.

We were still walking, but I realized that she had paused her talking. *Is that for me or someone else's benefit?* A sudden non-sequitur, but I knew exactly what she meant without following her eyes to my nails, my knife.

It's for someone else, is all I said. She nodded, fell silent for another moment, then said, *I'm glad I'm here with you,* before continuing her previous story. I grinned but kept playing with my nails for a few more paces. I never told her what happened.

Buddies
Will Evans

After my first year in college, I worked at a boys' summer camp on a lake in central New Hampshire. The other counselors called me "Blimp."

"Hey, Blimp! Lay offa those Yodels!" "Yo! Blimp. Seriously. When's the last time you saw your dick?"

We slept on Army cots in a bunkhouse off in the woods, and on Saturday nights we drove to a bar on the edge of the nearest town. The owner was a scrawny Vietnam vet with long, thin, dirty hair, tobacco-stained teeth, and a gray scraggly beard. The regulars were local tradesmen who hated us because we were college boys from suburbs in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New York.

One Saturday night after work, we all drove out to the bar—the five of us packed in the Volvo that Whitey Hargrove had driven to camp from his parents' house on Long Island.

The Ossipee Mountains Bar was a flat-roofed one-story building, faced with tar paper, that sat at the end of a dirt road off Route 109. Neon signs for Labatt's and Bud lit the two front windows, and the door was open that night to let out the smoke from inside. The rough boards of the walls were covered with the antlers of deer and moose, traps for beaver and bear, and pin-ups of naked women in an assortment of lewd poses. The bar was a pine slab set on top of two whiskey barrels, and in front of it stood a pool table lit by two hanging lamps, the only lights in the room except for one over the bar.

We ordered bottles of beer from Jack, the vet with the teeth and beard. Gillespie and Whitey put their money down on the pool table while Peter Hill and Stebbins pulled up stools to watch.

I yanked up a chair beside them, trying my best to look tough, like I wasn't going to take any shit. To look like one of my friends. To look like I belonged. As I sat down on the chair, I could see Whitey's eyes as they darted away, and he covered his grin with his hand. Then the legs flattened like cardboard, and everyone turned and bellowed, all the regulars and my friends. Besides Jack that night, there were six or eight other locals, full-grown men in work clothes, standing, playing pool, or joking with Jack at the bar.

Gillespie was shooting the eight-ball with a muscular man in a wife-beater and a stained, red trucker's cap, when the man walked into him just as he stroked his cue stick. The cue ball bounced off the table, and then the

room went quiet as the ball bumped across the planked floor and settled at Stebbins's feet.

Gillespie didn't look up. "You muffed my shot," he said.

"You got it wrong, boy. Is that what happened, Bob?"

"Nosir," Bob said. "He muffed it all by hisself."

"Chuck?" the man said.

"That's how it looked to me."

Gillespie chewed on his lip and glared at the top of the table. He turned his stick around and laid it on the felt. Whitey came up behind him, placed his hand on Gillespie's wrist, and whispered, "Let it go. Come on. Let's get out of here."

The door snapped shut, and we turned our heads to look.

One of them stood beside it, work boots planted beneath him, thick forearms crossed on his chest. His eyes shot over to Jack, still standing behind the bar. Jack's hand raised to the light switch behind the bar on the wall.

There was a moment of stillness. A moment of dense silence.

Without looking or lifting his head, Gillespie swung from the hip and caught the man in the trucker's cap with the butt end of the stick, and bits of his teeth flashed through the smoky light from the lamps above the pool table. And then the room went black as the rest of them started toward us.

The barroom exploded with cursing, cries, and grunts and moans, the sounds of thumping boots, sliding chairs, and breaking glass. Something whizzed close to my head, and I dropped down onto my knees and hands and crawled toward the door, as close as I could get to the walls. When I got there and felt for the knob, the man beside it was gone.

I was the first one out, then Hill, then Whitey and Stebbins. We sat low in the car, watching the door for Gillespie.

The lights flicked on and off inside, and he stumbled out and fell, with two of the locals right behind him. They kicked him until they were out of breath, and then they each kicked him again, turned away, and went inside. They cast a glance over their shoulder, muttering curses under their breath.

We crept out of the Volvo, dragged Gillespie back to it, belted him into the front seat, and sped away from the bar.

The doctors from the emergency room rushed Gillespie in on a stretcher, and then they examined the others and treated their wounds. Whitey had a broken nose and ribs and a dislocated thumb, while Stebbins and Hill had cuts, and their faces were raw with bruises.

It wasn't until we sat by ourselves in the bright, white lights of the waiting room that I felt their eyes on me and could see what they saw for

themselves. That I hadn't been touched in the fight. That there was no blood on my T-shirt or shorts, and only some scrapes on my knees.

A doctor came out and told us, "Your friend's in bad shape. We want to hold him for observation."

Then we left and started the drive back to camp, leaving Gillespie behind.

When we came to the dirt track for the bar, Whitey slowed and stopped. He pulled to the side of the road. The trees around us were black. The engine idled in the dark. Not one of them stirred in his seat. And there was that same silence, that ominous, dense silence, like that moment inside at the bar.

That night, as I slept on my Army cot in the bunkhouse off in the woods, they threw a blanket over my head and chest, and they beat the shit out of me.

* * *

At dawn, I signed out a truck from camp and drove back to see Gillespie. A faint light fell through the blinds and across the foot of his bed. One of his arms was hung in a sling, and his head and face were bandaged so that all you could see were his swollen lips and the slits of his blackened eyes.

I stood beside him a while, and then I touched his hand.

He raised an eyelid heavily, and then he tried to smile. I could tell he was missing teeth.

"Blimp? Hey," he said. "Hey, Blimp. Hey, buddy. Hey. It's great to see you." He swallowed and squeezed my hand.

"You— You had my back. You were right there for me, man. You stood up to those guys. You were right fuckin' there for me, Blimp, and I will never forget it. Christ— Look at you—" And he looked at my swollen face and the bruises along my arms. "They really fucked you up."

And then he began to cough, and he grimaced and clutched his side.

For a moment, I was stunned. You could've knocked me down with a finger. And a joy rushed through me like nothing I'd ever felt. Well, sure, I knew he'd find out. But I couldn't help myself. I grinned a little, and winced. I winced again and shrugged.

"They really did," I said. "They really fucked me up."

He seemed to be turning it over, and then he grinned and grimaced and clutched at his side again. A clear tube snaked from his blankets. The bag it led to was pink, and I knew he was pissing blood.

Then after a moment, he said, "Buddy? You and me. We showed them local boys."

“We kicked their ass,” I said. “We kicked their fuckin’ ass. We were taking names and numbers.”

“They won’t be fuckin’ with us anymore.”

“Not a chance,” I said.

And then I stood there, squeezing his hand, while the two of us said nothing.

The Flock
Courtney Seymour

We've cleared a path
to the January coop four times over,
moon boot prints, New England snow.
The chickens would leave their own
Y-shaped impressions if they emerged today,
but we do not ask.
We will not count them until they trickle out
as if in the sticky sap of spring.

I follow the curve of the drive
down to hazy dandelion patches
to pluck the greens all season.
They are a delicacy for our bantam hen,
her feathers painted on her summer chest
with a palette knife—tans and golds
that foretell the coming days of fall.

New Hampshire reds and orange
leaves and birds strutting with the
confidence of a harvest orb.
Lighting the way there and
back to December, they see the quiet of
a backyard farm, winter drifts, a woman
cradling eggs in mittened hands—
the smooth hope of new life to come.

Midcoast Maine in April
Josh Nicolaisen

Swampy lawns sponge up snowmelt and rain
while locals line bars they likely avoid in summer.
Lighthouses poke their heads out of creamy fog.
Ice cream shops closed shut as clam shells.
Lobster stands and seafood shacks all frozen in time.
Shores are empty, sands smoothed by months
of tides without tourist traffic. Caretakers rush to
repair winter's damages to vacation homes that sit
patiently as their owner's overlooked golden retrievers.
And this morning, drops of drizzle slide down
a granite monument for fishermen lost at sea,
names eternally beneath the water
and in the sky. Swooping back and forth above
screeching gulls flying. Their black-ringed beaks crying.

24 Hours of Summer
Lily Hinrichsen

So much sunshine it seems a crime to be indoors at all
Following dragonfly's lead I am pulled to the garden
turning the hem of my sleeveless shirt into a makeshift basket
to carry freshly-picked green beans and lettuce a green pepper
and a few sprigs of cilantro and dill
A day of sun's shine with no rain in sight means I must be the
cloud of refreshment dragging a long hose to meet the mouths
of all the hungry green life forms
Sweat becomes my second skin
and with a silent slip into the chilly mountain stream
I am transformed into a river otter
welcoming the massage of the current
And when I've sufficiently lowered my temperature
to that of a rainbow trout
I grow my land legs again and let the warm breeze dry me back to life
With the food of summer gods being my only nourishment
watermelon corn on the cob cucumbers tomatoes snow peas
there is no need for dinner bells or menus
Like the goldfinch I eat when I'm hungry and my hunger
diminishes with the heat of summer
Though I've not heard of a goldfinch sticky with
the bliss of a maple creemee
My fingers are tacky with sugary sweetness not a care for
its lack of nutrition or abomination among dieters
It's a staple on a hot day and we all know that in our heart of hearts
All that's left is a glide on the lake with loon as a companion
my kayak oars bobbing with the rhythm of gentle waves
I puff my gills in and out in and out becoming a loon becoming a gull
becoming a hot breeze
becoming water
becoming sun
If I were my 7-yr-old self I would end the day with somersaults
across the green lawn until the sun bows to the moon and then
I would collect a jarful of lightening bugs
holding summer for as long as possible
before the possible comes in on a cold crisp wind

The Widow's Walk
Gerald T. Snow

Here he lies where he long'd to be;
Home is the sailor, home from the sea.
-- Robert Louis Stevenson

A woman stood on top of her three-story Cape Cod mansion. A cold breeze ruffled her pale gingham dress, and she pulled her shawl closer around her head and shoulders. The autumn sky was gray, promising rain before evening. The woman paced around in the narrow widow's walk atop her house and stopped after a full turn, leaned on the white picket railing, and looked out to sea again. The ocean reflected the gray of the sky, its waves flecked with white caps. No incoming ships were in sight. Her face was grim, unsmiling, her lips thin and tight, gray with the cold. She turned and paced again, now looking across the tops of the houses in the village below to the wharf in the distance. It was crowded with ships, the Katherine not among them. A sharp gust of wind slapped her face with raindrops, and she turned to descend the stairs into her house. Thus spent was another weary and futile vigil, waiting for her sea captain husband to return home.

The woman eased herself down a circular staircase to her kitchen and placed a pot of thick clam chowder on the iron stove, its embers still smoldering from breakfast. She put some fresh kindling on the struggling fire. With the fire thus encouraged, the chowder was soon warm, and with a large chunk of sourdough bread to complement the chowder, she was able to warm and feed herself at the kitchen table. An orange and black calico cat curled around her feet and aroused in her welcome emotions. She reached down and stroked the cat, who responded by purring loudly. She smiled, grateful for the company in an otherwise large and empty house.

She dozed off, lulled by memories of her and Josiah strolling among the many trees of their spacious grounds, stopping to throw out a blanket, gazing together at the ocean, wrapped in a oneness with him and the sea. How she loved him. A sudden wind rattled the windows of the house. She awoke. She looked outside to see a flurry of leaves drifting past. How like one of these leaves I am, she thought, alone and adrift without Josiah.

The candle on the table had almost gone out. The cat was elsewhere. The darkening house creaked under the gathering storm. She rose and closed several windows and lit more candles. She loved this house that her husband Josiah had built for her, with bedrooms a-plenty for children—children who never came. But the house now stood for all the things that were missing in her life. He had named his ship the Katherine after her.

After the first years of pride, it became of small comfort. She would give it all up for a small cottage somewhere if she could only be with Josiah for the rest of their lives. For twenty-five years, he had roamed the Pacific oceans in search of the great whales. He had always brought home wonderful treasures from the South Sea Islands. He had made them wealthy. But to her, the greatest treasure was always Josiah himself. He always promised that he would return, no matter what. She clung to that promise, especially on those days when she stood on the widow's walk and gazed out at a stormy sea and feared for her husband's safety. She went now to her writing table and wrote a long letter to Josiah, a letter that would never be sent, and she finished her day reading a book in front of a small fire in the huge fireplace in the sitting room. The cat came again and nestled at her feet.

The next day, she went down into the village. She went first to the waterfront to admire the large sailing ships, and it pleased her to imagine Josiah and his crew flying swiftly across the water on such a fine day, all sheets to the wind.

"Have you heard from Josiah?" the voice of a young boy called to her. The youth of the village loved to hang around the wharf and dream of the days when they too would be able to go to sea and hunt whales.

"Not yet," she called back cheerfully. The boy ran on.

She exchanged friendly greetings with a few sailors who were unloading the wares from a recently arrived whaler, mostly whale blubber, sperm oil, and ambergris. When Josiah returned, he always brought with him treasures—silks, colorful clothing, ornate bamboo carvings, gold ornaments, strange weapons.

It was a lovely fall day, and she inhaled the salt smells of the sea, tangy and fresh, the smell of sail canvas drying in the sun, of aging oak and pine masts and spars, and the fragrances of Far Eastern spice cargo, especially cinnamon and curry. She then walked through the village, buying whatever she needed for the week, and got into several lively conversations with a few of the merchants.

"And how is Mrs. Hawkins today?" asked the fish merchant. He was always friendly and kind and gave her the best choice of freshly caught fish.

"I am well, thank you, Mr. Chandler. What have you got today?"

"Black sea bass, Mrs. Hawkins, just caught. Would you like some?

"Yes, please," she replied, and fish merchant Chandler wrapped up a large and smelly sea bass in white butcher paper and handed it to her, which she deposited in her basket. With that, she was off up the street to investigate the fresh vegetable stalls.

She was well known to all of the townspeople, and they were very deferential to the wife of Josiah Hawkins, who was much respected. Josiah was himself a local product who had risen through the various stages of ship's helper and cabin boy to becoming a sailor before the mast and finally captain of his own ship, all by dint of hard work and skill, and some family money. She was rejuvenated by the time she trudged back up the hill to her house, and her spirits were once again lifted up with hope. It was always thus. Hope sank on top of her house and rose again at the wharf.

Josiah always took his ship around Cape Horn into the South Pacific, and he always returned after two or three years. She knew that many a ship that set out from home failed to return, lost in a storm upon the high seas or rammed by an angry whale. There were several older women in the village who had lost a husband at sea and who endured with a Puritan-like resolve. Katherine was sympathetic but did not identify with them. She had the utmost confidence in Josiah and his skills and those of his handpicked crew. But Josiah had been gone for five years now, a very long time even for a whaling ship.

For the first years of this recent separation Katherine, had gone about her business as usual in the village, mingling in the marketplace and otherwise participating in the life of the town. She attended church on Sundays. She was always present at funerals with kind and compassionate words. But after two years, it was her custom to climb the stairs to the widow's walk on the afternoon of clear days and begin her lonely vigil of watching and waiting. Even on stormy days, she would go up to look, driven by habit, wrapping herself in the soft blue and white afghan shawl which she had made for this kind of purpose, giving her comfort during the many empty winter hours. As time passed, she spent more and more of her time on the widow's walk, wrapping herself more and more in hope than in her shawl.

* * *

At 16 years old, Katherine Winslow was alone in the world. Her mother died when she was only two years old. After a few months, her father remarried and ran off with his new wife, handing over Katherine to his maiden aunt, who raised Katherine as an only child before she too died. It was a solitary upbringing, with no siblings and few companions, but by 16, Katherine was pretty and full-bodied, with auburn-tinted hair, hazel green eyes, and a fair skin. The young men of the town did not fail to notice.

Katherine was unaccustomed to social life. One day, she decided to attend a town social. She hesitated on the threshold before entering the hall, which was full of people in a lively attitude of dancing and gaiety. She

slipped in quietly and took up a position along the back wall from where she could observe without drawing attention to herself.

But it was not to be. She had been noticed by Josiah Hawkins. Josiah was a confident young man of 28, the son of a wealthy merchant, and a sailor. He was six feet tall, muscular, with a rugged and handsome face, full of ambition and determination, with a well-tanned complexion, dark brown hair, and striking blue eyes. He studied Katherine from a distance, noting her quiet demeanor and her simple beauty. When he could no longer restrain himself, he moved slowly across the room, chatting amiably with several of the young ladies, who all eyed him with great interest.

When he came to Katherine, who was now gazing at him questioningly, he took both of her hands in his large, strong hands and, hesitating, said, "Would you be willing to dance with me?" He was surprised by his unaccustomed forwardness and blushed heavily. Katherine saw his embarrassment and could only laugh. Later, Katherine would say that it was his blue eyes and his gentle manner that decided her to accept his invitation.

The two of them spent the evening together, yet few words passed between them, for there was a mutual reserve in their initial meeting. At length, the social broke up. He escorted Katherine home, which she willingly allowed. She was as taken with Josiah as he was with her. And so a courtship began, which in due time resulted in a betrothal. Josiah Hawkins and Katherine Winslow were married before Christmas of that year. The townspeople were glad for both of them, but more especially for Katherine, as she was all alone in the world.

A great love sprang up between Katherine and Josiah. Josiah was the first man in Katherine's life since her father had abandoned her, and she gladly yielded herself to his manly strength and self-confidence and to the security he offered her. It was the genuineness of Katherine that spoke most deeply to Josiah. He felt her need for him, and it filled his soul with a sense of purpose.

Josiah could have been a lawyer, or a merchant, or had some other land-based occupation. Indeed, he could have taken over his father's mercantile business. But the romance of the sea had captured him at a young age. The smell of the ocean was intoxicating to him, and the rhythm of the waves lapping against the sides of the great sailing ships as they lay in harbor awakened visions of distant, imagined places. He loved to hear the stories told by the sailors, especially those of the pursuit of the great whales, of the excitement of the sighting, the danger of the chase, and the thrill of capture. Josiah knew where his life lay, and it was not on shore in the quiet

life of a tradesman but on board ship, breathing the clean air of the open sea, using his muscles to haul on the sails, and running before the wind.

Despite his father's remonstrances, Josiah had taken ship at age 15 as a cabin boy and never looked back. Since he was tall and strong, he quickly moved from cabin boy into full seaman before the mast, but by the luck of turnover in the crew and his skill and dedication, he was promoted to the trusted position of a bosun's mate at the age of 28. It was at this point in his life that he met Katherine while he was home from the sea. He had found the second love of his life. She had found her first and only love.

* * *

A few years into their marriage, Josiah's father died. He bequeathed his son a very sizable sum of money, and Josiah had used it to do two things for his two loves. He built a beautiful house on the hill outside of town for Katherine, a house with many spacious and well-furnished rooms, with ornate porticos, an elegant parlor, a sumptuous dining room, a grand staircase, a master bedroom with a large balcony that opened onto an unparalleled view of the ocean, and a number of other bedrooms intended for future occupancy. The house also included the traditional widow's walk. It became known in the village as the Mansion House.

Josiah and Katherine took delight in imagining their house filled with the joyous laughter of children. When their son Jacob had come along, they felt that God had finally opened Katherine's womb and there would be many more children to follow. Josiah took great comfort while he was away in knowing that he had been able to provide so well for Katherine and that she was no longer alone at home.

With the rest of his fortune, Josiah indulged in his other great love and bought a four-masted whaling ship from a retired merchantman and fixed it up. Josiah was then a strong and vigorous thirty-five-year-old. He was tired of shipping out as a mere seaman, always a sailor under different captains. He longed to have his own ship and crew, and his father's death had made that possible. Josiah prospered on the voyages that followed. He had the respect of the sailors who knew him, and he had no trouble raising a crew at any time he wanted to go to sea. He hand-picked his crew, always choosing the best who were skilled at navigating ocean storms and currents and in pursuing the great whales of the Pacific. And always, he managed to make it back home to port, his ship sometimes damaged in various ways, but never without valuable cargo.

Katherine went through many vigils in the course of Josiah's successful voyages, and they took their toll upon her. She never knew when exactly Josiah would return. And then one day, without warning, Josiah

would reappear, and her expectation would be let out of confinement. These were days of rejoicing for her and Jacob. She and Josiah spent many happy hours together as a family of three, picnicking, playing games, and engaging in sports, but the two of them also took time for themselves, walking in the woods outside of town. How she loved these times when she was with Josiah, how proud she felt of her strong, handsome husband with his weathered face and well combed beard. Often, she coaxed Josiah and reminded him that his son Jacob was growing up quickly, and that he needed a father. And she needed a husband. Didn't they have enough fortune for him to stay home? Josiah eventually yielded to her coaxing and promised that his seagoing days would soon be over and they would never be parted again. But in her heart, she feared he felt different.

As the days at home wore on, the familiar call of the sea reached out to Josiah as he lay awake in his bed long into the night, inhaling the ocean breezes that blew through the empty streets of the town and curled up the hill to the Mansion House, while Katherine lay sleeping contentedly beside him. Images of his many voyages danced relentlessly in his mind, and his heart grew restless. Finally, he could put it off no longer, and taking a tearful farewell from his beloved Katherine and young son Jacob, he raised a new crew, provisioned his ship, and once again set sail for distant ports and new adventures. And once again, Katherine and Jacob took up the well-worn routine of life without him.

* * *

There came a day when life changed for Katherine and Josiah. Katherine had given birth to only one child, Jacob. He was a great comfort to her during the days of Josiah's absence. Jacob had grown up as a handsome and strong lad, like his father. He doted on his mother yet lived for the day when his father would return home. He begged his father to take him on one of his voyages, but Josiah always refused, saying that Jacob was not old enough yet, and besides, his mother needed him.

When Jacob was twelve years old, he began to spend most of his free time hanging around the wharf, drinking in anything and everything that pertained to the sea. "Show me how you handle the sails," he would ask the sailors who were on shore. "Teach me all the knots I would need to know to be an able seaman." And they would produce a rope and teach him the rudiments of their craft. He would run errands for them and do odd jobs. He especially loved it when ships came into harbor, and he would watch the cargo being unloaded, cargo which carried tales of far-off places, bearing exotic scents, with strange writing on the boxes. He would touch almost reverently the wooden crates of cargo and roughen his hands on the jute

halyards used to raise and lower the sails, he would brush his face against the canvas of the sails, and he would dream of the day he, too, could run off to sea, like his father.

One day, as Katherine was busy at the house, having assured that Jacob had completed his studies for the day, she allowed him to run down to the harbor. As she stood at the door of the house, looking down at the village, she noticed a knot of men coming up the hill carrying something. As they drew close, she saw that they were carrying a small body. Her mind raced, and her stomach lurched with fear. The men came up to her and told her the sad story of how Jacob had stood by watching a ship that was unloading and in his delight and curiosity had stood too close, for the rope holding one end of the cargo as it was lifted off the ship broke and boxes and crates cascaded down on top of him before he could get out of the way. The seamen broke down as they told her this, as Jacob was a favorite lad of theirs.

Katherine never left Jacob's side for the three days in which he clung to life. The town doctor did what he could for Jacob. Many townspeople came by to see what they might do for him and for Katherine. But at length Jacob gave his mother a long embrace, told his mother to tell his father how much he loved him, then set sail for a far distant country, "a sailor at last,' as he said. Katherine couldn't help wondering forlornly if perhaps his father was already there to greet him. A period of deep mourning overcame Katherine.

However, not long after Jacob's death, Josiah returned home, but this time it was not accompanied by the usual rejoicing. For a long time, he too was consumed with grief at the loss of his only son and swore that he would never go back to sea. He blamed himself for being away so long, and he also blamed Katherine.

"How could you have let him get so near to the ships?!" he questioned one evening in his frustration as they sat alone on the balcony of their bedroom, staring blankly out to sea. For her part, Katherine, having already grieved for Jacob for many days, was heartbroken in the estrangement that had come between herself and Josiah at a time when she needed his comfort the most.

"It was no more possible for me to stop Jacob from going down to the docks than it has been for me to prevent you from going off to sea," she said bitterly. Josiah was silenced by this response, and he withdrew into himself.

As winter passed into spring, Josiah came to the realization that Katherine was right and that he had been wrong to blame her. With the

stirring of life around them, he tried to rebuild the lost trust between himself and Katherine. It had not been their lot to have any other children, and as they had only each other now, they reached out again and found their love and began to heal from their mutual sorrow and loss.

Now, surely, thought Katherine, Josiah could see the wisdom of staying home. She was grateful enough for the blessings brought her by Josiah's successes at sea, but she yearned for a simpler life together. They could go west. There was land on the frontier to be had. They could build a big new house in New Orleans. Josiah finally promised Katherine that he would never again leave Katherine and go off to sea. Several years passed, and the two of them made a new life together.

And yet, as the days passed, the other great love of Josiah's life, content to leave him alone for a time, began jealously calling to him that it was time to return to her bosom. He was seduced once more. Katherine realized that without a son to carry on his name, to one day go to sea with him, and to be a comfort to him in his old age, Josiah had less reason to stay at home now or even to return home. When Josiah left this time, she carried a sense of loss in her heart deeper than the loss of Jacob. She was left to brood over the many empty rooms and empty spaces in her big house on the hill. Jacob was gone, and no other children came to take his place.

* * *

Once Josiah was away at sea, Katherine closed off most of the rooms, threw sheets over the furniture, and lived frugally in just a few of the rooms that were absolutely necessary. There lingered a brooding emptiness in the background, the missing voices of children born and unborn, the closed-off rooms, and the growing awareness in Katherine's mind that she was second to Josiah's real love, an awareness long suppressed.

At times, Katherine would dream at night of her husband, fighting a raging storm somewhere in the Pacific, and she would wake up in the dark, frightened, listening intently. She felt for reassurance in the sheets next to her, but there was none. Only shadows filled the room. No sound echoed in the empty house, but the night wind whistling through the window screens. All was well, she would tell herself. She had heard stories of the terribly dangerous passage around Cape Horn at the tip of South America, where many ships had gone down when the wind and waves were contrary. But she knew Josiah was a skillful and bold captain, and he would surely protect his ship and crew.

At other times of peak loneliness, Katherine couldn't help wondering if Josiah had found love in the arms of one of the brown skinned Polynesian natives that populated the islands of the South Pacific, but then she chided

herself for thinking such thoughts. Josiah had assured her that he was true to her love and hers alone. And then his unfulfilled promise would echo in her mind: *I will always return home to you, and then we shall be together*.

Katherine continued to follow her well-established pattern of keeping a daily vigil on the widow's walk, except on cold and stormy days. She continued to go into town to shop for her basic needs and to pass the time of day with a shopkeeper or an acquaintance. But as the days passed into months and the months rolled into years, her spirits began to sink. Five years became six and then seven. Josiah had never been gone this long. Strange rumors filtered in of a New England whaling ship that had foundered in a storm in the South China Sea. Nothing definite. Only vague, unsettling rumors.

* * *

When the seventh year had come and gone, the townspeople reluctantly concluded that Josiah's ship had been lost at sea. They looked upon Katherine with great pity as she moved among them, offering her an occasional word of comfort or encouragement, but she only smiled. For her part, she refused to acknowledge that Josiah would not return. She faithfully kept her lonely vigil on the widow's walk. The people in the town would look up as they went about their daily business and would point out to one another the widow Hawkins, as they now referred to her, her small, gaunt figure pacing back and forth on the widow's walk.

As time passed, Katherine came to town less often. She bought only the bare necessities of life. She withdrew from all normal human interaction. She shrouded herself in her hopes and lived only for the day when Josiah would reappear. But a deep sadness grew heavy upon her, and she began to wither away. She would not be comforted by the townspeople. The leaves of autumn colored and fell, winter followed winter, and spring, with all of its promise of newness of life, brought no comfort.

On one beautiful spring day in the eighth year, when nature was rejoicing, Katherine stood at her post, ever watchful, ever hopeful, her hands stretched out plaintively on the parapet of the widow's walk. She was now in her late forties, her hair graying, lines of sorrow creasing her once youthful face. For thirty years, she had endured this waiting, and for thirty years she had been true to Josiah, although there had been more than one gentleman of the town who thought she should give him up for lost and remarry. She would never do that, she told herself.

On this day, a ship came into the harbor bearing the usual cargo of exotica and precious goods. Among the items of its cargo, there was a box

addressed to Katherine Hawkins. Great excitement arose in town as news of the box got around. A few of the men of the town put the box in a cart and escorted it up to her house. It was heavy, some seven feet long and four feet wide, made of burnished teakwood, and was intricately carved. The curiosity of the townspeople ran high as to its contents, knowing of the many treasures that Josiah had brought home to Katherine in the past. Perhaps this was a sign from Josiah that he was alive and would yet return.

Katherine received the men at her door and said not a word as they carried the box inside. They set it down and stood expectantly, but she disappointed them by not opening the box. Instead, to their astonishment, she directed them to bring the box up through the house and to place it in the widow's walk, not an easy task, but they complied reluctantly,

It was not long before the people of the town, always curious and more interested than ever in the widow Hawkins since she had received the mysterious box, began to take note that she no longer appeared on the widow's walk, maintaining her lonely vigil day after day. The people also noticed that she failed to appear on market day for two weeks running to conduct her minimal shopping.

Finally, a small party of the more courageous felt emboldened to approach her house to inquire after her welfare. There was no answer to their insistent knocking. They entered. The house was still, sheets on the furniture gathering thick layers of dust. They called out to her. There was no answer. They climbed the stairs and looked in all the rooms. They were empty, long unused. On the third floor, they saw that the bed in the master bedroom had evidently not been slept in for many days. There was no sign of Katherine anywhere. Finally, with trepidation, they ascended the stairs into the widow's walk.

On the widow's walk rested the great teakwood box they had all seen and marveled over, with its wonderfully carved lid slightly ajar. No one dared speak. Finally, one of the men stepped forward and lifted the lid, which was hinged on one side. Within the coffin, the group perceived the figure of a man lying on his side, dressed in richly colored robes like an oriental potentate, as lifelike as if he were still alive, looking almost healthy. His face was waxen, and it took the group a few moments to recognize the embalmed figure of Josiah Hawkins. Next to him now lay Katherine, stretched alongside Josiah, her arms wrapped around his lifelike corpse. Her body was stiff in death, yet fully molded to the body of Josiah. She looked as if she had died a long time ago, so thin and wasted was her body. At the head of the coffin was a carefully handwritten note: "Home from the sea at last! Inseparable forever."

One of the group thought he perceived a smile on Josiah's face. And all could see that there was clearly a smile on Katherine's face.

Do Caribbean Songs Always Smell This Nice?
Stephen Kramer Avitabile

If I were still eight years old, the metaphor that I'd make would be something along the lines of, "It was like seeing a beautiful new crayon getting added to the box." But eight years old was so long ago. I was an adult. 18. Seeing Serena for that first time was like endlessly bobbing in a white ocean and suddenly spotting the browned and sun-tanned land of an island up ahead.

A full decade later, and my metaphors had vastly improved.

Then again, it wasn't such a stretch from the literal scene. I don't think a single non-white person lived in my small New England town. If I ever saw someone who wasn't white in town, say at the grocery store where I worked, I always assumed they were from a town over… or a nearby city.

Most people I knew were completely fine with anybody who wasn't white; however, most people I knew still treated their existence as a spectacle. Then again, was I any different? I hoped I was because I didn't do or say the things they did. It was such a white town that when someone told a story and someone in the story wasn't white… it had to be mentioned. "I was in line, and the guy in front of me, he was black; he told me to go ahead of him because he only had two items." There was no need for anyone to know that the guy was black in the story, but it was made clear that he was. The listener was never informed if anyone in the story was white because, as the people of my town saw it, you just assumed so if no one said otherwise.

Another one was, "My cousin's neighbor helped us out with the car. Mexican guy. Real nice though." As if the listener needed to know that he was nice and wasn't already privy to this based on the fact that the guy was helping someone out.

I didn't do those things. They were borderline racist. Or maybe they were racist. I suppose if racism had levels from one to 10 and wasn't a—pardon this metaphor— black and white issue, and if, say, the KKK was level 10, then never mentioning that someone in a story was white but always mentioning that someone in a story wasn't white, well I'd have to consider that was closer to level one than to not having a level with a positive integer at all.

But this was different. Serena stood out immediately because of her darker skin against the backdrop of hundreds of white faces. But it wasn't just that. She shone. Her eyes and lips and hair. Even her clothes stood out with a vibrant color that suggested she hadn't been shopping at the Dress

Barn down the street. Even the Macy's in the mall of the city down the way didn't have clothing like that.

And it wasn't purely a physical attraction. Of course, it started that way, but she also had one of those beautiful faces in which her personality shone through. You could just tell that she was a beautiful person when she walked by and smiled…

Oh, she smiled when she walked by me.

I nearly dropped the cans I was stacking and struggled to regain my composure. She meandered down another aisle and was gone. Well, that was a brief moment. A nice one. A beautiful customer smiled at me. Couldn't be mad about that. It had been a slow and boring week in my life, so that was enough to be the high point. It could have been in the running for the high point of the month until days later, when I saw her again, only this time, she was wearing the same work uniform I was wearing. And a nametag. Serena.

This girl was going to be working with me?? I saw her working a cash register, which made sense; the new hires started as cashiers and baggers. That was where I started before I was eventually moved to stocking the aisles. It was good, but also not so good. I wished I'd be working in the same department as her so I'd be given ample opportunity to strike up a conversation with her, but then again, I knew myself. I was awkward around girls. I grew so uncomfortable when I was attracted to a girl that I couldn't carry on a normal conversation. I thought too hard about what to say and then couldn't say anything at all. My stomach turned, and my body rose in temperature. It was quite literally a sickness.

This situation was good in its own way. I didn't have the pressure of having to think of something to say constantly. I'd occasionally see her while I worked at the end of an aisle, or passing by from one aisle to another. I'd take calculated glimpses up towards the registers, hope for eye contact, and when I got it, return a smile. Couldn't do it too many times, couldn't be looking to do it too often either, because then it would be creepy, right?

I had to pass by her register and, at times, not even look her way so that I wasn't staring at her every time I passed by. That was difficult. If I looked once and she didn't catch my eye, I wouldn't bother trying the next time. If we made eye contact and I smiled, and got a smile back, then I had to refuse to look her way for a while after that. It wasn't like I was trying to play hard-to-get; it's that it was hard-to-not-be-awkward and I was trying to play don't-be-a-creep. One smile from Serena was enough to hold me over for the rest of the day.

Three weeks and eight Eye Contact Smiles later, that fateful moment happened. Serena had been sent to do a price check. She entered my aisle with such elegance that I wondered if she was floating. She saw me and smiled widely, and my eyes, my stomach, my knees… they all fluttered. I nearly sprouted wings and fluttered away into the rafters above.

"Hey, could I ask your help—"

"Kenny!" I placed my index finger on my sternum as if 'Kenny' was a synonym for chest.

"Kenny. I'm Serena."

"Serena. That's a beautiful name."

Serena bit her lip for a microsecond and then flashed an even bigger smile. Oh my God! It worked. I said something and spurred a positive reaction from a woman! I'd had that line prepared for about two weeks, but after that, I was all out of prepared lines. I suddenly felt as if I had lost my raft in the swelling Atlantic Ocean. What did people do at this point? Just say things that they hadn't premeditated?

"Thank you. Um, what was I going to ask? Oh yeah, this." Serena held out a container of coconut oil. "I don't know where this is. I need to do a price check on it."

"Oh yeah, I can show you."

I led Serena out of the aisle and over to aisle four, where Wayne happened to be working. Luckily, he was about halfway down the aisle and not too near our position… I didn't need an audience. This was tough enough as it was. I showed her the section with all the oils and pointed out specifically where that brand of coconut oil was located.

"Oh, it's with the oils!" Serena laughed. "I didn't think it was actually an oil."

"Yeah, it's a weird one because it doesn't look like oil. Not at these temperatures, anyway. When it's warmer, it actually melts down to an oil."

"Oh OK. That's good to know. Thanks so much, Kenny."

"Any time. You need to know where something is; I'm your guy." Who the hell was talking? Was this me? It was my voice. But… what?

Serena's cheeks were lifted and her eyes shifted in a pleasing way; her eyes were nearly sparkling. It was a look I'd seen on women's faces in movies… but never directly in front of my face. "I wouldn't want to bug you."

"Oh, you'd never bug me." How was this me talking? I'd never been this quick on my feet talking to anyone. "I'm telling you, I'm your guy."

"If I need to know where something is."

"And anything else you can think of."

Serena giggled. “Fantastic. I hope to see you again soon, Kenny.”

Serena sauntered off, and I was suddenly reminded that I had a tongue and almost choked on it. I turned around since I could feel Wayne staring at me.

His jaw was actually hanging. “Dude.”

“I know.” I held my arms out in disbelief.

“No. Seriously. Dude.”

I… yeah. I know.”

We’d made apparent the level of amazingness that had just occurred through our brilliant exchange of robust vocabulary. There was no need to add anything else. We’d described it perfectly. I walked back to my aisle.

My very next day of work, Serena appeared in my aisle, having to do a price check. And then three more times in the next four work days. She always needed to know where the items were. Some of them were fairly apparent where their location was. One was downright obvious. A 12-pack of Coke. Anyone could’ve found that. I was starting to think that she knew where these things were, but she was pretending that she didn’t just so she could come talk to me.

Yeah, right, I wish.

“They must have promoted you to Queen of the Price Check, huh?” I said when Serena came looking for a jug of orange juice.

“No. Whenever they ask if someone can do a price check, I just volunteer before anyone.”

OK, so maybe wishes do come true.

When I walked by her register, I felt emboldened to look every time. As if she had some sort of Advanced-Kenny-Radar, she detected me as I was walking by and looking. Or maybe that was just a sixth sense that women had about men looking their way, but luckily, in my case, she was always smiling.

I made my way to her register whenever I went on break, making sure she was the one who rang up my purchase of “muffin and a water” because the delicate order needed to be handled with care. Conversations grew. We developed inside jokes. One was about a dolphin recording artist who abused the echo feature on all his songs, especially on the hit track, “Echolocation.” I somehow made her laugh with every corny reference to it. I rarely prepared anything and just improvised. Freestyled. “Went off the top of the dome,” as it was described by the rapper featured on several of the dolphin’s songs, Notorious Man-A-Tee.

Our conversations were those of chummy coworkers (excuse the repetitive marine metaphors) and then blossomed into the conversations of

friends. And then, as a man who has a female friend would often do, I wondered.

Were these conversations becoming romantically-adjacent?

"Dude, she is totally, yet flabbergastingly, into you." Wayne sure thought so.

"Flabbergastingly? Is that a word?"

"Yeah, you've never heard flabbergasting before?"

"I have. I've just never heard it converted into an adverb."

"Whatever. Quit detracting from the point I'm making."

"Detracting? Who bought you Word-A-Day-Toilet-Paper?"

It may have sounded mean, but Wayne's diet of 23% Doritos and 21% Mountain Dew led me to believe he wasn't the master wordsmith. His diet was nearly half-video-game-food, and I was nearly half-sure he'd only just learned those words. Regardless, he was right. I was detracting.

"You're still doing it!" Wayne was onto me. "Dude, she is into you!"

"Who's into who?" Nate, our 50/50 manager, entered the break room.

I always thought that term was harsh. Sure, he wasn't a full-manager and they basically just let him play the role on weekends, but it just sounded like they treated him as half a person. Wayne said it made him "half our boss, half our friend." Nate sat down next to me and whipped out his phone, certainly going to ask me if I wanted to play him in Bowling.

"Serena up front. She's into Kenny here."

"Whaaaaaat?" Nate was, well, flabbergasted. "This Kenny?"

"Yeah! I know! Like, Kenny has a hard enough time talking to any girls, let alone ones that look like they're Miss Dominican Republic!"

"Is that where she's from?" Nate fixated on the wrong thing, as any good 50/50 would do.

"I don't know." Wayne laughed. "Ask Kenny. He's the one talking her up all the time, making her laugh, acting way smoother than he's ever been."

"Dude." Nate gave me a loving shoulder punch.

"I know." I looked down, embarrassed.

"No. Dude."

"No. I know."

And, of course, the next time I saw Serena at her register, Wayne and Nate were behind me in line. Did these guys plan this? Come on, guys! You know I get nervous about– most things! However, I gave them credit, they gave me a little extra room, pretending to examine the gum selection before the register. No one had ever read an ingredients list of a gum package with

that much detail. I knew what they were doing. And their constant "inconspicuous" eye flashes up at me made it all the more apparent.

Serena talked to me the same as she always would, and I, well, I was clearly self-conscious. But I was trying to act normal. But then it got a whole lot harder.

"Hey, you have your phone on you?" Serena asked.

"Uh, yeah, I… yeah. What was that song they wrote about me? Smooth Operator?"

"Here, let me give you my number. You can text me, you know, whenever. About, whatever."

Something happened to my eyeballs as I reached into my pocket to grab my phone. They continued to stare forward at Serena, but the peripheral ability was ratcheted up about 800%. The only information funneling through my eyeballs and into my brain was that of Nate and Wayne GAPING AT ME, gum packages dangling in their hands. Serena definitely gave me her number, and I definitely entered it into my phone, but I definitely do not know how I did it.

"Cool, well, I don't want to hold you up," Serena said, motioning towards my muffin.

"Yes! My muffin!" You idiot. Why would you say that?

Serena giggled, and I walked to the break room. Soon, cartoon-smoke was kicked up from the feet of Wayne and Nate as they Road-Runnered to catch up to me. I put up an invisible shield to protect from the incoming onslaught of several dozen "dudes" hurled my way. In the break room, Wayne and Nate did their best to inflate my ego, but I had to insist that Serena and I were just friends. Wayne and Nate said they thought she liked me more than just a friend. I insisted that men and women could be friends and exchange phone numbers.

"Text her," Wayne said.

Oh, right, she didn't have my number.

Hey. It's Kenny. Muffin time.

"Dude, why did you send that?" Wayne laughed. "Like, do you even think before you talk to women?"

"I think I think too much."

My phone buzzed.

You got to get me in on the next muffin time. :)

"Is that a smiley face?!"

"How is it that your lame muffin jokes work?!"

"What does muffin mean in this instance?!"

"Is Kenny smooth and we just never knew?!"

The answer to that was… definitely not. Never was. Still wasn't. But Serena saw something in me that she liked. But again, probably just as a friend. Wayne and Nate, like many guys near my age, were prone to jumping to conclusions when they saw a human female say words to a human male.

The text messages moved from the substance of acquaintances to friends to good friends. We were texting every day. Serena was often the first person I texted each morning and the last one I texted before going to bed. Wayne and Nate were relentless, and their constant dudesmanship really started to infiltrate my bones. Did she like me?

The very thought of it made my stomach swell with 50-foot waves of nausea. I stocked up on Pepto Bismol and DayQuil even though I was as healthy as an ox with a daily Vitamin C regimen. I was just preparing because I had these thoughts on my mind often. I tried to think about it less so that my gut stayed tsunami-free.

Many times, when work let out, the nights that we both closed the store down, Serena would invite me out to her car. We'd sit and listen to music. She'd ask what I liked, and I was always nervous that my taste didn't align with hers. But she loved most of what I did, and then she'd play me new music. In fact, many things she played I had never heard of. She introduced me to a lot of Caribbean-themed R&B and hip hop. This was music that constantly played in her home. It was so exciting and bright and vibrant, like her clothing, like her.

The music brought life to me, or maybe it was sitting in the passenger seat of her tiny sedan, in such close proximity to her… and her aroma. Even that was exotic. Island fruits? Vanilla? Cocoa? I wasn't an aroma-expert or an aromaphile or even a person who knew anything as it pertained to the details of smells. I was just your common-odor-knower. But I knew I loved what I smelled, and it made my skin rattle and my jaw clench in the most beautifully painful way.

One night, she popped a new CD in, played the first track, and then looked at me.

"Yeah, that's the one I love!" I said, remembering my affinity for this particular song by… I couldn't remember who.

"That's why it's the first track on your CD."

"My CD?"

Serena popped it out for a second and showed me what she had written on the silver disc.

Kenny's Mix

Serena

And there was a heart drawn next to it. But girls used hearts for all sorts of things, just like they did with sideways smiley faces, right? Technically, everyone had a heart and a smiley face… if they just smiled. No rarer than a toe or an ear. Would it mean anything if she drew an ear on the CD that she made for me— the CD that she popped back in and subsequently played all the songs she picked out specifically for me? Would that mean anything?

Would it?

After departing our little jam session, I popped the CD into my own CD player as I drove home, listening to the thoughtfully crafted arrangement of songs. Each song delivered a smile to my entire body as it played. They sounded different, more alive, as if this CD were a flavor enhancer, making the taste of each song even better. The songs were delectable on their own, each a chocolate treat. The disc was vanilla and exotic fruits lacing through it. These songs would never sound as good anywhere else. On this CD, in my car, they were perfection.

A week later, I began to worry that I was going to wear the CD out from playing it so much, but that worry didn't stick with me long. I had a new worry. Serena's invitation to go see a movie. At the theater. Just the two of us. Another thing that friends did, right?

I picked her up at her place first, meeting about a dozen of her family members. I had wondered why she told me to pick her up so long before the movie; it was because we weren't leaving right away. A little party was going on at her place. I met her mother, father, sisters, aunts, an uncle, a couple cousins… there was so much food, and I'd never tasted any of it. I was so nervous. Not because I was now the island in the sea of a different color, no, not at all. They made me feel so welcome from the instant I walked in. They all knew about my CD and asked me how I was enjoying the new tunes. I told them the music was quickly becoming my favorite.

"We're converting one!" A jovial uncle yelled out.

Laughter ensued. Great times ensued. The movie afterwards was great, though it didn't offer much of a chance for the two of us to talk one-on-one. I brought Serena back home and then went home myself; my head was spinning, and the songs tickled my nostrils with a delicious and humid island breeze.

What was happening?

"Dude! She is into you! You have to– I don't know– ask her out. Ask her to be your girlfriend. What is it that kids your age do?"

Nate was only about five or six years older than me, so I don't know why he acted like he was my dad's age. I guess that was what being a 50/50 manager did to a person.

"Should I?"

"Absolutely!"

"I just– what if she only wants to be friends? And that's what all this is."

"Well, then you'd know at the very least."

"But then we couldn't keep being friends after that. It would be too awkward. Then, seeing her at work all the time…"

"You're nervous," Nate said in a matter-of-fact way.

I was about to take offense and lash out, but I realized that he was not only right, but he was also saying it with no malice.

"Yeah."

"OK, I'm going to ask you something. Answer honestly. I'm not going to say anything to anyone or pass any judgment. Just answer. Taking everything out of the equation, your nerves, what you think she would say… would you want to be dating her?"

"Yeah."

"OK. Good. So, that also means you wouldn't want to not be dating her."

"Well, yeah, I'd prefer to date her over not dating her."

Nate grinned as if he had trapped me. "Perfect. So, the thing you'd least prefer, you can guarantee that will happen if you never ask her out. The only way the thing that you truly prefer happens… can happen… is if you ask her out."

"But she could say no…"

"And then you wouldn't be dating her."

"Right."

"Which puts you in the exact spot you're in now."

"I'm just nervous when it comes to… I don't ever talk to girls like this."

"I get it. But here's the kicker… she's going to say yes. You just have to ask."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because I am."

I promised Nate that I'd ask Serena out the next time I saw her and got the chance. And I truly meant it. I felt pumped up and knew if I saw her at work later that day, I would ask her. Only she wasn't there that day. The next day that we worked together, I never got a good opportunity; there

were always people around. At her register, in the aisle. I thought I could ask her after work, but they cut her shift early since it was slow. I considered texting her and asking if she wanted to meet up, and then I could ask her, but my stomach lurched and made me think it was a bad idea. I'd see her at work again, and a natural opportunity would present itself.

Only the next day we worked together, but that didn't happen. Nor did it happen the next time. The time after that, there were several opportunities, but I had become so gun-shy. We hadn't been talking as much, in person or through text. The next time at work, I couldn't even bring myself to pass by her register and say hi. Her text messages were short with me. I was losing momentum. Wayne kept bugging me about it, and it made me feel even more pressure, but then I realized I needed to do this before the moment had passed.

The next day at work, I told myself I was going to do it no matter what. But I didn't believe myself. So, I told Nate, and said he had to make me keep this promise. Make me do it if he had to.

"Oh, dude." Nate's face dropped. "Um, I heard from one of the other cashiers that she saw Serena with some guy last night, at the restaurant across the street."

"Oh."

"And he dropped her off at work today."

"Oh."

"Yeah, I think—"

"I lost my momentum."

Nate slapped my shoulder hard, and I don't know if it was supposed to make me feel better. It actually hurt, which was good. I deserved a smack in the face.

Serena and I stopped texting so much over the next couple of days, and then texting stopped altogether a week after that. I told myself there was a chance whatever she had going on with whoever this guy was… it could not last. I rarely looked over in her direction at the store for the next few months. I avoided her register. I was embarrassed. Every once in a while, we would cross paths, and we'd be friendly and fine on the outside, and I didn't know how she felt on the inside, but I felt like my whole body was made up of lava.

The school year ended, summer streaked by, and I'd still see Serena up at the register every once in a while. She seemed to work less. And then college started in the fall… and I was off. My mind was kept preoccupied for that entire school year; I hardly had any time to even think about Serena.

Hardly. Not never. Whenever a particular lecture was boring or I had free time or someone played a song with Caribbean influences that I knew a little too well… she'd enter my mind. I didn't bring the CD with me. When I heard the songs occasionally, it was when other people played them, and they sounded sweet, but empty. I couldn't even smell the exotic fruit or vanilla, or cocoa.

Near the end of the school year, I started to think about Serena more often. My stomach still fluttered when she entered my mind, even with all this time having passed. Even though I'd been on several dates with three different girls this last semester, I never got the same feeling with them.

The school year ended, and I was back home, ready to take on time at the grocery store again. It was that great moment at the beginning of summer that I'd seen all the older coworkers of mine go through. They looked like they'd returned from a journey across the world, older, wiser, happier. They'd return to see us, and the others who had left for other colleges, people, coworkers, friends that they hadn't seen in months.

I got to experience it for myself. Wayne was back from his college. I saw Nate again. I saw all my coworkers again and realized how odd everyone's faces looked just because I hadn't seen them in so long. It was a pleasant shock to the system, and all my younger coworkers who were still in high school looked to me like I was a ruler of lands, asking me about my adventures. But there was one face I was looking for, and I vowed not to miss the opportunity this time.

Only I never saw that face. She had left for college, too. I couldn't remember which one; someone had once mentioned it to me. I hadn't heard it directly from Serena because we hadn't spoken in a while. I assumed she'd come back to work at the grocery store like everyone else did. But she didn't. Who knew what her plans were, if she was somewhere else, or just decided she didn't want to work during her summer.

I could've texted her. Sure.

But I didn't.

A Caribbean-inspired R&B song played, and my foot started tapping uncontrollably. The song had regained all of its joy… nearly all of it. Only a slight empty feeling resided in the lyrics. It sent so many tingly feelings rushing through my head. Either it came with that scent of island fruit, vanilla, and cocoa… or just the sounds from the song sprang memories of those scents so strong that I actually smelled them.

I sat still, listening to the whole song, sipping my wine. Johnny suddenly ran into the room.

“I finished my Christmas list for Santa!” Johnny said excitedly.

“Excellent! Let’s mail it to him tomorrow!”

“Or we drive it to him!”

“All the way to the North Pole?!”

Johnny cackled and raced out of the room. Ginny walked in as soon as he left.

She leaned against my shoulder. “Make a decision yet?”

“The smart, safe thing to do is to stay with the company,” I said. “I don’t have to worry about uncertainty.”

Ginny gave me a small smile. “Certainty.”

“Yup.” I grabbed my laptop and pulled up my resignation email, all typed out. I hit send. “Which is why I’m joining the start-up. Certainty is safe. Safe isn’t thrilling.”

Ginny’s smile grew larger. “Really?”

“Since when was life supposed to sacrifice thrill just for the boredom of certainty?”

“I’m so proud of you.” Ginny kissed my forehead. “You’re not worried?”

“No, the start-up is as close to a sure thing as it can get. But it’ll never happen if I’m unable to take even one small leap of faith.”

“Can’t miss out on a great opportunity, right?” Ginny kissed me on the head again and left.

“No. Never again.”

A Night Walk on the Lake
Russell Dupont

Here in Vermont
on this late winter night,
I walk on water
and hear the lake rumble
like an empty stomach.

Huddled under
this blanket of darkness,
I watch the night pass,
see tracks in the crusted snow,
hear the crunch of footsteps.

The lake grumbles,
stars move clouds,
far-away dogs howl,
and the pine forest
along the shore
has become a menacing wall.

There is no comfort here,
in the narrow confines of night.

I turn back, stepping cautiously
in the glazed hollow of my prints.

The sky dissolves
into the trees.
I shiver.

Mask
Sam Moe

Lately, I have been wondering a lot about who I am and what is going on in my life. I've stopped sleeping through the night; have I ever been sleeping through the night? I am always uncertain. It is starting to drive everyone to their limits. They don't say this to me, but I can tell. I can always tell.

I have been avoiding writing this essay all week. Instead of writing, I am in my office at school, putting on makeup. I am now lint rolling my shirt. I should just start writing, dammit; isn't that what I always tell my students? They can't achieve anything until they just start. Even if they're scared, even if they don't know what they're doing. The problem is, in this instance, I do know what I'm doing; I know exactly what I am trying to say. I'm not scared, I'm angry. Am I too angry to write the objective essay I've been needing to write for five days now?

A story: when I was younger, I told my mom I hated sleeping in my grandmother's apartment. I always had nightmares in those twin beds, terrified something—or someone—was going to attack me in the night. Ever the denier of my reality, she told me I was ridiculous, I needed to sleep, my grandmother would sing me lullabies, didn't that help? I expressed, or at least I tried to, I was afraid of the rest of the apartment, too. The railroad-style apartment is the length of almost two train cars. At the very end is my great-grandmother's old room, which now has bars on the window. Is this when I started to become afraid of the night? Or would that happen much later, after everything went down in high school?

Later, when I was in my early thirties, my mother told me she was molested in the room I used to sleep in. The pink room, we call it, for the bright pink rug. Next door is the blue room, where my aunt used to sleep. They switched rooms when we were older, which is why I suspect I never questioned the energy in the pink room. Why be afraid of the night if nothing bad ever happened? If the walls had never seen anyone's blood?

The bed, however, has seen my blood. When I turned thirteen, I had my period for almost a month. In other versions of this story, the menstrual cycle never lasted that long. Regardless, something was wrong. I remember telling my mother I needed more boxes of menstrual pads. Again? she had asked me, disturbed by the rate at which I went through a pack of thirty-six.

Yes, I urged her. And I need the longer ones. Is this normal? Should I still have my period? Yes, this is normal, she responded. As in, I'm not listening to you. It wasn't until she found out I was having nonstop blood clots that she took me to the emergency room. Again, I wouldn't find out until later that one of the nurses apparently yelled at my mother. My father was outside, smoking.

I should report you for child abuse, the nurse had said.

I wonder what my life would be like if she had.

*

My mother tells me on the phone that she is also afraid of the end of the apartment. After a break-in when she was six, she feared someone would climb up the fire escape and enter through my abuelitita's window. Whoever had broken in stole everything they had. This was during the early seventies, and the city-wide blackout hadn't yet happened. I learn later that the blackout was in 1977. My mother and great-grandmother, whom we've nicknamed Wita, left the apartment to take shelter with friends. My mother cackles on the phone, explaining she kept trying to blow out Wita's candle. Ay Elga, no hagas eso, Wita replied, justifiably upset. When she was younger, my mother, like me, loved to push boundaries. I theorize part of it had to do with the trauma she suffered at an early age, but I'll never know. Perhaps it was boredom, or the appeal of growing up in New York City with parents who barely knew your comings and goings, just told you to return home before the streetlights came on.

*

At four in the morning, I get up to use the bathroom. When I return to bed, where my cat has stolen my pillow, I find I can't get back to sleep. For what feels like the hundredth time this semester, I lie in bed and stare at the ceiling, wondering what I'm doing with my life.

In class on Monday, we read four essays from an anthology. One of the essays is about a professor who suggested a student might not participate in a workshop because their piece is emotionally intense, and further, the student appeared to be having an "emotionally intense time." I asked my students if they thought this was a trauma-engaged method. I had only meant for the question to spark a discussion. Immediately after asking it, my students got into an argument about whether they should be allowed to read (specifically) pieces about sexual violence. Distracted by the

conversation and the intensity, I begin fidgeting with a lilac whiteboard marker.

I'm sorry, I tell one of the students. I sort of blacked out when you said S.A.

And therein lies my point, they responded.

The rest of class is a debate about how many women are sexually assaulted or raped (1 in 6) and how much of that occurs in school (1 in 4). At first, no one can agree on a number. They argue. After having read several pieces thus far in the creative nonfiction class, I am familiar with at least a small portion of the class who are survivors of sexual assault and rape.

To guide the conversation, I explain to the students that it is up to them what they do and don't want to share in future workshops they might take part in. I let them know I've personally included more trauma in some of my workshop pieces from when I was a student. If my peers had said anything problematic about my work the week before, I would amp up the descriptors. I don't think this was me doing a good job or behaving like a decent human being. I was acting out of rage and frustration. Frustration at not being heard. Rage that I'd only recently found out what had happened to me in high school was non-consensual, and why did I spend my entire life convincing myself otherwise? Why did everyone else try to convince me otherwise? Am I pushing boundaries with my students by having these conversations? Am I losing my mind?

I lay awake in bed on Monday and Tuesday and Wednesday morning. We have class again that Wednesday night. During the day, I hang out in my colleague's office. We talk about how classes have been going. I explained to him the conversation I had with my students.

This kind of is your fault for having them read these types of essays—the ones about trauma, he says.

What are you talking about? I never assign students work with S.A. in the content.

He explains he browsed the collection I was teaching and that some of the essays were more explicit, insinuating it is my fault for triggering this kind of behavior.

Do you think our colleague has ever had this issue? He asks, pointing to the office adjacent to us.

I wouldn't know. I have no idea what my colleague teaches. Aside from knowing she writes and teaches both poetry and prose, I have no knowledge of how her classes go.

My mind is unraveling. I am frustrated knowing I had this conversation with my chair a few weeks ago, who told me I shouldn't be teaching the class like a memoir-only class. (I explained to him that I haven't been, that students learn how to imbue research with their essays.) They learn different forms, and I encourage them to write in the medium that best represents what they are trying to say. I feel as though no one is listening to me. Do my colleagues think I am just encouraging students to write about trauma all the time? Why would anyone want that?

Not that I don't support or encourage students to reclaim their stories. In fact, what they write is not up to me. The students write what they think is best based on the writing prompts I have given them, and nothing more. The majority of our in-class discussions are about craft and style choices, and less about trauma and memory circumstances. Does it matter if I disagree with my colleague? He will never listen to me. He will never fully understand what I'm saying. I wonder why I bother, then remember I have an obsession with accurately representing myself. Ever since I was abused in high school, this obsession has followed me throughout my life. It is impossible to get away from, even though I am in therapy, and I am medicated, and trying. Just like everyone wants me to. Do I put too much of my emotion in this essay? And if so, what should I do about it? Never write about trauma again? I wonder what the point is when my colleagues tell me what to do with my lived experiences. When they cast judgment on me, which I do not consent to. How can we move past these situations? Is that even a possibility?

*

The gazebo is shrouded in darkness in my mind. The grass has streaks of light from a bonfire, but otherwise, it is dark. The neighborhood, lovingly nicknamed The Grid, is also dark. There are only a few streetlamps positioned at the ends of several interconnected bike paths, which weave across neighbors' backyards. I will walk these paths when I am older and in love with a man who lives in The Grid. We will walk until we find a body of

water. We will kiss and fight and throw stones into the lake until I become so fatigued I must take a nap on the dock.

In high school, the gazebo was the only place we felt we could hang out. My curfew was still nine, and my mother went to sleep around 9:30pm. After turning out the lights, she would sleep so lightly that I had to pause after making the slightest of sounds. I wonder how she didn't notice for months how I was easing open the old, rickety window in the downstairs guest room.

[Writing this essay makes me feel sick.]

I cannot enter that space again, at least not in the context of that circumstance. Instead, I will write a list:

Freezing / summertime / lonely / jaw / hands / cruelty / parrots / biting / couches / bright red / blood smear / gauze / needles / blue bear / small box / yellow tub / mother / fear / anger / indifference / suicide / dozens, if not more / flood / narrative / rhetoric / lies / bench / forest / woods / lake / exes

And then some.

*

In the middle of the week, I go on a walk with my friend. He spends the entire hour telling me the LGBT "alphabet" has too many letters that render each individual identity meaningless. He says we should all be fluid? I ask him about people who are gay or lesbian and not pansexual or bisexual. He says I am focusing too much on the individual and not the collective. He asks me, if I'm so stressed out about coming out again, why can't I just be fluid. I physically, mentally, and emotionally do not have the energy to explain my identity to him.

People see me as a cisgender, heterosexual man, he says.

Okay? I respond.

But they don't know anything about my sexuality. They're making assumptions.

I try to explain to him that some of the younger queer and trans generation are trying not to automatically identify people, and he says that's good. He tells me his sexuality is nobody's business, though I don't understand if he is anything beyond heterosexual (and cisgendered) how that would not have come out already. Which leads me to believe he is lying for the sake of the argument. But what do I know? I'm just confused, apparently.

I think back to hanging out with his wife last Friday, at his house. The two of them had hosted a a symposium. After everyone finished presenting, there was time for questions. My body was in so much pain from the chair I was in that when my friend asked me to go check on his cat in the other room, I happily obliged. I found his wife in the kitchen, and she instructed me not to let the cat in. We spent the next half hour talking about life and my eventual separation from my current partner.

She apologized profusely and asked if I was okay. I explained he was in love with my childhood best friend, but more than that, I thought I was gay. Or perhaps I've always known. And I have stuffed that down, too, which is a story for another time.

After the students finished receiving questions, we returned to the living room. His wife and I talked and joked about what we'd been doing all week. I told her, laughing, that he had suggested it was "pointless" coming out if I was just going to walk it back years later. She laughed and told me she thought he was trying to be helpful.

Is it helpful to tell me you don't think I am gay because I am going to "walk it back" years later? And further, why do I keep laughing at all these interactions?

*

I try to talk to my partner about school, but I can tell his mind is elsewhere. He has told me several times in the past year that he finds these stories and worries "stupid." We have gotten into arguments because he says he doesn't like the word "trigger" and finds it annoying. I explain to him, for the millionth time, that I have complex PTSD. He tells me he knows, and adds on that I act like I am the only person in the world with trauma.

My friend says the same thing to me. On Tuesday of this week, we are sitting on a bench in the sun, talking about life. I bring up something related to a trigger, I can't remember what exactly, and he responds by

telling me I act like I am the only person in the world who has trauma. He begins telling me about his suicide attempt and his wife's toxic ex-husband. I tell him I know these stories. I explain there is not a day that goes by where I don't think about how I am happy we are all alive, that we haven't died by suicide. I have tried to take my life twice this year and told no one.

It's not that I think I am the only person who has trauma. It's that other people aren't listening to me when I'm trying to talk about what happened, I explain to him.

Take, for example, a colleague of mine. Upon learning I was raped by more than two people, he told me he "knew it was wrong," but he was worried about being alone in the room with me. Later in the conversation, he asked how I was going to convince anyone reading my memoir that the rape happened multiple times. If he was having a hard time believing me, I had no idea how I was going to convince a stranger. I still don't. I write this essay on a Friday afternoon, hiding in my office, before I'm meant to head to the bar with my coworkers for an end-of-semester drink. I have no idea what I am doing or saying anymore. Everything, no matter what, feels somehow wrong.

Writing everything feels somehow wrong feels wrong. I am reminded of how my colleagues were joking the other day about how I had cried in public. Has she done this to you? one colleague asked. Oh, about once a day, the other joked.

Am I meant to also find these funny jokes? Is every part of my personality hilarious? Is this essay somehow too scathing or too honest (or, not honest enough) to see the light of day? What am I trying to achieve by telling these stories?

*

In class on Wednesday, I give my students a speech. It is a speech I have given several times before. I do not want to be giving this speech, ever. I feel people should already know this. But they don't, so here we are.

You own the things that happened to you, I instruct my students. These stories are yours to do whatever you want with. If you need to reclaim what happened to you, then you may do so. Don't let anyone tell you what you can or can't write about.

I don't know if I have gotten through to any of them. Do I own the things that have happened to me? Can someone come down from the heavens, or spill forth from a crack in the earth, and shake me? Please, come. Tell me I own these stories, too. I am in charge of this narrative, now I know better. Now I can understand more fully the things that happened to me, and how they are not my fault.

*

Late one night, a past student of mine tags me in an Instagram post. She is reading my short story collection and has underlined one of the passages:

There persisted a sticky-sweet quality about a man who had driven all that way just to hurt you. No one brought you to the hospital, and your mother was pissed off, not sad, when she found out you wanted to die.

I've read this piece so many times, you have no idea the student says.

And I cried after receiving this message, just like how I cried a few weeks ago upon receiving an anonymous email from a literary magazine editor. She told me she had read one of my submissions and was so sorry for what happened to me. She encouraged me to keep writing and to keep telling my stories.

What am I doing, if not trying to speak to other survivors?

When I read Amanda Nguyen, Chanel Miller, Roxane Gay, Stephanie Foo, Erika Krouse, and others, I don't question what they went through. I read their memoirs and feel seen. I hold their books in my hands and sob in the innermost room of the apartment, hoping my partner can't hear me. He hasn't explicitly told me to get over it, but I fear the words are coming.

It has been almost two weeks since I relapsed. Two days since I last went to therapy and had an EMDR session in which I recalled over twenty specific memories of violence, looped and sometimes spliced together, like a continuous daydream (or nightmare). I am fatigued. I need rest, but don't know how to ask for it. How does one rest when they are still living in the lion's den? I fear self-gaslighting myself. I do not want another survivor to read this essay and attempt to convince themselves that what they are experiencing is "not that bad." I want to believe in myself, too. These conversations are bad. I am not completely untethered from my own reality.

I remind myself about the time I told my current therapist about one of the men abusing me in high school. You have to be sexual for me so I can forgive you for being sexual with all my friends, he had said. He patted the top of my head and told me he loved me; all would be forgiven if I could do this small favor for him over and over and over again. In some of my journal entries from high school, I am kind to him. Almost fond. I write about how nice he was today because he told me he loved me while abusing me, or he rubbed the top of my head, or he gave me a hug. I am partially disgusted. The other part of me realizes I am only mimicking the same behavior, as an adult.

People have been toxic to me. Each time they are done being toxic to me, each time we return to joking and laughing, I immediately forgive them. It is as if my mind is the sand being licked clean by high tide. In and out, slowly. My memories are washed away. I replace them with laughter and jokes. Sure, a friend said something toxic today. My therapist confirmed it was toxic. But then, he made a joke about my appearance or the sound of my voice, or my writing style. And isn't that enough to make me love them again?

I have to laugh, otherwise I would cry, and we can't have that. At least not while I'm still on campus, tethered to this particular job. I cannot keep crying at school.

I know it sounds awful, but don't cry, my therapist instructed me. These men are old-school sexist, and they're just going to disrespect you even more if you cry in front of them or beg for anything.

Instead, I mask. It is a difficult mask because it is nothing like my true face. But it is the mask I wear at school, and I hope others are buying into the performance.

*

Outside, the temperature has climbed into the low eighties. I will drive to a bar down the street and have a drink with my coworkers. I will laugh at their jokes. If anyone says anything offensive, I will laugh, inconspicuously writing it down in my phone so I can turn it into a piece of literature later in the evening. I will try to enjoy the sun on my face and the breeze on my recently healed tattoos (which are covering self-harm scars). I will not think about my colleague, who constantly jokes about taking his own life. I will be

as gentle as humanly possible with myself. And if I cannot be gentle, I will be patient. In the meantime, my true self is waiting for me. She hides in the plastic house I built for her in my mind.

Don't let anyone in who's not me, I instruct her. She is six years old.

Okay, she responds, tone defiant, as if she knows she might let in a monster and still live after he is done with her.

I glance around the space in my mind, scanning the horizon for predators. This is the void, my waiting space where my mind goes during the beginning of each EMDR session. The perimeter seems devoid of threat, for now. My younger self is already distracted. She is cooking using plastic utensils and plastic food. She fries a plastic egg. She has locked the door from the inside. The small playhouse, normally white and blue plastic or pink and green, is also black, like the void. There are no stars in this realm.

I know she will be safe. And when she is not safe, she will fight. Eventually, we will be able to tell this story without backing down or apologizing. We will reclaim our minds. We will heal.

I Hope
Julia Konow

To my niece,
Green to this life,
I have a million wishes for you.
I hope you sit around crackling embers
And don't get too upset when the sticky marshmallow with golden dreams
Ignites to charcoal.
I hope you blow on every transformed dandelion
And never see dandelions as weeds
But instead just misunderstood flowers.
I hope you sing to the radio or at least mouth the words
And feel confident to crank up the volume for the songs you like.
I hope you close your tired eyes tightly when you feel the car pulling into the familiar driveway
And pretend that you are still asleep
Just so your parents can carry you inside.
I hope you sift through the jellybeans to find the chocolates
Tucked in the Easter basket grass.
I hope you run barefoot on the dewy lawn without stepping on a bee
As you search for wooly bears and bumble bees.
I hope you check for fairies under the spongy mushrooms.
I hope you gaze at the July sky in hopes of spotting fireworks.
I hope you take an extra whiff of the vanilla extract when baking.
I hope you lick every spatula and bowl
Always adding more chocolate chips than the recipe requires.
I hope you are indignant when your parents instruct you to wear a layering shirt
Under your carefully constructed Halloween costume
Due to the evening chill before trick or treating.
I hope you burn the first round of pancakes
Though perfect the golden edges of the second batch with pride.
I hope you pitch a little tent in the back yard,
Stocked with playing cards and a surplus of snacks,
Like you were camping in the Amazon Rainforest.
I hope you tuck a spoon under your pillow the night before a snow storm
And stay glued to the ice crusted bedroom window that you awake to
On any snow day off from school.

I hope you hang each and every homemade ornament on the evergreen Christmas tree
Even if they are nearly impossible to decipher as the years chug along.
I hope you take weeks, if not months, carefully mapping out
Your birthday cake flavor and frosting combination.
I hope you use an excessive amount of glue
Just so that it congeals on your fingers
So that you can spend the day peeling away at its waxy coating.
I hope your idea of independence involves
Microwaving tortillas and melted cheese
On paper plates
Just to call them nachos.
I hope you never ignore the night sky
And take the time to smell the cornfield
When the stalks are above you.
I hope you stay up late at sleepovers.
I hope you jump into the frigid pool with glee
But if you decide to be like me
And want to slowly mosey in
That works just as well.
I hope you look for seaglass by the ocean
And check if it is foggy enough to count towards your collection
Alongside shriveled mermaid purses discovered in the sandy dunes.
I hope you squint at treetops
In hopes that you'll spot an owl.
I hope you leave movie theaters with popcorn butter on your fingers.
I hope you ignore this list
Crumble it up and toss it in the wind
Like scarlet red leaves in autumn
And do whatever you want to do
As long as you can look in the mirror
And smile
And know confidently that you are loved.
I hope above all that you are so immensely loved beyond measure.
I hope you know that I would lasso the moon and bring it down to you
As a nightlight in your floral bedroom
So that you would never encounter monsters lurking under the bed
And the night’s darkness only holds stars to wish upon.
You are enough
Evermore

My sweet niece Everly Layne.

In Conversation with Stephen May

MJ: As an English teacher at Hopkins School in New Haven, how has being in that environment and working with students impacted your writing, either directly or indirectly, if at all?

SM: I was a writer before I was an English teacher, but there was always the need to have a day job. While I'm grateful for the opportunities I had, I found the structure soul-crushing. Teaching was a revelation. I could immerse myself in books and language! I had license to be creative and self-led! Most of all: there were all these young humans!

But standing before them and, later, my own two children as a failed writer — because let's call it what it was — felt bad. I had to find a way to start writing again. I'd found myself drawn to poetry as a graduate student and, later, as a teacher. I had young kids at home; instead of doom-scrolling, browsing for records I didn't need, or endlessly revising the unworkable manuscript I wrote in my twenties, I started playing with words and sentences on my phone.

To me, the obvious follow-up question, which I will pose to myself, is this: *How has my poetry practice impacted my teaching?*

Every writer knows that language is honed through use. As a result of my poetry practice, I come to class sharp. Moreover, I'm credible — both to myself and my students. This matters to me because I was a writer first. I'm not someone talking about writing from the outside. I'm in it.

MJ: As the advisor to the student newspaper, you guide students in shaping their voices for journalism, and I wanted to ask: how does that experience influence your own poetry, and do you see connections between the discipline of reporting and creative writing?

SM: All writing is writing. Every poem must, in some way, answer the question "So what?", and so must every newspaper article. Moreover, part of being a creative person is the compulsion — or duty, depending on the day — to see the world through a certain kind of lens. Newspapers require the same

of journalists. So it goes with a student newspaper. Also, there is the duty, or compulsion, to write — even on days when we're feeling less than inspired. Writers of all sorts must become well acquainted with the experience of pushing through.

MJ: One of the elements of your poem that stuck out to me was the geological terms you were using. Can you describe your process in combining these areas of study — science and literature — in your poem? What does that connection allow you to express that either discipline alone might not achieve by itself?

SM: I'm definitely not a geologist, but I'm a curious person. I'm also neurodiverse, which means, among many other things, that I'm sensitive to patterns and susceptible to deep dives.

East Rock is a prominent and striking part of the landscape of my neighborhood; it was inevitable that I'd start wondering about what I was seeing. Every time you crack open a new Wikipedia page, or whatever, there are new ideas, new patterns, new language. With them comes the thrill of discovery and possibilities for sound, structure, metaphor, and meaning.

MJ: In your biography, you mention an interest in ritual and memory, and I see those themes in your poem published in this issue. Beyond just "East Rock Creed," how do memory and ritual work together in your poetry and writing?

SM: Part of poetry is what you see and hear in your daily life, and another part is what you carry around in your mind.

I was raised Roman Catholic. We weren't an every-holy-day family, but we went to Mass often enough. I went to public school, but my mom saw to it that I memorized the required prayers. In a real way, those were the first poems I came into contact with.

As a child, I had little idea of what any of the Catholic stuff really meant. When I began writing poetry, I couldn't help but notice similarities to the

rhythms of the prayers and responsories I internalized in childhood. The poems are prayers, of a sort, that I use to find my own meaning.

Memory is another piece of this same meaning-making process. We often think of memories as static, as existing under glass, but they're in a constant process of shapeshifting. I've been in therapy for years. One of the most important lessons I've learned is that we can work to shape how we understand our experiences. Poetry — which imposes order on ideas even as it defamiliarizes them — is one way to do this. And, of course, memories often push back, which both complicates and enriches the process.

MJ: As someone who formerly lived in Stratford, I used to visit New Haven often; I actually made it up there about 3–4 years ago. East Rock is such a defining area of New Haven, so I am curious: how does living and teaching in New Haven (and specifically that area of the city) shape your sense of place in this poem, and what role does New Haven play in your writing and daily life?

SM: New Haven lies in a basin between two dramatic ridges, East Rock and West Rock, and the Long Island Sound. So there are the "rocks," which I see as sentinels, reminders of the greater whole, and there's the ebb and flow of life beneath them.

Separately, one of the things I love most about the neighborhood of East Rock, and New Haven more broadly, is the obsession — and it really is an obsession — with education. School and learning, and their rhythms, are part of the cycle of life here in myriad ways. That feels familiar to me: my parents were teachers, and that sensibility permeated life at home. They're long retired now, but they still have the spirit of educators. I'm proud to carry that forward in my own life. So New Haven feels like home.

MJ: In terms of your influences, which poets or writers have most shaped your sense of some of the themes we've previously discussed? Do you see yourself writing in a tradition of New England poets and writers, or do you feel your influences come from elsewhere?

SM: I was so lucky, as a first-year undergrad at Pitt, to have Terrance Hayes teach my Creative Writing class. Even then, he was just about the coolest person I could imagine. His enthusiasm for the experimental — not to oversell it — stuff I was writing at the time felt like an affirmation. I felt seen.

In terms of New England poets, my mom will want me to mention Robert Frost. One of the many random cassettes we had was a recording of him reading his poetry, and I wound up listening to it more than I wanted people to know. I can still hear him reading "Button, button, who's got the button?" from "The Witch of Coös."

It wasn't until much later, in an American Poetry class in grad school, that I was introduced to the work of Wallace Stevens and Elizabeth Bishop. I was drawn into Stevens's austere abstraction and Bishop's Yankee restraint and attention to observation. I went through a phase where I had Stevens's first collection, *Harmonium*, with me at all times. Here was art as language; language as art.

When life brought me to New Haven, I was aware that I was not far from Hartford, Stevens's adopted home city. Last winter, I followed the path from The Hartford, where he worked, to his house in a nearby suburb. I stood in the snow across the street from his house and paid tribute.

I continue to be inspired by Stevens's bifurcated life: insurance executive on the one hand, poet on the other. There's no rule that says we must stop writing or making art when we get real jobs. To the contrary, our lives are enriched when we continue to create.

MJ: What are you currently reading?

SM: My kitchen table book is Pramod K. Nayar's *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism*. I keep re-reading the chapter on Structuralism. Here, before me, is the way I think about poetic language.

I'm listening to Walter Isaacson's *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life*, which is purely utilitarian — I wanted to know more about the subject. And

Franklin himself is fascinating. I could do without the reader's cloying impersonation of him, however.

MJ: What are you currently working on, creatively or professionally?

SM: Professionally, in addition to teaching and the newspaper, I'm working as part of a team tasked with imagining what an independent school in the AI era might look like, and how it might function. In many ways, we're already there, and we educators have some catching up to do. It would be impossible to overstate how profoundly AI is going to change everything. It strains the imagination

As a poet, I try to finish a workable draft of a new piece every week. I send those to my friend and editing partner for feedback. She lets me know when my ideas are too abstract or obscure.

A couple of my recent poems will run soon in *Euphonia Review*. I also post some of my work on my personal Substack, *No Direction Press* (https://xdpress.substack.com/).

Contributor Biographies

Stephen Kramer Avitabile is a New-England-born, Los-Angeles-based writer. He writes short stories, novellas, novels, screenplays, and even dabbled in stand-up. He's had his work appear in publications like Adelaide Literary Magazine, Boudin Literary Magazine, and Clever Fox Lit. His script "A Tale of Two Tales" won Best Feature Script at the New York Tri-State International Film Festival. When not writing, he spends his time with his partner Evelyn, exploring Southern California, taking care of their guinea pig Peggy and tortoise Joey, and feeding the animals outside his home.

Hannah Bottigheimer is a writer based outside Boston, where she lives with her husband and blended family of seven children. Her essays explore motherhood, family dynamics, love, and resilience, and have appeared in *Chicago Story Press* and other literary journals. A longtime New Englander, she spends summers in Maine at a small cottage on Loon Pond—an inspiration for much of her recent work. When she's not writing, she can be found kayaking, walking public Trustees land, or planning her next essay. Instagram:@hannahbottigheimerwrites

Patrick Bradshaw is a retired electrical engineer who enjoys using both sides of his brain. His poems have been published or are forthcoming in *Touchstone, Smoky Quartz* and *The Mountain Troubadour*. He lives in New Hampshire with his wife.

Amber Rose Crowtree, MFA, is an award-winning poet whose poems have appeared widely from North America to overseas. She is the author and cover-artist of two chapbooks: *Harboring the Imperfect* and *The Inviolable Hours*. She has been an Artist-in-Residence through the Shoals Marine Laboratory on Appledore Island and a Writer-in-Residence through the Carl Sandburg National Historic Site online. Amber has been an assistant editor for *The Poets' Touchstone* and a reader for *Hunger Mountain Review*. She grew up in Downeast Maine and now lives in New Hampshire with her man, their orange tabby cat, Rambunctious (Rambo), and many house plants.

Russell Dupont is the author of three novels; a short story collection; two collections of poetry and four chapbooks. His work has been published in

numerous journals, including*, the albatross, Spectrum, The I, For Poets Only, The Anthology of South Shore Poets, Mozaic Daily Jazz Gazette, Re-Side, Oddball, JerryJazzMusician, Adelaide Literary Magazine, Rye Whiskey Review, Last Stanza Poetry Journal*, the new post-literate, *DADAKU, One Sentence, the Northern New England Review, Verse-Virtual, The Lothlorien Review, Pick-Me-Up Poetry, Silver Birch Press, The Poetry Porch 2024, Tell-Tale Inklings, Concrete Formalist Poetry,* and *Cold Moon Journal.*

Will Evans has been writing about New England since he published his first story in Yankee, in 1983. Since then, his work has appeared *in Yankee, NER/BLQ, Northern New England Review,* and others. His stories have been reprinted in *The Best of Yankee Magazine, New Fiction from New England,* and *Street Songs 1: New Voices in Fiction*. He was awarded the *Yankee* fiction prize in 1987. He recently retired from Johns Hopkins University and has also taught at Harvard and UNH. He lives in Baltimore, MD.

Heidi Greenwald is a New Englander by birth. She grew up in Connecticut and spent much of her time exploring New Hampshire. She moved to the west coast at 24 and was always searching for a place with a lake that reminded her of home. Her chapbook *Home Where I've Never Been* was published in August 2025, and she was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She and her husband now live in Vermont with their dog Marley.

Matthew E. Henry (MEH) is an educator, essayist, and the author of six poetry collections, most recently *said the Frog to the scorpion* (Harbor Editions, 2024). He is editor-in-chief of *The Weight Journal*, the creative nonfiction editor at *Porcupine Literary*, and an associate editor at *Rise Up Review*. MEH's publications include *Had, Massachusetts Review, Ploughshares, Terrain, Whale Road Review,* and *The Worcester Review*. MEH earned an MFA yet continued to spend money he didn't have completing an MA in theology and a PhD in education. He writes about education, race, religion, and burning oppressive systems to the ground at www.MEHPoeting.com.

Lily Hinrichsen's life of artmaking and the written word has been a life of translation. It's not enough to just observe - she must give things a voice. She transcribes the everyday ordinary into words, shapes, and line.

Transforms feelings into color. She is fluent in painting, printmaking, words. She has shown her art in galleries throughout New England, and has published poetry in *Three Fingers Review, deLuge, Mountain Troubadour, Outside the Margin, Periwinkle Literary Magazine,* and *Zig Zag Lit*. She has two self-published books of poetry. She resides in an idyllic corner of Vermont. Website: www.LilyHinrichsen.com

Julia Konow is a 26-year-old lifelong Connecticut resident who works as a reading specialist paraprofessional at a local middle school. She has an unquenchable passion for wildlife, family, coffee, and literature. While she has previously published journalistic and academic pieces to various publications, this entry is her first attempt at wading in the waters of creative nonfiction writing.

Stephen May teaches English and advises the student newspaper at Hopkins School in New Haven, Connecticut. His poetry explores intersections of memory, ritual, and place.

John McBrien is a mechanical engineer from Glastonbury, Connecticut, and enjoys creative auto-fiction writing. He plays soccer every Sunday and enjoys spending time with his friends and family. He studied mechanical engineering at the University of Connecticut.

Sam Moe is the author of eight books. Her most recent poetry collection, *RED HALCYON*, is forthcoming from Querencia Press in 2026. Her debut short story collection, *I MIGHT TRUST YOU*, is out from Experiments in Fiction (2025). She has attended the Sewanee Writers' Conference and received fellowships from the Longleaf Writer's conference and the Key West Literary Seminar. Sam has also attended residencies at The Writers' Colony at Dairy Hollow, VCCA, and Château d'Orquevau.

Josh Nicolaisen lives in New Hampshire and teaches writing at Plymouth State University. He holds an MFA from Randolph College. He has received support from Bread Loaf Environmental Writers Conference, Hewnoaks, and Martha's Vineyard Institute of Creative Writing. His work has appeared *in Colorado Review, Hunger Mountain Review, Permafrost, Appalachian Review, Four Way Review, Bellingham Review,* and elsewhere. Find him at www.oldmangardening.com/poetry

Courtney Seymour (she/her) is a librarian, domestic violence advocate, mother, writer, and New England transplant. Her poetry appears in *Slam!: Performance Poetry from the Underrepresented, Kelp Journal, Shift (MTSU Write), Miracle Monocle, the Poetry Society of New York's Milk Press,* and *the Poetry Society of New Hampshire's Touchstone*. Follow her Instagram @b_irth.stories

Charlie Simmons is 22 years old and a recent graduate of the University of Vermont. He is currently living in Dartmouth, Massachusetts, working on a farm and practicing freelance writing. He has a passion for creative non-fiction, especially about subjects relating to New England, where he has lived his entire life.

Gerald Snow is a debut fiction author. He has published a work of nonfiction entitled, *The Life of Christ*. He earned his undergraduate degree from Stanford University in English, followed by law degrees from Harvard Law School and New York University. Later, he received degrees in linguistics from the University of Utah and Brigham Young University. He studied creative writing at both Stanford and University of Utah. In between these academic degrees, he has had a long career as a lawyer.

Susan Zelie hails from beautiful Barrington, New Hampshire where she pursues vocations of teaching and writing. She was honored to be published in both volumes of NH's COVID Spring poetry collections, and looks forward to a poem coming out this fall in the Poetry Society of New Hampshire's *Touchstone Journal.*

About The Portrait of New England

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

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

Submissions open back up between March 1, 2026-May 31, 2026 for Issue Nine.

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