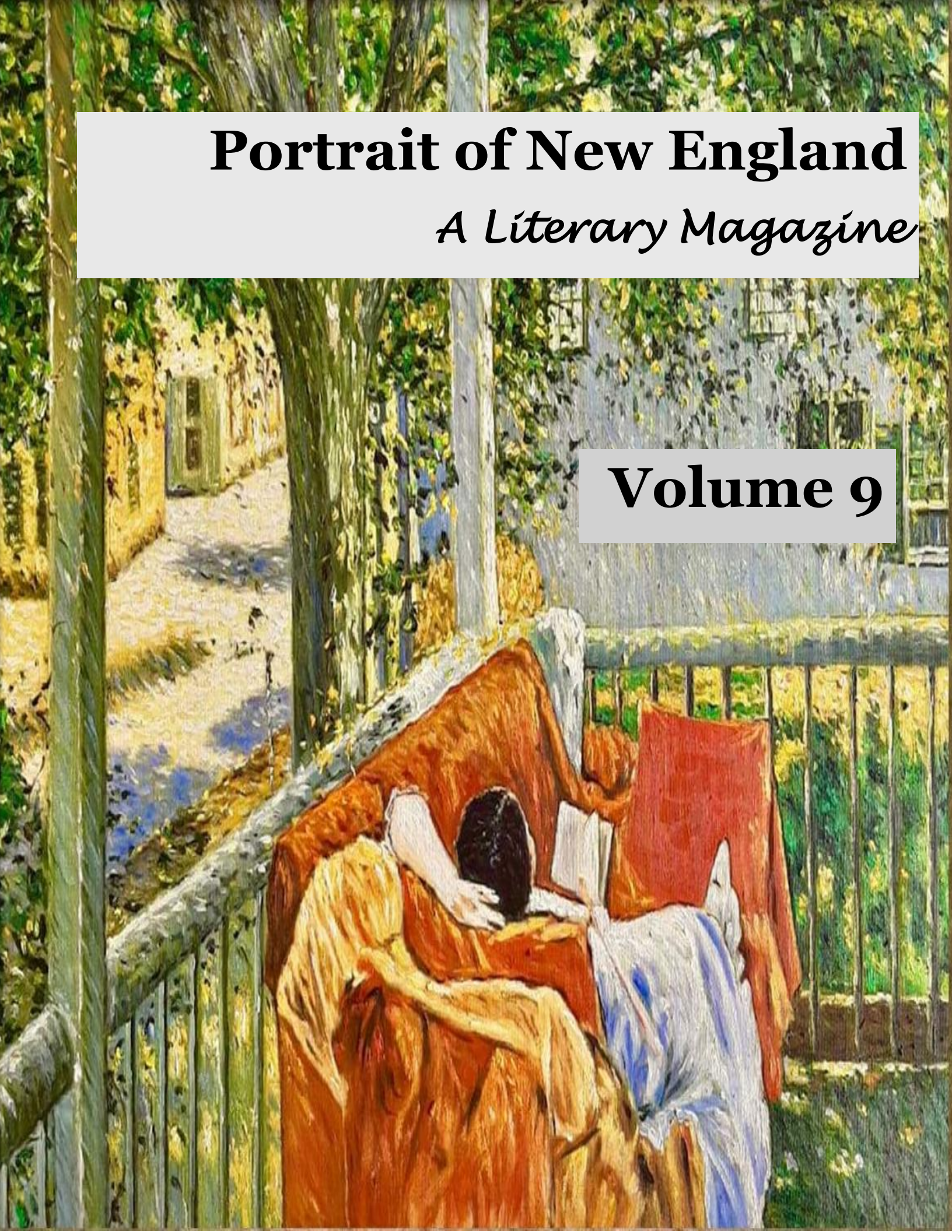


An impressionist painting of a person with dark hair, seen from behind, sitting on a wooden porch. They are wearing a long, flowing orange-brown robe and are reading an open book. The porch has a wooden railing. In the background, there is a narrow path leading between trees and a building with a yellow door. The scene is bathed in warm, golden light, suggesting late afternoon or early morning. The brushwork is visible and textured.

Portrait of New England

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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 FREDERICK CHILDE HASSAM,
“COUCH ON THE PORCH, COS COBB”

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Editor's Note:

Like many Americans this summer, I have been thinking about the ongoing reflection of the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. As taught in many classrooms through the years, citizens of New England played an outsized role in the earliest days of the nation's founding.

Crispus Attucks, a man of both Black and Native American descent, is recognized to have been the first person killed at the Boston Massacre, one of the sparks that turned protests into actual revolution. John, Abigail, and Samuel Adams played pivotal roles in shaping political ideas and public advocacy that fueled movement for not immediate independence, but once that independence was achieved, they helped define the principles that would shape the new American republic. Countless other New Englanders, both famous and forgotten, contributed through military service, civic leadership, commerce, and everyday acts of sacrifice that helped lay the foundation for the nation in the late 18th century.

If you have been keeping count at home (specifically on your electronic devices), *The Portrait of New England* is on the verge of a notable anniversary as well; with the release of our fall/winter issue, we will have published our tenth issue as a literary magazine.

While our tenth issue is just over the horizon, there is no reason to rush past this one. Our ninth issue represents another meaningful step in the magazine's journey, bringing together writers whose work reflects the many landscapes, histories, and communities that define New England. In this issue, you will find poems and prose that will take you to fireflies and Nantasket Beach in summer, under maple trees, through the snow, leaving New England, as well as home, plus many others that it was a pleasure to read, along with our team of Misty, our poetry editor, and Rachel, our intern.

Every issue has helped shape who we are, and this collection is no exception. We hope you'll spend time with these pages, discover new voices, revisit a few familiar ones, and join us in celebrating not only where *The Portrait of New England* is headed, but also the remarkable work that has brought us to this moment.

Peace,

Matthew Johnson

Day Breaks Over the West River
Michael J. Carter

Day breaks over the West River
a bright yolk seeping across a meringue of snow.
We are headed to work. On one side of the road
is the river's cursive scroll, on the other side
a rock face with frozen waterfalls hanging
like the tongues of Hindu goddesses.
He's just asked me, *who is it going to be?*
Which one of us are you going to pick?
My safety orange gloves glow
in my lap. The matching hat went up
in flames along with my scarf and
borrowed gloves in my mother's
coffin. She was cold, so I tucked them in
next to her. After a brief thaw the river refroze
leaving glacial plates jutting in crystal peaks.
What are you going to do? he asked.
She was cold. A time of ice in the long winter
that she will never leave. *Close your eyes,*
she said, three weeks dead, *just be here with me.*

Rehomed
Kersea Calhoun

Cactus on
a Northeastern
windowsill touches
an icy pane,
aches—
reaches spines
towards mounds
of white, craves
the grit
from home—
hardened form
shrinks, wrinkles—
by March
has lost its roots—
it doesn't hate
the snow—
just misses
the sun.

A Groundhog in Skunk's Misery

Matt Rosenberg

Two years ago, that groundhog broke my heart. I did not see him do it, but I know that it was him. No other creature in this neighborhood, human or otherwise, would be so meticulous, so precise. That groundhog always took pride in his work, and the scene that I discovered that morning as I stepped onto my back steps reeked of his special brand of havoc.

To be honest, I'd thought we had seen the last of him. There had been roadwork the year before. The city tore up the entire street. The workers were keeping their machinery in the dead end beside my family's house. The groundhog was laying low, and I believed that all the activity had frightened him away for good. It was wishful thinking, I guess.

He had always been a pest. I say "he," but I don't really know if the groundhog was male or female. Perhaps the division of labor is the same among groundhogs as it is among lions, with the females securing all the food and rearing the young while the males sit around, waiting to mate. Nor do I know if he was one groundhog, or an entire family or community. I admit to knowing very little about the inner workings of groundhog society.

I choose to believe that the perpetrator in this case was one solitary, cold-blooded malcontent. He was a loner with a chip on his shoulder. Perhaps he was even a troublemaker among groundhogs, the black sheep of his family, a shirker of the high moral code of civilized rodentia.

He had, as I've said, always been a pest. I would sometimes catch him with a zucchini or summer squash between his paws. I would try to frighten him by slamming the storm door as I stomped out of my house; he was not frightened. I would yell "get out of here"; he would smile at me, actually smile as he continued to gnaw. I would run at him, affecting my most intimidating sneer; he would stay put until I was about five feet away from him. Finally, he would scoot across the yard and into the woods behind the house before I got too close.

I was thankful when he ran. My father had always told me never to get into a fight that I was not absolutely certain I could win. I do not know if I could win a fight against a motivated groundhog.

My wife is more sympathetic toward animals than I am. She forbade me from turning the hose on him. I argued that water wouldn't actually hurt him. Anyway, summers are hot in Manchester, NH. Situated as it is, on the floor of the Merrimack Valley, humidity has a tendency to linger over our city, making for uncomfortable middays in June and July. He would be grateful for the cool-down once the initial shock wore off.

My wife was unmoved by my protests.

One day, my elderly neighbor called me on the phone and said, "I'll come over this weekend and shoot him. I'll use the gun that Leo gave me."

Leo and his wife were the previous owners of my home. Leo had built the house in 1949. He'd been a master electrician with a will of pure iron. I had never met him; he died before my wife and I moved in. To hear my neighbors talk, though, one might imagine that he had assembled the entire structure, from foundation to shingles, single-handedly, perhaps without needing any tools.

I had not known that Leo had given my neighbor a gun, but from what I had learned through neighborhood lore, it seemed consistent with his character.

Leo had been born in 1929 and raised in a house just half a block from the one that he built, the one that my family now occupies. Once, as an old man, he marched over to his childhood home and banged on the door. He was angry with the current occupants. They had removed a tree from the backyard. Leo had no legal rights to the yard or its flora, but his parents had planted the tree on the day he was born. By divine right, it was his. This couple had committed a regrettable breach of etiquette by chopping it down.

The tree was dead and rotting by the time they had moved in. It was attracting harmful insects. It would have been irresponsible of them not to remove it. Still, Leo was incensed by the fact that they would do such a thing without consulting him.

That was the one and only time he spoke to the couple. From that moment forward, he would only flash dirty looks whenever he saw them. Leo was a steadfast sort of man.

One summer, in the early days of July, Leo contrived to save the lives of a couple of pine trees that straddled the property line of his adult home. They were covered with strangling Ivy, an invasive vine, potentially fatal to all plant life growing in its immediate vicinity. They would certainly be squeezed to death if Leo did not take swift action.

Luckily, he knew just what to do. He went out to the yard with a can of gasoline and doused the trunks of both trees. Then he went back inside to pack for his vacation; he would be bringing his family to Lake Winnepesaukee for the week. In his absence, the gasoline would surely kill the Ivy and spare the trees. He would return home to a hero's welcome.

While Leo and his family were away at the lake, the O'Brians, who live two houses up the road, threw their annual Independence Day party. It was an event that the entire neighborhood looked forward to each year. There

would be food, music, and fireworks. All were welcome, though some neighbors claimed that the overlap between the party and Leo's yearly absence was more than coincidence.

As the sun began to set on that beautiful, Fourth of July evening, Mr. O'Brian set off the first of his pyrotechnics. He had been stockpiling fireworks in his garage all year long. This was just the beginning of a night of summertime entertainment.

The guests were thrilled as the skyrocket climbed higher and higher into the sky. At its apex, it let forth with a colorful plume of streaming, twinkling light. Then the light faded, and all was still and quiet, but not for long.

Mr. O'Brian lit another firework, then another. He had spared no expense in preparation for this display, and he was going to give the neighbors something to remember. The skyrockets ascended more rapidly, climbing higher and higher into the stratosphere. His audience was rapt with excitement.

Around eight o'clock, one of the fireworks got away from Mr. O'Brian. Its trajectory followed a path that was a little more outward than upward. It flew directly into the trunk of one of Leo's gasoline-soaked trees. The blaze was immediate and dramatic.

When the fire crew finally packed up and headed back to the station that evening, the O'Brian's guests were amazed to discover that the trees were still standing, tall and strong as ever. By contrast, the strangling Ivy was decimated. It had been charred to the roots and would never return. Leo was, indeed, a hero.

It seems natural that a man with the confidence to harangue strangers for removing a dead tree on their own property, and the faith to cover his own trees with gasoline so close to the Fourth of July would be the kind of man who would offer a gun as a gift to a valued friend. Likewise, I am sure that it would be a great honor to receive a gun from such a man. I imagine that my neighbor believed that he would be paying homage to Leo's memory by shooting my groundhog with that gun.

He was disappointed by my response to his offer, though. My wife and children would never forgive me if I allowed such a thing to happen just outside our back door. I had to decline.

When I stepped onto my back steps that morning and saw what had become of my edamame patch, ten feet by ten feet of meticulously placed seeds that I'd nurtured to become strong and healthy stocks, I regretted the refusal of my neighbor's offer. It looked like someone had given my garden a crew cut. The groundhog had snipped each plant down to a three-inch-long, green straw that would never yield food. On that day, I hung up my

trowel and gardening fork for good. I briefly considered taking up hunting as a replacement hobby.

It was never supposed to be my garden in the first place. My wife and I had purchased the house in December of 2010, and within weeks, she had a wide variety of seeds growing in little, biodegradable starter pots. Our street runs from east to west, and each morning and evening, she would move the pots from a windowsill on one side of the house to a windowsill on the other side, so that they received optimal light throughout the day, as the sun rose and set.

My wife is significantly better at visualizing things that do not yet exist than I am. She had planned out exactly where the garden would go in our yard. She knew how the plants would be situated in relation to one another. She could close her eyes and see it all in her mind.

But it was hard for me to think about starter pots or vegetables that winter. My head was still adjusting to the fact that we had just purchased a house. The idea of a mortgage and monthly payments consumed all my mental energy, and I was having difficulty focusing on the actual particulars of home ownership, like landscaping and gardening.

This is not to say that I was the one managing our household finances. My wife has always been in charge of our bills and budgeting—I am a spoiled man. I was, however, busy doing all the worrying for both of us. The anxiety caused by purchasing a home made it difficult to think rationally about the future, and planting season seemed like a very distant proposition.

This is all besides the fact that the snow did not let up that winter. I was focused on keeping the driveway clear for our cars and maintaining a path so that the mail carrier would have access to the slot in our front storm door. My wife and I had never actually seen our yard beneath the snow; we would not see it until mid-March when it all melted. Imagining a garden seemed to me like an impossible feat of mental gymnastics.

But Spring came quickly to Manchester. The ground thawed, and my wife had a collection of pots, bulging with little pumpkin plants and sprouted eggplant seeds. The garden would be a reality whether or not I was ready for it.

Tyler, my sister-in-law's boyfriend, was inexplicably excited. I believe that Tyler has always been concerned about my capacity for independent living. He is about ten years younger than me, but he seemed to grow up knowing how to do things. After my wife and I purchased the house, he taught me how to insulate the attic, how to reinforce the wooden posts in the basement, even how to siphon gasoline from our old pickup truck

before trading it in for a newer vehicle; he could not abide the idea of my wife and me giving away gasoline that we had already paid for. With each of these lessons, he quietly shook his head, wondering how I could have possibly survived so long with such gaping deficits in my practical knowledge.

Tyler's eyes lit up when he learned about my wife's plans for a garden. His family owned a rototiller. He was going to teach me how to use it.

I said, "Leo left shovels and hoes in the garage. Can't we just use those to loosen the soil?"

Tyler looked at the ground in my backyard and said, "It's never been a garden before, Matt. You'll be shoveling and hoeing for weeks. We can rototill it in an hour".

One Saturday afternoon, Tyler pulled into my driveway with his machine in the flatbed of his truck. He wheeled it onto the predetermined section of my backyard. Then he talked me through starting the thing up and getting it moving.

We took turns pushing Tyler's rototiller back and forth across my lawn, digging up the grass that Leo and his wife had planted years prior. The neighbors have told me that Leo spent a great deal of time and effort working on that grass. It was never thick or luxurious, like the grass in many of my neighbors' lawns, but that was not for lack of effort on Leo's part. There were stories of him spending entire Saturdays, from dawn until dusk, laying sod and spreading fertilizer.

Every few inches, we had to stop because the tiller's path was obstructed by a rock. Tyler couldn't believe how many hunks of granite lay just beneath the surface of my lawn, hindering our progress. I was not surprised. I supposed that Leo's spirit, like some kind of vengeful Easter Bunny, had placed those rocks there for us to find, just to let us know what he thought of Tyler's rototiller.

When we finally succeeded in loosening a neat rectangle of soil, it was time to plant. We dug wide, rounded holes for the seedlings that had started growing on the windowsills of my home. We poked our fingers in the dirt to make holes for green bean and cucumber seeds. Then, we watered.

As I watched the soil change from a dusty, light brown to a deep, rich, dark hue under the sprinkle of the garden hose, and as an earthy smell rose up from the ground, I began to understand that this was my garden. I would be preparing the starter pots from now on. I would be mapping out the placement of each vegetable plant in the years to come.

In hindsight, I understand how gracious my wife was regarding my theft of her garden. It had been her dream, not mine, to grow vegetables. It was, at least in part, the size of our lot, a half-acre of open space with unlimited potential for planting, that made her want to buy this house. At the moment, however, I was too consumed by the magic of soil transforming under a garden hose to recognize my impropriety. It was not the first time, nor would it be the last, that my wife would have to deal with my unpredictable enthusiasm.

Over the coming days, weeks, and indeed years, I grew obsessed with my garden. I would come home from work each day and start weeding, getting mudstains on my clean, khaki pants before even coming inside the house. My heart sang when I saw green bean seedlings, like tiny loops of telephone cord, emerging from the dirt. I mourned when I discovered evidence of stink bug attacks on my cucumbers. The vines from my pumpkin plants had coiled themselves around my soul, and they were pulling it deeper into the soil each day.

Indeed, it was the pumpkin plants that consumed the majority of my attention. I was thrilled one morning to look out my kitchen window and discover a small sea of golden-orange blossoms waving in the springtime breeze. They appeared impossibly large as I ran outside and knelt down to inspect them. Each seemed to radiate its own special kind of light. Each promised an Autumn bounty of large, round pumpkins.

I was disappointed when I arrived home that evening to find the blossoms dead, the ground littered with wilted petals.

The same thing happened the next day, and then the day after that, radiant life in the morning, degradation in the afternoon. I soon learned that I had been seeing male pumpkin blossoms in my garden each morning. They open, then wither each day, attracting bees and other pollinators in preparation for the arrival of the female blossoms, a week or two later. The females look like the males, but are distinguished by a round, green bulge between the blossom and the stem, an unfertilized pumpkin.

This information came as a relief to me. My pumpkin vines had not died or become diseased. They were developing in the typical manner. I would soon have female blossoms that might yield fruit.

I was also beginning to worry. My wife and I had owned our house for almost half a year, and I had not yet seen one bumblebee on our property. I was beginning to notice female pumpkin buds popping up in my garden. How would they become fertilized?

I formulated a plan. I would start getting up very early in the morning to inspect my garden. When my female blossoms opened, I would be prepared with a Q-tip in hand. I would gather the pollen from the males with the swab and transfer it to the females.

“Be the bee,” a friend had advised me. Indeed, I would be the bee.

On the morning the first female pumpkin blossoms opened, I was prepared to perform artificial pumpkin insemination. I stepped out of my back door and walked slowly to my garden, just a little nervous. I knelt down in front of a male blossom and circled the stamen with my Q-tip until it was completely orange. Then I stood back up, took a few steps, and knelt again so that I was facing a female blossom.

When I peered inside, I saw two bees, nestled against the stigma. It was a relief; my family would have naturally fertilized pumpkins. Perhaps Leo had finally decided to nod his approval of my garden from beyond the grave.

I stood up once again and took a couple of breaths of fresh, morning air. Then I went back inside and back to sleep. It was Saturday.

My worries were over, but I continued to persevere over pumpkin reproduction; I found it fascinating. Over the next couple of years, I developed a habit of sitting beside my garden for ten, fifteen, twenty minutes at a stretch, just watching the bees gather and deposit pollen. I would inspect the daily growth of the fertilized pumpkins as they dwarfed and eventually shed their wilted blossoms. Also, I would note the development of the vines as they snaked along my lawn and fed my pumpkins.

Then I would rush inside and give detailed accounts of what I had seen to my wife and my young son, who had been born ten months after we'd moved into Leo's house. Though they had never planned to, my family members became experts in the life cycle of the pumpkin. My boy got particularly excited about the information I shared and was soon infected by my enthusiasm. As he grew older, our roles reversed; he slowly became the one providing me with news about what the bees were up to.

In addition to the botany lessons that he was receiving from my garden, my son also developed an appreciation for the food that it made available. I began to plant my rows of green beans farther apart from each other so that he could walk in between them. He'd start at one end and take slow, deliberate steps, inspecting each stalk as he walked. By the time he emerged on the other side of the garden, his mouth and both hands would be full of bean pods.

Sometimes, I would stick my head between the plants and try to imagine what the experience was like for him. The air was much cooler in the shade of the leaves. The ground was darker beneath their shadows. He must have felt like he had entered into a different world when he walked between them.

Each year, I would make my garden a little bigger. I would go to the lumber yard in early spring and pick up a couple of 10x2 boards. Then I would bring them home and cut them down to the sizes that I would need in order to accommodate the proportions of the beds that I wanted to build. Luckily, I had a rich supply of hardware to fasten my boards together. Leo had left behind shelves upon shelves of baby food jars in the basement, each filled with a different variety of nail, screw, nut, or bolt. I designated a different vegetable for each garden bed, and I placed a little bench in the middle of all of them, so that I could sit and watch the bees.

My garden was growing and, as it grew, it attracted the attention of the groundhog.

My neighborhood was nicknamed “Skunks Misery” many years ago by the English-speaking residents of this largely French-Canadian section of Manchester. Judging by the smell that often greets residents in the evenings during the warmer months, the name is appropriate. We certainly have skunks.

But despite the moniker, there is a wide variety of wildlife to be found in the land surrounding my home. I would often spot deer in the woods when I used to jog in the morning. More than once, my family has seen foxes running across our yard. We have been spooked by the ghostly appearance of possums near our tree line, and we have shaken our heads at the impossible numbers of rabbits munching on the white clover that grows wild on our property. And yes, we became intimately aware of the groundhog.

My neighbors tell me that the habitats of all these creatures had once been centralized near the wetland, on the other side of the rail trail, behind my house. When the area was cleared to make way for a shopping plaza, the animals relocated. Soon, it became more common to see them wandering the diminished woods surrounding the homes in our neighborhood.

I can picture the frustration on Leo's face as he stood in his yard, watching the machines flatten land for a parking lot. I can feel the blood boiling in his veins as the subsequent animal migration threatened to encroach upon his land. Sometimes, as I poured screws from a baby food jar into my hand in order to build a new garden bed, I would gaze through

the trees at the back of the shopping plaza, and I would feel a certain kinship with Leo.

I am not a wildlife biologist. I do not know if the groundhog's appetite for my garden was influenced by the loss of the wetland. I only know that I was losing vegetables, and that it was time to fight back.

Someone told me that the movement of pinwheels spinning in the breeze would make the groundhog think that there were humans nearby and they would keep him away. I went to the dollar store and cleaned out their entire stock of red, white, and blue pinwheels. For an entire summer, my backyard looked like a perpetual Fourth of July parade. I won the affections of my more patriotic neighbors. I did not scare the groundhog away.

I went to the garden center and came home with a canister of special powder. It was pet-safe, child-safe, and eco-friendly. It had an odor that was guaranteed to repel all kinds of garden pests, including groundhogs. My groundhog was not repelled. He continued to raid my vegetables.

I realized that nothing short of violence was going to keep him away. I could not bring myself to do violence to a groundhog. Perhaps it was time for a new strategy.

I started to take note of the kinds of vegetables that the groundhog was eating. He seemed to appreciate produce with soft skins and smooth stems, foods that were easy on his paws and teeth. I had noticed, for example, that he frequently swiped my zucchini and cucumbers.

Then I conducted an informal survey of the vegetables that the groundhog left alone. My pumpkins, with their hard shells and sharp, stiff hairs on their vines were, largely unmolested. Also, he was not interested in digging for root vegetables like carrots and turnips.

This was when I started thinking seriously about potatoes. Potatoes grow underground. They seemed to be a safe bet.

This was also when my second son became interested in helping me in the garden.

My younger boy loved digging holes in the dirt. He made a regular pastime of it, both at home and in the school playground. One afternoon, in fact, I returned home from work to find only his head visible above the surface of the lawn. The ground had been loosened when my wife and I removed the frame of an old clothesline. He had dug into the broken ground and created a space just his size, and about the shape of a lawn chair, sunken into the earth. There he lay, with his sunglasses on, enjoying the warm, springtime weather.

I will not swear to the accuracy of my memory upon this point, but I like to think that it was on that afternoon that I told him about my potato plan. I described the trenches that we would need to dig in order to make the venture successful. He said that he was equal to the task, and together, we dug, excavating deep creases across a 10×10 garden bed. By the time we were finished, the square plot of soil looked like wide-wale corduroy and was ready for planting.

We dropped seed potatoes into our trenches, covering them with handfuls of loose soil. Then we watered. Again, I enjoyed the transformation of dusty dirt to rich, fragrant soil as my son manned the hose.

When plants sprouted from the eyes of the seeds, we added more dirt so that only the tiny leaves were visible. We added even more as the plants grew taller. Weeks passed, and the trenches filled with soil. By midsummer, our neat corduroy was replaced by tidy rows of potato plants.

On Saturday mornings, my son and I would go out to the garden with a large, stainless-steel colander. He had a great time filling it, laying bare our trenches once again, unearthing the potatoes that we had grown. It was like a treasure hunt. By the time we were done, we were both covered from head to toe with dirt.

We had lots of mashed, baked, roasted, and French-fried potatoes that year. My boy never ate them. He did not like the taste or texture. He still does not.

It seemed like my groundhog problems were over when the road construction vehicles arrived a couple of years later. I was still in the habit of planting some cucumber plants, and I was gratified that year to find them unburgled. The giant trucks and rumbling jackhammers had kept them safe. My neighbors were not thrilled by the noise and inconvenience of the work being done, but I was having a wonderful summer.

That year, I experimented with edamame. My family does not eat meat, and the protein afforded by soybeans made them a logical choice. Also, both of my boys loved them.

They would help me pick them, filling the same colander that my younger son and I used for potatoes. Then I would blanch them on the stovetop, boiling them in salty water for a couple of minutes and cooling them with ice. The prepared edamame never lasted long in my house.

I was excited. The groundhog was gone, and I had found a vegetable that both of my children would eat. The time had come to plan something big.

The following year, I went to the lumber yard and purchased four ten-foot-long, 10×2 planks. This time, I did not cut them down. I was going to grow a lot of edamame.

I used eight long screws from Leo's baby food jars to fasten my boards together. Then I waited for the truck, with its load of soil, to fill my bed. It was like waiting for Santa Claus.

Each afternoon, I would sit on my bench, which stood on a narrow strip of level ground between my edamame and my pumpkins. I would watch the bees as they dipped in and out of my blossoms. I enjoyed the breezes that wandered through the woods and backyards of Skunk's Misery. I felt very, very powerful.

But there was no roadwork that year. The neighborhood was quiet and peaceful. The groundhog had plans and a kind power of his own.

I am not sure if I believe in reincarnation. I had actually never given the matter much thought until that morning when my heart broke. I do know that, if Leo happened to come back as a groundhog, he was certainly the groundhog who ate my edamame.

He probably surmised that it was a fair exchange. His home had given my wife and me a safe, quiet place to raise our family. His land had given us food. His basement had given us the nuts, bolts, screws, and nails that we needed in order to keep the things that we had in working condition. Soybeans were a small price to pay.

Leo's grass is slowly reclaiming the places where my garden beds had stood. My boys are getting older and taller; one is getting ready for high school and the other for fourth grade. My wife and I continue to be thankful for Leo's house, and to shake our heads when we think about the groundhog.

Conversations About Home

Val I. Vanderburgh

you ever been on one o them covered bridges in new england? they're so narrow that if another car's comin the other way you both gotta play a game o chicken to see which one o you's gonna get to go first.

shit, this could be a poem.

those cars? life and death, respectively, though it don't matter which side o the bridge you puts which on. the bridge? us. we're the finitude stretched atween infinity. the realization o the abstract. the thing you take a picture of, editin out the passin vehicles.

On My Sister Leaving New England

Jennifer L. Bauman

Your saltbox house,
your home.
Four walls or forty—
what does a house hold?

Beyond the couches
the chairs
the unmade beds
and unread books.

Beyond the dirty dishes
and moth-dined duvets
there are the gatherings,
the dinners,
the wine-stained napkins and leftovers,
the blowing of birthday candles.

There's the making of wishes
of babies
of promises
of plans.

The crossing of thresholds
with sand-stained feet,
and boots dripping wet
with melted snow.

What does a house hold?

There are the holidays
the sick days
the every days.

There's the loneliness,
the lively chatter,
the whispers in the hall,
the creaking of floorboards in

the inky black of the night.

What does a house hold?

The washed-up buoys strung
around the fireplace—giant marshmallows
avoiding the flame.
A smattering of gathered shells,
snapshots in frames.

What does a house hold?

The on-trend coastal blues
and the saddle-browns of aged beams.
The stark whites of cabinets
and vivid pinks of Audubon prints.
The unforgiving coldness of the stone
floor in winter,
the very long winters that sent
you south in search of more
temperate days.

What does a house hold without
you?

Tectonic
Bob McAfee

At a business conference
near Disneyland,
after meeting
with movers and shakers,
I was showering
in my room
on the twelfth floor
of the Hilton
when I noticed
my shower curtain,
once perpendicular,
was now estranged
from my tub,
water spraying
onto the floor.
As that vinyl sail
returned to the tub,
I could feel
the building's movement
start to subside.
Badly shaken,
I decided to take an early plane
back to Boston
where the shower curtains
rarely wander
and the tired earth
is not so anxious
to be on the move.

Nantasket Beach

Will Evans

Tony Lopez stood on the steps leading down to Nantasket Beach. The two old locals behind him were peeling out of their shorties, longboards on the walk by their feet, when one of them snickered and said, “Won’t catch many waves with *that* board. Hey, kook. Go back to Boston.”

He waved to them over his shoulder, grateful not to be recognized and to be left alone by the journalists and crowds of fans he was used to. He hitched his shortboard under his arm, walked to the edge of the water, and paddled out into the knee-high waves feathering over the sandbar on the far side of a gully.

It was August, almost dusk, and except for a girl on a soft top, the small, green waves were empty. He waved, and she waved back. She was obviously a beginner. With every wave she caught, she rode straight in on the whitewater, her feet planted wide, arms like the wings of a plane. At the end of each of her rides, she leaped off the side of her board. Then she grabbed the leash with her hand and towed the board backward toward the waves again, out into the deeper water.

He smiled to himself as he watched her. Dropping into a twenty-foot grinding barrel was as natural to him as breathing.

He positioned himself for a wave. He was angling into a right, when he saw the black fin rip the darker water in the gully after a seal. The seal yelped like a dog, and then it was gone, silence, the shark’s mass dragging it down through the blood on top of the water.

Tony Lopez froze, and then he looked at the girl.

The water was red in front of her between her and the beach. She sat near the tail of her board, the nose rising over her head, deck held like a shield, as if she thought the surfboard would protect her from the shark.

Tony paddled toward her.

The water boiled in front of the girl, the shark twisting and thrashing its great gray head with the seal, the gully blooming with blood beneath the surface of the water. She glanced over at him coming and then looked back at the shark. The girl’s eyes were moons.

“I’m going to die!” she cried. “Please! Don’t let me die!”

“Listen to me!” he called.

“Please,” she cried, “please! Please! I don’t want to die!”

“No, no! Listen to me! You’re going to be all right! What’s your name?”

“Nancy.”

“Nancy? Okay! You need to look at me. Try not to look at the shark. That’s it. Good. Now I want you to move very slowly back up on the deck of your board. Very, very slowly. Do you think you can do that for me?”

The girl nodded once, eyes vacant, face shaking.

“Okay, then, very slowly. Very, very slowly. Good. That’s it, good. Now sit there and be very still. Very, very still. Do not move. You’re going to be just fine. You’re going to be all right.”

“Don’t leave me here!” she cried.

“I won’t! I’m going to stay right here. Right here beside you, okay?”

“O— Okay,” she said, her voice thin and shrill.

Then the shark thrashed again, whipping its pointed head like a dog ragging a toy.

She gasped, closed her eyes, and gripped the rails of her board. Her fingers were white as bone, and her shoulders and arms were trembling.

“Nancy,” he said. “Nancy!”

The girl nodded blankly, eyes back on the shark.

“Try to listen to me. Try not to look at the shark. Nancy! Focus on me! Do not look at the shark! Do you live around here at the beach?”

“What— ” she said, and glanced at him, tears tracking over her cheeks.

“Do you live around here at the beach!”

“The beach?”

“Do you live around here!”

“Oh, here? No,” she said.

“Okay, then. Where do you live!”

“Oh, oh— Boston. I only come here to surf.”

“Good. That’s it, good. Keep trying to focus on me. Let’s just talk for a while. Let’s talk like it’s just the two of us here. Try to forget about the shark. What do you do in Boston? Nancy! Focus on me! What do you do in Boston?”

“I’m a— I’m a graduate student.”

“Where?”

“BU.”

“BU?”

“Boston University.”

“And what are you studying there?”

“Art— Art History,” she said, and her eyes flicked to the shark wrenching, jerking the seal, flashing its wedged teeth.

“Nancy! No! Look at me! Do not look at the shark! You need to focus on me! How long have you been surfing? Nancy! How long?”

Mouth open, chin quivering, she turned slightly toward him. Then a little more. "Not very long," she said. "I'm— I'm just a beginner."

"That's it. Just keep talking. Just keep talking to me. Keep talking softly, Nancy, like it's just the two of us here. Tell me some more," he said. "When did you learn how to surf?"

"Just this summer," she said. "My boyfriend. He got me lessons."

"Where?"

"Here," she said. "Here at Nantasket Beach."

"That's it. Try to relax."

"Okay. I will. I'll try."

"So your boyfriend got you lessons. What—for like your birthday?"

"No. My anniversary."

"Oh, like since you'd been dating?"

She shook her head, hard.

"What, then? Just keep talking."

"A year since I'd finished chemo."

"Chemo! Oh, I'm sorry. I'm really sorry," he said.

She nodded and looked at her hands. "Radiation and chemo. The chemo was the worst."

"I bet. I bet it was."

"Yeah, but here I am." She wiped her cheeks with her fingertips. "Sort of ironic, y'know? Like I went through all that chemo just to die like this." Then she tried to laugh at herself. "Sorry. I can't help it. I've thought about dying a lot. It's weird. You never think about it. And then suddenly, there you are."

Tony didn't reply, and she turned and looked toward him, her eyes wet and glassy. After a moment, she said, "I've never seen you out here. You're not from around here, are you."

"Me? No." He paused. "I've never been here before."

Then he didn't say anything else. He was thinking about irony. Irony and death. Though he'd known other surfers who'd died, surfers who'd drowned in the surf, he had always been lucky—blessed or somehow untouchable, or so he'd always thought—had never had even a brush, never stopped to think about death. Injuries, yeah, sure. But he'd never thought about death as he thought about it now, irony and death. He shuddered and tried to swallow, but his throat was dry as sand. After all the heavy breaks he'd surfed—Pipeline, Jaws, Mavericks—Tony Lopez, *the* Tony Lopez, the big-wave surfer, the waterman, was killed by a great white shark while surfing knee-high waves at an unknown beach near Boston. And who would believe it could happen?

He felt his pulse whacking, thumping at the base of his neck.

Then the water boiled with blood again, and they both jumped, and her breath caught, and she covered her face with her hands. “Oh, God, God!” she cried. “Oh, God! We’re going to die!”

“Your boyfriend— What does your boyfriend do? Nancy! Look at me!”

“Alex— Alex,” she said.

“Okay,” he said, “Alex? Alex. What does he do?”

“He— He’s a med student. And a surfer too. He taught me a lot about surfing.”

“Like what? Just keep talking. Nancy! Try to keep talking!”

“I don’t know . . . ,” she said. “Just about everything. We’re always watching these videos. About surfers and places to surf.”

“Videos— Tell me about them. Like where? What places?”

“You know. Like California. Hawaii, Indonesia. Like Malibu and Jaws. Places like that,” she said.

“Good. That’s it, good. Just keep talking to me. California. Ever been out there?”

“LA once. A conference.”

“What about Hawaii?”

Nancy shook her head.

“Videos,” he said, “videos. Which one do you like the best?”

“Titles. I always forget them. I kind of like them all.”

“Then who’s your favorite surfer? Come on. Keep talking to me. Nancy! Just keep talking!”

“I don’t know . . . ,” she said. “Laird Hamilton, I guess. Kai Lenny. Or Tony Lopez. They’re famous. Big-wave surfers. You’ve probably heard of them.”

“Yeah, I have. I’ve heard of them. I hear they’re good,” he said.

“They’re really good,” she said. “Really, *really* good.” And then she let out a laugh. “Like you’d almost catch them out here, y’know? Here at Nantasket Beach.”

Well, no, he started to say. Nantasket Beach? No. No, I guess you wouldn’t. But the shark was turning now—slow, it seemed, as a battleship yet powerfully and sinuously with a single thrust of its tail—trailing blood and gore from the seal, one black eye dull and depthless beneath the surface of the water.

The girl saw it and screamed and scrambled up onto her knees, kicking and slipping and splashing as she climbed on the deck of her board. “Oh, please! God!” she cried. “It saw us! It’s coming toward us!”

“Nancy! Sssshhhhhh! Don’t move again on your board! Just try to stay very still! And try not to look at the shark!”

She nodded, down on her knees, shrinking like a cat. Her nose was trickling blood.

“Nancy! Look at me! Okay. There. Good. Okay, that’s good,” he said. And then he tried to swallow again and said, his voice croaking, just able to get out a whisper, “Nancy? Listen to me. I think it’s going to leave. I think it’s going to go. But it’s going to swim right past us to get back out to sea. So we have to be very still, okay? Very, very still.”

“O— Okay,” she said. And then she whirled to look at him. “But what— What if it doesn’t! What if it doesn’t leave!”

Tony Lopez couldn’t answer. His eyes were pinned on the shark. It steadily glided toward them, black back and fin slicing the top of the water, the seal’s blood streaming around it.

Then he said, “I think it will. I do. I think it will. I think it’s going to leave now. I think it’s going to go. Just stay very still on your board. Very, very still. And try not to look at the shark. I think it’s going to leave and swim away with the seal.”

“I,” she said, and her breath caught. “I— I hope you’re right.”

“It is. It’s going to go. Believe me,” he added then. “Believe me,” he said again.

Then they both stayed silent and still—very, very still—and he tried not to look at the shark, and he prayed for the shark to go, *please, God, please*, to swim past them and back out to sea, *please, I will do anything, please, God, please*, and he sat for what seemed like a long time, waited, and held his breath.

When it did, when it swam away with the seal, its great tail sweeping the water, he let out a deep gasp and collapsed into himself. Then he turned and beamed at the girl. He wanted to whoop at the sky. He wanted to hug her and kiss her.

“You saved my life,” she said. “You did. You saved my life.”

“No. You did good. Come on. Let’s go in. Let’s get the hell out of here.”

Then they paddled to the beach together, through the slick of blood from the seal.

As soon as she stepped on the sand, her boyfriend ran up to meet her. She dropped her board at her feet and threw herself into his arms. “Alex— Alex!” she cried. “Alex!” she cried, “Alex!”

Tony paused to check on her, grateful not to be recognized. And then he walked back to the steps on the empty beach at dusk, the pulse in his

neck still banging, knees suddenly buckling, his hands and arms, chest and legs—all filmed with blood. Laird Hamilton, she'd said. Kai Lenny. Or Tony Lopez. But who'd ever heard of Nantasket Beach?

Who would believe it could happen.

Wiffle Ball Wonder

John E. Heard

Richie Moran developed a crush on Jennifer Beekman during the summer of 8th grade.

It was a strange feeling for Richie because he had never shown any interest in girls before. It was even stranger because Richie had known Jennifer for years and hadn't given her the time of day. They were neighbors and had played childhood games together.

One summer day a few years earlier, they went fishing along the Charles River, near where they lived west of Boston. Jennifer had caught a small sunfish, and Richie had to unsnag the hook from the mouth of the flipping, angry fish before he kicked it back into the river. Jennifer thanked him, and they shared a peanut butter sandwich she had brought along on their outing. That was about the extent of their personal contact.

The Beekmans always invited the neighbors to their annual Christmas party, including Richie and his parents. The Morans usually didn't attend fancy gatherings, but the Beekmans had a large house overlooking the bend in the river, and the event was catered. Mr. Moran said it would be rude not to go and that the food and drinks were free. He made Richie wear a tie and coat and told him to behave himself.

While the adults sipped cocktails and enjoyed the fondue, Jennifer and her older sister, who had a promising future in figure skating, entertained the neighborhood kids with games. Both girls had attended private school, and that made Richie even more uncomfortable, as Jennifer was very good at making conversation and serving cups of holiday punch without spilling a drop. At the party, she wore a short skirt with a knitted sweater, and her brown hair was pulled back in a red-and-green ribbon. She looked like something pretty you'd see in a Christmas card, thought Richie.

The other problem Richie faced was that Jennifer was a year older. When she finished 8th grade at the private school, her parents moved her to the local high school. So, while Richie was still in middle school, Jennifer boarded the high school bus each morning at the stop near their house, where about half a dozen kids waited.

Jennifer wasn't a snob. She always said 'good morning' to the other kids, and once in a while she'd ask Richie a question. "How are you doing in science this year?" or "When does baseball start?" Richie knew that Jennifer was just being polite, but still, she took an interest in him, which must have meant something.

Richie Moran was the kind of 8th grader that teachers dreaded. He was full of nervous energy and lacked any academic motivation. Richie could tell you the daily baseball standings and the batting averages of almost every popular player, but he couldn't finish a simple assignment. He was sent to the principal's office regularly for minor infractions. He was usually guilty of drawing attention to himself with some silly prank.

Yet Richie was clever in other ways. Although he was struggling in math, he always helped Mr. Johnson, his teacher, put the chairs on top of the desks at the end of the day. He also clapped the erasures clean and changed the daily announcements on the bulletin board. So, his potential F in math became a D, and occasionally Mr. Johnson gave him a C-. Richie knew how to play the game.

Richie excelled at baseball. He was a starter on his middle school team, and he participated in the junior softball league on weekends. His dream was to someday play for the Boston Red Sox.

Richie realized that if he was going to make an impression on Jennifer and perhaps get a chance to kiss her, it would have to be during the summer when she was home, and the sun didn't set until late in the evening. Richie longed for the warm, lazy days when there were no classes to attend or annoying teachers to please. He just needed a small plan to make this dream happen.

Jennifer's summer job was helping another neighbor, Chuck Sullivan, with his large vegetable garden. The Sullivans owned several acres of land that ran down to the river's edge, and Chuck needed someone young who was willing to do the monotonous work of weeding and hoeing along the rows.

Chuck paid Jennifer a decent hourly wage, so she was happy to work from mid-morning until dinner time. She and her mother opened a bank

account, and Jennifer's parents said they would double her savings at the end of the summer.

If they had a successful crop, Chuck Sullivan would open his small stand next to the general store across from where both families lived. Chuck told Jennifer that they could split any profits from sales during August and September. Chuck was a college professor, and he knew a thing or two about motivation. "This is called profit-sharing," he told Jennifer one morning in July as they walked up and down the rows of fresh corn, looking to remove beetles and other insects. "If we're lucky, we can take in a few thousand dollars, especially over Labor Day weekend when everyone comes back to town."

Jennifer was happy working in the garden. It gave her time to think and to be alone, which she enjoyed. She was keeping a summer diary for her English teacher, and the solitude provided ample time to reflect on her life as a fourteen-year-old.

But there was also a tactile element to her summer in the field: Jennifer could close her eyes and tell the different plants by their smell: tomatoes, carrots, squash, and green beans. As summer wore on, she also made friends with the small animals that lived in or near the field: mice, chipmunks, and squirrels; a family of woodchucks and a lonely fox that occasionally wandered through, sniffing at the low-lying cucumbers and watermelons.

She named one of the squirrels "Bushy" for his big, sweepy tail that flicked up and down as he ran past her each morning. Jennifer knew that Bushy lived in a maple tree by the river because she could see him scampering up and down the trunk, in search of food.

Jennifer's social life was limited. Her older sister had a driver's license, so they sometimes drove into Boston on Saturdays, when her sister wasn't practicing skating, to visit the expensive shops on Newbury Street. Often, they would stop for an ice cream sundae on the way home.

Jennifer's mother, who was also a teacher like Chuck Sullivan, told her to focus on her studies during grades 9 and 10. "You were an A student last year, so try to get off to a good start in high school. The boys will still be

there when you are older, and they might even be a bit more mature and enjoyable by then.”

Jennifer’s best friends were those from her middle school years at Miss Maxwell’s private school. However, since they all lived in different towns around Boston, the girls only arranged sleepovers on weekends. Thus, for a few months, Jennifer’s world consisted of the vegetable field, serving hors d’oeuvres at her parents’ summer parties, and spending time with some of the neighborhood kids.

Richie Moran had a part-time summer job helping at the local landscaping business, owned by his dad’s friend. Richie was allowed to mow a few lawns, and he helped the crew, mostly college kids, by raking the cut grass on the bigger properties. At the end of the day, it was his job to clean the mowers and to ensure the equipment was ready for the next morning.

On Tuesday and Thursday evenings, Richie played second base on the junior town team. The team consisted of 13- to 15-year-olds. Sometimes the coach used Richie as a backup pitcher so that he could get some practice at that position, where he showed some promise.

Richie liked pitching. It gave him a rare sense of control. For a brief moment, everyone paid attention to the pitcher; the infield players, the batter, and even the home plate umpire watched carefully. All eyes were on him, and it made Richie feel good.

The idea came to him from out of the blue. On Saturday evenings, Chuck Sullivan hosted a neighborhood wiffle ball game. He set up his big grill so people could bring along some food, and the adults usually had coolers filled with beer, wine, and soft drinks. A few of the men had tumblers full of whiskey or bourbon. Some of the mothers brought along brownies and homemade pies.

Richie remembered that Jennifer’s family, including her sister’s boyfriend, always joined in. Surely, he could figure out a way to spend time with her. If she were watching the game, he’d impress her with his pitching skills. Having spent so much time handling baseballs and softballs, Richie could make a wiffle ball dance on the way to home plate.

In fact, Richie kept a ball next to his bed. If he couldn't fall asleep, which was quite common because his mind was always racing, he used to grip the resilient plastic to expend some of his nervous energy. A friend had explained how to use his thumb and fingers to manipulate the lightweight sphere. The key was finding the right touch around the oblong-shaped, perforated holes.

Anyone can play wiffle ball, so on Saturday evenings in Chuck Sullivan's backyard, the neighbors gathered, and Richie Moran set out to get Jennifer Beekman's attention.

In addition to the neighbors, a few old buddies of Chuck Sullivan's showed up to play. One was Eddie Powers. In high school, Eddie was a three-sport letterman. He was an excellent baseball player and earned a scholarship to play at the University of New Hampshire. After two years, he was recruited by a baseball team and assigned to its minor league affiliate to practice regularly. His team played in Albany, New York, about 3 hours west of Boston.

Eddie improved steadily. He could pitch, hit, and field. He was a promising star. One warm July day, however, Eddie slid awkwardly into home plate and broke his ankle. Such was the nature of the injury that Eddie never really fully recovered and had to give up his auspicious baseball career. Back home, he played in the men's softball league each summer to keep his skills sharp. It was a big change from semi-professional baseball, but he was still able to play a form of the game he loved.

Eddie also remembered Chuck Sullivan's wiffle ball parties, and so one Saturday evening, for a lark, he showed up to see his old friend and perhaps play an inning or two with the teenagers, college kids, and the beer-bellied neighbors.

The wiffle ball games were very casual. There were usually several teams, and after two innings, one team sat out, and another rotated in. The adults loved this as they could play in the field for a few minutes, and then come in for a beer or a fresh ear of corn. Everyone was happy.

Jennifer's mom, Molly, brought a blanket down from the house and a cooler full of sandwiches, snacks, and a bottle of cold white wine. For her part, Jennifer usually wore shorts and a tank top and was happy to take off her sandals as Chuck Sullivan's expansive back lawn had a deep cut of soft, green grass. A line of maple and oak trees delineated his property from the Charles River. All in all, it was an idyllic setting for some summer fun.

Eddie Powers joined two guys who worked in town and the boyfriend of Jennifer's sister. He was a freshman in college and played on the baseball team, so the four of them thought they'd have as good a chance as any to win a few rounds of wiffle ball.

Before the games began, Richie Moran walked over to Jennifer and said, "I might need to pick up some more tomatoes for my mother tomorrow. She loved the ones you chose last week. Will you be working?"

"I take over from Chuck in the afternoon," Jennifer replied. "The tomatoes are going fast this summer, so I'm not sure what will be left at the end of the day. But I'll put aside a nice box or two for you. And remember, bring \$1 bills. Last week you had a \$20. We are not the Super Value in town. "O.K.," said Richie hesitantly, "And by the way, I'll be pitching one of our games if you are still around."

"I'll watch, and good luck," said Jennifer as she popped a potato chip into her mouth, and Richie walked away, unsure if he had made an impression.

Molly had just poured herself a glass of wine into a plastic cup and said, "Well, at least he's turning out to be a polite boy. I was worried about him a couple of years ago when he pulled that Halloween prank with Mrs. Carlson's dog. Remember? He tied it to their flagpole and placed a devil's mask on its head. The dog howled for hours before the police came."

"I don't know, Mom. Last week at the stand, he bought \$4 worth of tomatoes and \$3 of corn, and I had to do the math for him. He seemed surprised when I gave him \$13 in change. Really. Isn't that fourth-grade level arithmetic?"

"Educators say that boys develop more slowly than girls, so maybe things will get better when he's in high school. At least the kid is good at

baseball. It will be fun to watch him pitch tonight,” replied Molly. “And we get to see the great Eddie Powers. Your sister had a crush on him when she was your age. But he was an untouchable senior, so nothing came of it.”

“Love is in the air, Mom. That’s what my English teacher says. You never know when Cupid will show up. At least my sister has a boyfriend now, so one of us is happy.”

Jennifer feigned a pout. Her mother leaned over and hugged her.

Eddie Powers made the rounds, saying hello to everyone. He accepted a can of beer from an old high school friend but politely declined a greasy-looking cheeseburger that was clearly overdone.

If Eddie had learned one thing, it was that athletic reputations hung on forever in small towns. It had been a few years since he played minor league baseball, but some of the younger kids wanted his autograph, and a couple of the old geezers just wanted to shake his hand.

Finally, he found his teammates, and they had a quick talk about the evening’s opposition. There was a high school kid pitching the first game, and it was said that he had had a decent season on the mound. 8th-grader Richie Moran was pitching the second game, and the town’s electrician, Mikey Blaney, was going to start the third game. “We should win the first two easily,” said Eddie’s teammate.

The wiffle bat, like the ball, was very light, so Eddie had to take a dozen practice swings to get the feel of it. In the first game, Eddie popped out and hit a feeble single that dribbled into the outfield. It was a big change from semi-professional baseball, he thought.

Richie Moran was ‘feeling his oats’. Last week, he struck out several batters, none of whom saw his wicked curveball disappear before their eyes.

In the second game, Richie found the whole neighborhood watching as he faced the town’s most famous athlete, Eddie Powers. For a brief moment, there was quiet in Chuck Sullivan’s backyard – only a chorus of cicadas from the woods broke the silence.

As was his custom, Eddie tipped his hat to the mound, acknowledging the tense, age-old adversarial relationship between a pitcher and batter.

Eddie had been taught to swing at the first pitch. This sent the pitcher a message that the batter wasn't afraid. So, Eddie swung with all his might as Richie Moran threw the first ball. However, despite the practice swings, Eddie Powers swung wildly and didn't come close to hitting the ball. Whiff. Strike one.

Out on the mound, Richie Moran remembered some advice that his dad had given him. Always throw a slow pitch after a fast pitch. Richie fingered the ball and found the right grip.

At home plate, Eddie Powers told himself to relax and to swing easily. He was playing a recreational game with a lightweight ball. The next pitch came at him in slow motion. Eddie timed his swing perfectly and hit a hard line-drive down the right field line – foul – and into the flower bed adjacent to the field. The ball was hit so hard that it sliced off the top of a yellow gladiolus.

Richie Moran was a little surprised that his last pitch wasn't effective. However, he still had Eddie Powers up by two strikes. With the next pitch, he'd surprise Eddie and get his strikeout.

In science class last month, while others were writing up a dissection experiment, Richie was reading *Baseball Weekly* and saw an article about throwing the feared 'brush back pitch.' This seldom-used pitch was thrown close to the batter and meant to intimidate him.

Richie took careful aim and fired the ball towards home plate and right at Eddie Powers. Unfortunately, Richie had read an article about professionals using a real baseball and didn't take into account the aerodynamics of a wiffle ball.

At home plate, Eddie Powers saw the pitch coming at him – and then suddenly didn't see the pitch coming at him. Richie's pitch was meant to miss Eddie, and it did – but the ball went behind the batter, just missing his back by an inch.

The crowd hooted and hollered, and Richie gave a little wave to Eddie to say ... sorry. He was embarrassed – what a lousy pitch. Still, he had two strikes on Eddie.

Richie hadn't thrown a curve yet, which was the staple of wiffle ball. Almost any kid could throw a curve – you just had to finger the ball and get the holes lined up correctly.

When a pitcher throws the ball, it is called the delivery. Some pitchers use a simple delivery and some a more complex one. Pitchers can wind up, lean back, and throw the ball using their full weight. Deliveries can be very theatrical. Richie Moran wanted a strikeout so badly to impress Jennifer Beekman. He decided to go for the full Broadway version that would take down Eddie Powers. He knew the curveball would do the trick.

The best place to watch a game behind the Sullivan's house was the third branch of the lone maple tree, at the edge of the field just by the river. It was here that Bushy Squirrel made his home. The maple had a full canopy of leaves, which made it cool and a safe hiding place during the hot summer months.

Bushy often took his afternoon nap with his tail and back up against the main trunk. He needed his rest because autumn was coming, and that was the busiest time of year for a squirrel. Bushy and his friends will be active eight hours a day collecting nuts, seeds, and acorns and storing them for the winter months. In summer, he took it easy, just like the humans who lived in the houses by his tree.

Summer evenings were his favorite time. With his view atop the limb, he could watch the activities that humans seemed to find enjoyable. In a few weeks, when the weather was cooler, these humans would play a different game. They called it tag football, which was certainly different from wiffle ball. In the winter, after a big storm, the kids would make figures out of the snow, and they would slip and slide down the hill by the Beekman's house. Bushy watched it all from his perch.

This evening, there was a boy on the field holding a white ball behind his back. Bushy didn't like this boy. Last summer, the kid had walked along the

edge of the river and tried to hit him with a slingshot. Bushy was climbing up the main trunk of the maple when the boy fired off two small stones, both of which missed. The boy wasn't very good with his slingshot. From his vantage point high on the third limb of the maple tree, Bushy was holding his breath. The boy on the mound was agitated and was about to hurl the ball at the man a few yards away.

At home plate, Eddie Powers knew what was coming. The curveball was the last option that Richie had left. Besides, Eddie knew, for all his theatrics, the pitcher was getting tired. 8th-grade boys weren't as strong as they thought, and Richie must be mentally fatigued, especially after throwing such a bad pitch earlier.

Eddie saw the pitch curve. It moved from the edge of his vision to the inside and crossed just in front of him. Eddie kept his head down, one of the cardinal rules for batters. This had been drilled into him since high school. Head down, and use a powerful but controlled swing.

Richie leaned back on his heels and started his forward motion. He used his legs, hips, torso, shoulders, arms, and wrists, all moving forward in sync, to throw the ball, a curve, toward home plate.

THWACK! TH-WACK!

As he finished his swing, Eddie twisted his body around like a pretzel. This was the batting style of the great Ted Williams, the best hitter in modern baseball, and a left-hander like Eddie Powers.

THWACK! TH-WACK!

Eddie watched the wiffle ball head toward the trees, high in the evening sky. Remarkably, it was gaining momentum as it cleared the outfield. The last Eddie saw of the white ball was that it was heading toward the Charles River.

From his vantage point on the third limb of the maple tree, Bushy saw two things happening. The little white ball was moving very fast and moving right toward him. He was also watching as all the kids jumped up in

excitement. They were all running out toward his maple tree, following the ball's flight.

Out on the mound, Richie Moran turned and watched the wiffle ball disappear into the gloaming. He just realized that he had thrown a “hanging curve” – a pitch that is great for the batter but disastrous for the pitcher. Never had Richie seen a wiffle ball hit so far. But his embarrassment soon turned to pride as he now knew he had thrown the pitch that would go down in wiffle ball history. If not history, then at the very least, this moment would become part of town lore.

Richie Moran threw the pitch that Eddie Powers annihilated. THWACK!
TH-WACK!

Bushy had his own problem. Sitting out on the limb, he had drifted off into a kind of squirrel snooze. He was thinking about food – the major preoccupation of most animals.

Bushy was the real winner of these wiffle ball evenings. He realized long ago that humans were the only species that took their source of nourishment, food, so casually. Bushy noticed that each week, a big truck arrived at the Sullivan's house and men dumped the contents of a large pail into a hopper. For hours afterwards, a smell of old food and trash wafted through the air and twitched Bushy's nostrils.

Last month, when it got dark and the humans went home, Bushy had his best dinner – a veritable banquet compared to the usual berries and seeds that made up his summer diet.

Down on the ground, he had some choices. Although he didn't like watermelon, the rinds were fun to chew. Rinds were much softer than tree bark, one of his staples.

The neighbors cooked all sorts of things on the grill. Bushy watched the meat burn and sizzle, which he could smell up on his branch. One of the items, he learned, was called a hot dog. Bushy was confused, but he tried to make some sense out of the odd name. Bushy saw plenty of dogs each day. They were annoying animals as they often liked to chase squirrels up the trees.

Bushy was not naive. He knew the difference between a male and a female dog. It was quite easy to see what made a male, a male. He concluded that a hot dog was a roasted, male doggie thing.

How odd that humans enjoyed the doggie thing once it had been grilled.

When ready, humans placed the doggie thing into a piece of bread. He heard people call this a roll. Last month, a complete hot dog in a roll was left under the cooking table. Bushy ignored the charred doggie thing and nibbled on the roll. He loved bread in its many forms. The hot dog roll was different. One side was smeared in a yellow sauce called mustard. Bushy found the taste to be rather sharp and hot. The other side was plain – just soft and easy to pick at.

But the bonanza of Bushy's meal was the popcorn scattered up and down the left field line. Popcorn was roughly similar to the nuts that Bushy subsisted on throughout the winter months. But humans added things like melted butter and salt, which ruined the flavor. However, for every piece of popped popcorn, there were raw kernels that Bushy loved. This was another example of wasted food, he thought. Why not pop each piece? About half of all the wasted popcorn consisted of rough kernels scattered in the grass.

Bushy finished off the evening with part of a chocolate chip cookie. The woman of the house, Mrs. Sullivan, made these in batches. The dark chips in the cookies reminded him of blackberries, which grew in abundance in the woods by the river.

Bushy's gourmet reverie was interrupted by the sound of an approaching buzz saw, or maybe a swarm of angry bees he once provoked when he accidentally knocked over a nest. The noise grew louder and closer. He was just about to scamper to the safety of the tree trunk when the wiffle ball went sizzling past. The ball was so close that Bushy's fur flew up in a small wave before settling down again.

Thankfully, his tail was tucked in, or he might have had it snipped off. How ironic, thought Bushy, that the kid who tried to kill him with a slingshot nearly succeeded with a bad pitch that turned a plastic ball into a missile. Below the tree, the group of kids had stopped running. Looking up, Jennifer Beekman watched the wiffle ball reach its apogee over the river. Then a light breeze came up, and the ball's perforated design helped it turn

downstream. With the excitement over, the other kids walked back to the field, but Jennifer stood there watching as the ball hit the water and then bobbed slowly along toward the bend beyond the Sullivan's house.

Jennifer walked with it. The Charles River was languorous in the summer months with hardly a ripple disturbing the surface. The ball found an eddy here and there, but it moved so slowly that Jennifer was a few paces ahead when she reached the bottom of the vegetable garden.

Jennifer sat in the grass beyond the last row of corn. She tucked her knees up to her chin. The sky was almost dark, and she could see the lights on in her house up on the hill. Her parents, sister, and boyfriend would be home by now.

Just then, the little white ball drifted past. Jennifer wondered if it would make it to Boston Harbor, floating another ten miles downstream. Perhaps it would reach the ocean? The ball would no longer spend its days and nights in Chuck Sullivan's musty garage. Thanks to Richie Moran's hanging curve and Eddie Power's almighty swing, the ball had been liberated, set free to find its own way in the world.

Jennifer decided to write about the game in her summer diary. She could tell the story of that evening's party, the relaxed atmosphere, the smell of the barbecue, and the historic hit she had witnessed. She didn't think she should mention names or go into detail about Richie Moran, who suffered an embarrassment in front of all the neighbors. That would be too cruel. So, she reflected, she'd find a way to write about the ball's flight and its surprising journey along the Charles River.

The next day, Sunday, Jennifer arrived early at the vegetable stand to relieve Chuck Sullivan and pick out some good tomatoes for Richie. It was a workday for her, so she had her hair in a ponytail and wore a T-shirt that read *Cape Cod*.

All morning, she had been thinking about him. The boy was a nuisance, lacked charm, and wasn't especially polite, as her mother had suggested the night before. Richie didn't seem to get anything right, including throwing a lightweight ball at a batter a few feet away.

He was just an awkward kid, Jennifer thought. Not unlike herself when she was in middle school. Self-conscious, unsure of everything, and physically clumsy. But things changed in 8th grade at Miss Maxwell's School. Everything seemed to click into place, and she graduated confident that she would succeed in high school. Maybe, she thought, that's what Richie needed, some faith in himself.

Chuck Sullivan had told her to discount everything in the late afternoon. "Give things away at half price or throw in a few items for free, especially for our regular customers," he had said.

An hour later, Jennifer started to close the stand. The last customers were helping themselves to bags of fresh corn. "I can give you those green beans for one dollar, if you'd like them," said Jennifer, trying to push another sale.

Just then, Richie arrived riding his sister's red bike with a basket on the front. He was out of breath because his house was half a mile away, and his mother sent him at the last minute.

"Hi. Did you save me any tomatoes?" asked Richie, bluntly.

"Well, I almost sold them last hour, but here they are - two boxes, as you requested. The tomatoes are very ripe and should be eaten within the next day or two. And, they're plump and juicy, so your mom should be happy." Jennifer gently placed the boxes of tomatoes into the basket on Richie's bike.

"If you have an extra dollar, I can give you six ears of corn and a small melon. That's a good deal for a Sunday afternoon," added Jennifer.

"Did you see my pitch yesterday?" asked Richie cautiously, ignoring the offer.

"Of course. We all saw it, including Eddie Powers, who saw it very clearly," replied Jennifer, smiling. She tossed her ponytail back and wiped her hands on the apron she was wearing.

Her English teacher had taught the class the word ‘coy’ in June, and Jennifer thought she might try being flirtatious, even if just for a moment. She made a mental note to ask her sister whether you could practice being coy or if it came naturally.

“I threw him the wrong pitch,” continued Richie. “I just wanted to get him out on a strike, but he had my number.” His shoulders slumped, and he scuffed the dirt next to his bike.

“Richie, Eddie Powers played semi-professional baseball, and you threw him two strikes,” Jennifer said, putting her hand on his shoulder. “That you got to pitch to him was a privilege. Not many kids get to do what you did last night. And my dad said that your pitch had potential. It just didn’t meet its goal. It had promise, but didn’t deliver. Don’t feel so bad.” She tilted her head and smiled again.

“We’ll see you next weekend.” Jennifer waved to a couple getting into their car with a large bag of corn and beans.

Jennifer looked back at Richie and said, “I want to say something else. You’ll start high school in a few weeks. That means all new teachers, and it will be a new start for you. It will be a fresh page, as my mom likes to remind me every September. So do the best you can. Stay out of trouble. If you can get through grade 9, you’ll be able to do anything. I hear that the junior varsity baseball coach is very good but demanding. You can make the team and dazzle people with your pitching. All of that is possible.”

Listening carefully, Richie surprised Jennifer. “Will you write that word on the back of the bag? Potential, is that it?”

“Yes, potential. It’s a big word that means promise or ability. Every time you practice baseball, softball, or even wiffle ball, you are improving your skills. The trick is to stay motivated to improve in all areas, like paying attention in class and doing your homework. It’s not easy, but you’ll feel better about yourself. When school starts, my mom has me write down three goals. We tape them to the refrigerator door. After Christmas, I think up three new goals for the second semester.”

“That’s a neat idea,” said Richie. “I might do the same.”

“Okay. It’s up to you. But I know you can succeed. Just keep the goals simple. Like, I’ll study for 30 minutes each night.”

Then Jennifer surprised herself. As she placed the bag of corn and the melon in the bike’s basket, she kissed Richie Moran on the cheek. “That’s for good luck this year.”

Richie was as surprised as Jennifer, and his face turned as red as the tomatoes he was about to take home to his mother.

“That’s nice,” mumbled Richie. “I guess I’ll see you at the bus stop in a few weeks.”

“Remember, from now on, it will be the high school bus. And thank you for last night. You weren’t the hero, but everyone had fun. I heard someone say that you were the ‘wiffle ball wonder,’ so I guess that’s a compliment you can cherish for a long time.”

Richie Moran rode off into the sunset. He was pedaling very fast to get the perfect tomatoes home to his mom as quickly as possible. He would never forget this afternoon, especially the kiss he didn’t see coming. His first kiss.

Jennifer Beekman closed up the remaining boxes. Her mom would be along in a few minutes, and they’d take the last of the produce and the cash box to Chuck Sullivan, and then go home to dinner.

Jennifer thought about her talk to Richie and hoped that it didn’t sound like a lecture and that some of her points would sink in. She made a promise to herself to keep an eye on him during the first few weeks of high school.

She also thought about the small white wiffle ball floating aimlessly along the Charles River. It would be halfway to Boston by now. How funny, she reflected. Richie and the wiffle ball would forever be linked in her mind to a relaxed summer evening. A ball and a boy, each destined for their own fate.

Tomorrow, she’d be back to weeding in the garden. There were only two more weeks of summer, followed by Labor Day and the start of school.

Jennifer set aside a couple of ears of corn. “I’ll leave these by the maple tree,” she thought, “so Bushy doesn’t have to spend his day looking for food. I hope he wasn’t bothered by the commotion last night.”

The Thief of Joy

Eric D. Lehman

After the hut croo's breakfast skit about a sheriff and bandit, three travelers dawdled at Lakes of the Clouds, stretching sore limbs, applying Vaseline to their feet, and fiddling with their equipment, while one by one, other groups headed up Crawford Path. A group of six with shirts that read "Wild White Mountain Women" set off laughing, waving friendly hands at the oldest of the three, Marta, who had shared split pea soup and no flour chocolate with them the previous evening. Marta looked after these women, all her own age, and then at the young couple she was waiting for. At this signal, she began to walk, and as if reluctant to begin, the others followed, clacking their walking sticks on the rock and listening to a white-throated sparrow in the krumholz.

At the first junction, the young couple, Marta's daughter Kara and her husband Jim, stopped, adjusting their pack straps, retying their laces, and whispering in angry tones. As Marta paused, thinking they might need her, they seemed to decide something and took the steep trail up to the peak of Mount Washington. They waved briefly and flew up the slope, Kara taking the lead.

Alone now, Marta skirted the peak, navigating the windswept granite and scree fields, enjoying the alpine tundra and open views. The sun rose higher in a cloudless cobalt sky, the sort of day that makes the world feel vast and wild. She walked across smoke-black rocks and passed under the railroad, watching as tourists chugged up to the summit buildings, feeling a sense of superiority and freedom. She did not climb Washington, Clay, or Jefferson, sticking to the Gulfside Trail. But all day, her daughter and son-in-law leapfrogged her, waving from distances and once crossing paths just west of Mount Adams. When she saw the two at the junction with Lowe's Path, they appeared to be having a heated discussion, but stopped when she shuffled near, smiling and congratulating her on her accomplishment. A half hour later, she was waiting for them outside Madison Hut, holding a warm cup of cocoa, and Jim arrived shortly afterwards, putting his pack down on the porch steps and collapsing.

"Where's Kara?"

"Apparently, we're hiking down early tomorrow, and she wanted to add Madison."

"You already hiked over four peaks today."

He shrugged. "I offered to go with her, but she said I would slow her down." He began cleaning his hiking poles. "It's probably true; she's much faster."

"All those years of track and field."

"Sure."

A red squirrel chattered in the nearby pines. Other hikers arrived, poles clattering on the porch. Through the open windows, groups recounted their just-completed hikes or laughed over card games. Jim pulled a pair of comfortable slip-ons out of his pack and exchanged them for his boots.

"Want to go play a game while we wait?" Marta asked.

"No, I'm good here."

"Are you?" she said, putting a hand on his thin, hard shoulder.

"Of course not," he muttered. "This is the end."

Two croo members huffed up the Valley Way to the hut, returning from the parking lot with high stacks of supplies. Hikers filled their bottles. One group had laid tents and clothing out on the rocks near the hut, letting them dry after last night's rainstorm.

"Please don't carry all of this alone. You both did your best." Marta forced her face into a smile. "You'll find your way through this."

"I thought if we came up here with you that she might see how good..." he trailed off.

"I'm sorry. It's work," said Marta. "She wants things her way and always has."

"We've only been married for three years. Feels like she hardly gave me a chance."

"It does feel like yesterday we were cutting the cake at the wedding," Marta agreed.

"I still can't accept it." He stood up and took a few steps away from the porch, turning around to scan the slopes of Madison. "I can't believe she wants to leave."

"It's a good opportunity for her," Marta said, a little defensively. "And Colorado is beautiful."

"Sure, but I could get a job, a different job there, go with her."

"She says she needs to do it on her own."

"But for the last five years we've done it all together."

"Maybe that's the problem."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know...I really don't." Marta frowned. "She doesn't tell me anything."

"What would you do?"

“If I had to do it over again? I would have delayed my wedding, backpacked solo on the Inca Trail like I had promised myself.”

“I didn’t know you...wanted that.”

She snorted. “I used to dance barefoot naked in the rain and stay up all night to see the dawn. More than you have, and certainly more than Kara did.”

“Yeah?” He looked up and squinted at the path to the top of Madison, then sat down again. “We had dreams like that, but dreams of doing it together.”

“Well, I had other dreams, too, of having a family and a career, having Kara and her brothers, and I lived those dreams.” She paused, then continued, as if speaking to herself. “But it never seemed to fit, and I never was able to choose for myself. Not really.”

Jim didn’t say anything, his hands over his contorting face.

“I guess I didn’t expect a lot from Kara’s father,” she said. “He was a good man, but not what you might call, adventurous.” She waved at the green wonder around them. “He would never have come here.”

“I see,” he said. “I finally see.”

“What’s that?”

“Nothing.” He looked at his trail-roughened hands and his muddy pant legs. “I thought if I worked hard, joined her adventures, did what she wanted...” He shook his head. “I made myself a better man.”

“You’re a nice man,” she said, rubbing her calves. “Too nice, maybe.”

“That’s a contradiction...” He threw up his hands. “Does it have to be divorce? So final?”

A few other hikers looked in their direction at the word “divorce,” but quickly looked away, giving the two as wide a berth as they could on the narrow porch.

“I guess you won’t be my mother-in-law anymore,” he said, bitterly. “Is that right?”

“Oh...no, I hope we can still be friends,” she said.

“I guess I expected too much.” Jim continued cleaning his hiking poles.

The smell of insect repellent, body odor, and the first whiffs of a turkey dinner swirled around the hut. Over the trees to the north, the summer hazed into Canada. After a few minutes, Kara strode up the steps of the hut, long brown hair shining in the late afternoon sun. She set down her small pack next to her mother and gave Jim a nod. “Did I miss dinner?”

“No, you’ve got half an hour,” Jim said. “How was Madison?”

She shrugged. “I thought these mountains would be taller.”

When I First Saw Fireflies

Emory Stevens

You brought me somewhere I shouldn't have been
And I told you something you shouldn't have known.
I looked out across the horizon,
And I saw the firefly, too,
Like a bleeding, blinking heartbeat,
Skipping across the water in its lonely campaign.
Patiently, I floated out to catch it,
Walking on that water like I somehow always could;
Hands out-stretched towards the glimmer, cupped in prayer,
Fixating on the green light sputtering in front of me
That disparaged and melted into the night sky
In one moment as it died
Then gasped wildly back to life, clawing itself from the ink
In the next
As it flickered aglow once more.

How I coveted to see that grounding lighthouse
And to fear not the ancient waves that pull.
To stay steady, true, my journey onwards,
Lest I dared my eyes behind me and crumbled back into the sea.
3300 miles away, you caught that fire between your teeth
And inside you still, it burns and flutters its wings
Against the cage that holds your breath.
And the crust of nights like these chipping away into the water below
Could not change that anymore than
The sinking of winning stones down to where we can't see can.
So I trust you now, I'm blinking back,
Light then dark... then somehow light before the dark again,
I'm blinking back and letting out my breath into the wind,
"Can you keep a secret?"

From Beneath the Bridge

Jeanne Julian

After daybreak. Too early, or too late,
I wake to the darn chirping birds
of C Street exclaiming *C! C!* as if
the ordinary, the average, is remarkable.
One scolds to the contrary, pizzicato.
(There's one naysayer in every crowd, right?)
Those perky twittering provocateurs
ask where I stand. And so I'm up and out
and following C Street that empties
onto Ocean Street, Ocean dead-ending—

or rather, leading me to layered relics.
Traces of trolley tracks scar remnants
of cobbled road descending to
an old wooden pier, what's left of
The Million Dollar Bridge—once a marvel!
now just a memory breaking
the flow of river into harbor,
replaced long ago by a massive
span of thoroughfare held aloft by
a cortege of concrete piles.

Phantom traffic (another river)
rushes overhead, oblivious
to the forsaken waterfront below.
There in centuries past
the enterprising Thomas Knight
built clipper packets, *Phoenix* and *Echo*.
Summer panorama persists,
dazzling dovetail of sky, city, water,
but no echo, now, of those ships,
their wind-borne grace rising

from plunder and welter.
Low tide exposes only
a shopping cart's skeleton
in the muck. Dislocated spine

of mired tires. Sunken cable.
And look: eider ducks,
seeking sustenance in the shallows.
I'm lucky: now the drawbridge lifts
its mighty arms, and red tugboats
usher a tanker toward open sea.

Okay, yes. I should regret,
rebuke, the blight of this rusty hulk
gliding past in majestic obsolescence.
Should ponder the harrowing crush
of industrialization, curse
the curse of fuels fed by fossils
more stubborn than our own
fleeting remains. But this morning
I only thank those pesky sparrows
for rousing me to this shifting prospect:

Aucocisco, haven of the First People,
shimmering bay
I know as Casco,
where shadowed islands
slumber in solitude
until arrival
of the morning
yellow ferry.
Like flowers
nudged by a bee.

Beating Bobby Flay

Bobby Slokes

We wrestle with ourselves. Some of us more than others. I am afraid, while others are not. I find little comfort and feel even fewer successes.

To pass some time, we watch that show with Bobby Flay. The one where he cooks and wins.

I watch and try not to remember too many things.

And then I try to copy him. I make pizzas, marinades, and various types of pesto. And I grasp at pleasure as my daughters eat and smile. Their eyes widen as they say, "this is good" with food in their mouths.

And I think of my mother, who had left before it all started, and who is waiting on the other side, I hope. And I hope that she looks upon me kindly. I'm sure she does. But it doesn't count really. She could look upon me no other way.

My mom died at home. Her lungs had caught up with her. And she was old and thin and frail. She essentially stopped eating anything other than little bits here and there. She had fallen and broken some bones. She ended up in one of those rehab places where other frail elderly ladies would beg you to help them escape as you passed them in the hallway. We were able to get Peggy out, though. Home with hospice.

Peggy - my mom - was a child of the Great Depression. I think it's called the "Silent Generation." Grin and bear it. Don't complain and make sacrifices for the greater good.

There are very early memories that I cling to and attempt to piece together bit by bit. Nostalgic things of childhood. Like the trips to my mom's union hall. Which may be a memory of one trip or the collection of memories of several trips. Either way, it would have happened in the summer when I was out of school, but too little for Peggy to leave home alone.

Peggy was a member of the hotel workers union in Boston, and she referred to herself as a "banquet waitress." If you found yourself at a function - such as a wedding - in a hotel in Boston, Peggy would set up one of those folding

stands by your table. Upon which she would place her huge tray and then pass out all the dinners for your table. She would pour you water, wine, and coffee.

We would ride the orange line together to the union hall. To Ruggles Station I think. There was a park nearby. A concrete urban type park where mostly black children played. Running and chasing and dancing around one of those fountains that sprays out of the grounds of those playgrounds. I remember the girls most and the colorful beads in their braided hair. I thought they looked beautiful and exotic.

I remember sitting on one of those big wooden benches on the landing between floors at the union hall. The air smelled of cigar smoke. Peggy would go inside for roll call while I waited on the bench. I must have complained once about going because I remember her telling me why we had to go. You didn't get the good jobs if you didn't show up for roll call, she had told me. My aunt Rita wouldn't always get the good jobs because of that. In those early days, the good jobs were ones on weekends. They paid better and complemented my dad's hours at the post office so that me and my sisters wouldn't be home alone. Later on, when she was old, the good jobs meant the ones that didn't have stairs or other obstacles leading from the kitchen, which would have made it hard for her hunched-over body to lug those huge trays.

Many years later, while Peggy was dying at home, we all stood vigil over her. We would take turns sitting with her. And every four hours, we would squirt the morphine into her cheek to keep her from getting too short of breath.

She would smile up at us with her toothless smile.

I would ask how she was doing. It was always the same answer.

"Getting better," she would say with a smile. But I'm pretty sure she knew that getting better wasn't part of the plan.

There are other, more vivid memories. Vivid because of the events they recall. Things out of the ordinary. Memorable life events. Like the day our car was stolen. Right down the street from our house. Peggy came home crying that evening. I rarely saw Peggy crying. But this day, she came in

crying with anger. Her face was red. Possibly swollen. She was standing in the archway of our living room as I sat on the floor watching TV. Her face may have been swollen because she had been punched in the nose. I know it was winter because it was dark at dinner time, and she was in winter clothes as she stood there, angry and crying. A wool hat. A scarf around her neck. A waist-length winter coat. Manly and bargain basement, her outfits were in general.

She described them as teenagers, I think. They had done that little “bump Peggy’s bumper” trick while she was at a stop sign. When she got out to discuss one of them punched her in the face and drove off with her car. We got the car back. I don’t remember how long it took. The cops found it abandoned. They had punched Peggy in the face for a joy ride in a rusty old Gran Torino.

Then there are the memories that keep coming back on their own. That needs no help from me. Somewhat unwanted but seared in my brain forever. They chase me down and pierce me with the shame and the aching of something that cannot be fixed. They do this over and over again.

As she lay dying, Peggy took residence in my old bedroom. She had moved into that room because she couldn’t get up the stairs anymore. A hospital bed replaced my old bed, and the furniture was all rearranged.

But I still remember decades earlier that I had sat on my bed in that room with Peggy beside me. It was just after Christmas. It was the eighties, and I was too old to believe in Santa Claus. Which makes the memory sting even worse. I should have known better at that point.

On Christmas day that year, I had opened a card in my stalking. It read “a subscription to *Sports Illustrated*.” I was happy. That was a big deal then. But when the first edition came, it was wrong. Some lame rip-off sports magazine. Robert Redford was on the cover. He had been in a baseball movie that year. I sat on my bed, and I was angry. Peggy sat beside me. I looked at the magazine, complaining that it was wrong. Then I looked up at Peggy and saw tears in her eyes. I apologized, but it was too late. She didn’t notice. Too caught up in her own disappointment to realize what a brat I was. She said she was sorry and would fix it.

A silly, stupid, aching memory, too petty to bring up years later as we sat in that room with the morphine. She asked me if I believed whether or not there was something after this. The question surprised me. I said yes, partly because I do and partly to comfort her. I asked if she did. I was more interested in her answer.

“Oh yes, sure I do,” she said in that overly positive tone that she used often to reassure us. I hope that she believed it.

The vigil of Peggy’s dying had started on a Thursday, and by Sunday evening, we were tired. My dad was supposed to give a dose of morphine at 4 pm that day. But when her breathing became extra labored, he couldn’t remember if he given it or not. It didn’t matter really. Except that when I went to give her an extra dose, my father protested that I would kill her. I didn’t say what I was thinking.

She kept struggling while we deliberated over it. Until finally she sat up and choked out the words...

“I can’t breathe!”

I heard one of my sisters gasp from behind me. And finally, I gave her the “missed” dose. I contemplated giving her the whole bottle. It occurred to me that I could have ended it right there and then.

But she settled down before those thoughts could take hold. Lied back and closed her eyes.

She didn’t open her eyes again after that as she fell into an unnaturally rhythmic breathing pattern.

She hung on another 24 hours or so. Her brain is still telling her heart to beat and her diaphragm to pull inward. But she was gone.

Now she has been gone completely for over a year, and the world has changed much more than that amount of time should suggest.

We look back now and take comfort that Peggy got out just in time.

We live our lives. I try not to remember too many things.

And Bobby Flay cooks on TV. He whips up something that he hasn't made in years.

Everyone loves it.

He is good, that Bobby Flay. He's really something. Nailed it again.

But for me, the thoughts and memories pierce and ache. Like the one with my mother and the magazine. And countless others that don't include her and ache worse.

And so I cook and look at my daughters' faces.

And try to win too.

A Man Dragging His Dog Over a Snowy Field

Elizabeth Rosen

Molly wraps her shawl around herself and steps out onto the back porch. The shock of the cold sends an involuntary convulsion through her old body, and her shaky breath emerges in a puff of white. She wills her body to fight the cold, to stand without shivering, so she can focus on what she's seen out her upstairs window, far out on the flat, snow-covered field behind the house.

Even through the screens that keep the bugs out in the summer, she sees that she's right: Dave Michoybin is making his way slowly and painfully across the field, dragging his dog, Millie, behind him. Millie is on her side, no more than a heap of black and white fur that Molly would not have recognized were it not for the distinctive coloring of the Border Collie and the fact that it is her neighbor, Dave, who leans into the rope thrown over his shoulder and drags the animal's body over the icy field behind him. Dave appears to be making his way back to his own yard.

The field behind her and Dave's houses dwarfs the man in the middle of it. Like hers, his farm borders the enormous piece of land that the electric company leased decades ago to put up transformers and give their semi-rural area power. Right now, it is snow from one end of the flat horizon to the other, an expanse interrupted only by the transformers looming over it at set distances from one another.

There had been more than one moonlit night that Molly had glanced out of her bedroom window – the same one she'd spotted Dave from just now - and found herself likening the scene to a Nordic tale of giants striding across a wintery land, long, thin, knobby legs traversing the field in massive strides as, with arms outstretched, they rendered a protective benediction on everything below. She never failed to surprise herself with this bit of whimsy, so unlike her. She chalks it up to the tales her Irish grandmother had told her when she was a child.

Big pieces of land like the one their houses abut are the exception now, rather than the rule they'd once been out here when Molly and her now-dead husband had first moved to the farm almost sixty years ago. Since that time, the little cafe that had doubled as a bar for the local farmers and the fuel depot from which they'd filled their tractors had both been subsumed by the hodge-podge growth of the little town they used as their address.

Molly hops from one foot to the other, trying to get her blood flowing to her legs as she follows Dave's progress across the field. The past week

hasn't seen temperatures above twenty-five, so she figures there is a hard crust of ice on top of the snow that is making it easier to drag the dog. Still, Dave stops every ten feet or so and wipes one arm across his face.

Molly steps back to her porch door and reaches inside for the binoculars she keeps hanging from the coat rack there. She uses them mostly to watch the deer and foxes who cross the land, along with the red-tailed hawks and vultures that perch on the transformers looking for a small rodent or snake below to make a meal of. Now she raises the binoculars to get a closer look at her neighbor. She holds her breath to pause the fog of her exhalations and sharpens the focus of the binoculars until she can see Dave clearly.

He has started up his march again, a hunched man in insulated coveralls and a tan winter work coat, his black knit cap pulled low over his ears and head down as he leans again into the rope. His breath explodes from him in white plumes that remind her of plains bison she's seen on wildlife documentaries. As he plods toward his house, his feet break through the icy crust and sink into the snow.

Molly follows the rope back. Yep, sure enough, that is Millie at the end of it. Molly can see now, too, the rifle that Dave drags despondently in his free hand, its butt jouncing with small jolts over the icy field. That explains the gunshot she'd heard, which had brought her to her bedroom window to look out. It also confirms her assumption that Millie is no longer among the living.

Molly follows Dave's progress for a few minutes until he stops again to rest, and she sees that the arm he drags across his face is not for perspiration but to clear the tears from his cheeks. She lowers her binoculars. There is something unneighborly about observing a man's grief, and Molly has no interest in spying on it. Dave has had Millie for nigh on twelve years. She has been a good farm dog and Dave's constant companion; Molly suspected a better one than Pam, his wife, who'd died last year. Men were like that with their dogs, openly showing them the affection they couldn't for their people. She'd seen it with her own husband, gone these seventeen years now, how the man had openly wept upon finding their Blue Heeler dead from a snakebite out behind their barn.

Molly is not a sentimental woman. She's lived through blizzards that froze the chickens to death, and blights that had killed the kitchen garden and field crops alike. She wasn't the sort to doubt her husband's love for her, simply because he also loved his dog. And she'd spent enough time sitting with Dave at his kitchen table listening to him talk after Pam died, the bean casseroles she'd brought as an excuse to keep him company in his

grief pushed to one side, to know that he'd loved his wife, too. She's seen over the last year how his clothes drooped a little more on his bones, how his back has become a little more hunched. Without Millie to keep him company, she suspects he wouldn't have made it this long.

Molly shuffles back inside and hangs the binoculars back in their place. She'll be paying closer attention now, listening closely for the sound she knows in her bones will be coming in the next few days, for she knows something people in town don't know, which is that Dave had gotten a diagnosis of prostate cancer not two weeks before. It wasn't just Millie the Border Collie who was an old dog.

When she hears the shot, she won't be surprised; she'll call the appropriate authorities. When they ask if there had been any signs that Dave might do something like this, she also won't be surprised. She'd seen it in the man dragging his dog over a snowy field.

Marla and the Manager

Leo Swainbank

Marla's husband had taken to reading poetry, and it was making him dreadful. "We're decaying," he would tell her as he perched in some unusual spot in their house that was not meant to be sat on: the windowsill, for example. "Our muscles are atrophying, and we no longer slay dragons."

"You never slew any dragons," Marla muttered, disturbed by the scaly, swampy image he'd conjured in her mind. Dragons were like big snakes, weren't they? Marla had a fear of snakes and was quite certain one would be the death of her someday, not from a poisonous bite since she'd heard those were near nonexistent in New Hampshire, but from the heart attack that a snake could give her by appearing, disguised as a shoelace, in her path.

"Oh, you forget the fighter I was," her husband said, lowering the poetry book. "Remember when I was on the board at the Athenaeum? How I waged war against the new guard and their revisionism. Why, I was the stalwart shield of our town's rich history, Don Quixote of the archives."

Marla could not tell if he was making fun of her or if he'd simply gone mad, so she remained silent. She did not have much patience for her husband anymore. If he thought he'd grown weak with age, she wasn't going to argue. They had just had the most awful experience at the Bartlett Hotel last weekend, and he had not once stood up for them. Where was the backbone of the man she'd married? Indeed, where was the rest of him, too? It had been fifty-three years, and he looked completely different.

"Well, the fight hasn't all gone out of *me*," she called to him from the kitchen as she sorted their spoons from their knives. "I am still 'slaying dragons'— wherever you got that phrase. Remember at Suzanne's wedding? There was that awful, unhappy cater waitress. I stopped her, and I said to her: 'Dear, you can put on a smile, or you can leave.'" Marla could not remember the ending of that story. She hoped the caterer had put on a smile and been happy, but she wasn't sure she had seen her again. She may have just moved to serving crab cakes on the other end of the party.

Rather than being impressed by this account, Marla's husband frowned, as if the story unsettled him. This in turn unsettled Marla, and she thought back to that evening, wondering if she had been too hard on the cater waitress at her niece's wedding. But everyone was supposed to be happy at a wedding. The waitress had been menacing the atmosphere, and Marla had saved it. If only someone had saved her unhappy stay at the Bartlett Hotel in the same manner, she would have been much relieved.

Marla's family had been coming to the Bartlett Hotel for over a hundred years. Her mother used to sing in the dining room. This was back when hotels put singers in nice dining rooms. Not that her mother had ever been a musician by trade, but she was something of a local star, and her music was in much demand during that period. Marla loved the Bartlett Hotel. She always had, ever since she was a little girl. Back then, the grand hotel was painted the color of money, and the bellhops wore silly hats. Her parents used to rent the Admiral Suite with its massive porthole window, where Marla could watch the yachts pull in and out of the marina. Once she was married, she took her own children to the Bartlett, and they loved it—maybe less than she had, but still a fair bit.

It had been years since they'd stayed there, and Marla was miserable with other things. Mostly, she was irritated with herself for all she kept forgetting. She'd been around a long time, and she had quite a lot to remember, so it was no wonder that some of the most recent things—like all the passwords, all the different apps on her phone that she couldn't remember putting there, and so many people's names—were getting squeezed out by the sheer volume of her memories. As perfectly understandable as that was, it still irritated her, and drew pitying, unsettled looks from her own children, and from *their* uncountable children, and their spouses, and siblings of spouses, and nephews, and so on, who were so legion she could hardly be expected to fit them all in her head.

Marla was so frustrated by all this that she fled from her house one day and got rather lost driving around. She was weaving through the labyrinthine roads, looking for something familiar, when she saw it. Rising past brilliant boat sails, the Bartlett Hotel appeared proudly on its hillside. The money-green color was gone, replaced with white, but it was the same hotel, high on its regal seat over the glistening water. In front of the Bartlett, she at last oriented herself and drove straight home, where she insisted to her husband: They *had* to book a room.

"At the Bartlett?" Her husband, who was sitting on the floor at the time, frowned up at her from his Robert Frost. "But that's hardly fifteen minutes from here. That's not much of a vacation. If you need to get out of the house, why don't we go to Hawaii? They have volcanoes."

Marla would have nothing but the Bartlett, so they reserved a room. The Admiral Suite was called something else now, but the woman on the phone assured her it was the same, though she had an accent, so Marla made her repeat it several times until she was sure she'd heard right. She found herself uncommonly excited all week leading up to it. She pictured how she would dine in the great dining hall every day. She would sit by the

pool. She would watch the yachts on the water. Yet in the end, their stay had been awful, the whole experience absolutely monstrous.

"It was really monstrous," she told her husband, when they were speaking of dragons.

"Hm? What was?" He lowered his book again.

"The Bartlett, when we stayed there last weekend. Wasn't that awful?"

"Was it? Oh, I suppose," her husband mumbled indifferently.

Marla slammed the silverware drawer shut. "It used to be a wonderful hotel. I don't know what's happened."

"Maybe new owner."

"And you were no help, I'll add," she said, putting her hands on her hips.

Her husband looked at her. "With what?"

"With the whole thing, with the stay. You remember that girl at the front desk, how she treated me? You didn't stand up for us. So much for Don Quixote or whatever you say you are."

"It's what I'm not, dear. Both of us; we're decomposing. We're George Romero's Living Dead."

She swatted a hand. "I don't know what that is, but I find it sick," she said, then stomped away.

Out on the breezeway, Marla sat down and tried to take up a magazine, but she couldn't focus. She kept thinking about the Bartlett Hotel; good old memories were now mired in ugly ones. Maybe it *was* under new ownership. Maybe some clueless manager had taken charge, someone who didn't know the area and didn't understand how much the Bartlett Hotel meant to people around here who'd been staying there all their lives. If she let it, the hotel would keep going on like that, keep slipping away, getting worse and worse until the new and ugly squeezed out the beautiful past. She needed to do something. She needed to save the Bartlett. Yes, that was it. At the very least, she could raise the alarm so that people knew that the Bartlett needed saving from the clutches of this terribleness. So far, no one seemed to care.

With new resolve, she announced to her husband that she was going out. Hitching her purse up on her shoulder and bundling herself in a pink jacket with fur, she climbed into her Coupe deVille and drove directly to the Bartlett Hotel, guiding herself by perfect memory through the winding roads.

Yet, like so many things these days, Marla had difficulty holding onto her resolve. As the imperial white hotel came into view, she was overwhelmed with memories that pulled her thoughts in every direction.

Already, she could feel the insults and indecencies of her last stay at the Bartlett fluttering away out of focus. She fought to hold on to them. She should write everything down. Her son had downloaded this notebook app onto her phone, but ads kept popping up whenever she tried to use it, making her lose track of her notes, so she'd deleted it without telling him. She searched in the glove compartment for pen and paper while she drove, swerving slightly off her lane in the rummage. Inside was a wild tangle of papers, the origin and purpose of which Marla could not recall, but no pen.

Marla pulled up under the columned porte cochère of the front entrance and waited for the valet to come help her with her car, but the valet station was empty, and the door was unmanned. She remembered now that the valet was the bellhop who was also the doorman, three in one, but as long as she waited, no part of this holy trinity came out to assist her. So Marla climbed out of her car and left it there under the overhang.

Pushing through the towering century-old doors herself, she came into the nearly-empty grand lobby of the Bartlett Hotel. With his hands in his pockets, the bellhop/valet/doorman stood dressed in some ugly windbreaker, laughing with the girl at the check-in desk. He looked young enough to have a fake ID, and the blonde desk girl looked even younger. Marla faltered slightly, realizing it was the same rude girl who had checked her in before. The sight of her quite flustered Marla. She was filled with the vague, awful feeling of how horrible her hotel stay had been. Yet, rather than propel her forward, the feeling paralyzed her in place, and she stood watching the young people laugh about nothing at all.

As soon as they finished flirting, they noticed her, and both launched into their roles. "Checking in?" blurted the desk girl, who showed no recognition of Marla.

"Egh, no—" Marla started.

"Want me to park that?" The bellhop gestured for her keys like he was mugging her.

"No, I—"

"I'll just pull it to the side," he urged.

Marla clutched her keys like her mother's pearl necklace. Yet before she knew it, she'd handed them over, and the bellhop was swinging the keyring on his finger as he went out to take her car away.

"How can I help you?" The check-in girl tried again.

Marla could not deal with the check-in girl, so she hastened to be done with her and asked, more meekly than she meant to: "Is the hotel manager in?"

“You mean the General Manager? Uhhh, I don’t know if he’s back there,” the girl said, looking over her shoulder at a mysterious doorway that presumably led to the back offices. “Is he expecting you?”

“No,” Marla said. “I was just hoping to speak with him.”

“OK, yeah. May I ask, what’s this concerning?” The girl furrowed her brow suspiciously,

Marla kept herself steady. “It concerns me, and this hotel, and the manager.”

“Gotcha. Uhhh, I just don’t think he’s back there right now.”

“Is there anyone in management I could speak to about some issues I had?” She took a deep breath. “I would like to speak to the most senior person I can.”

“Sure, let me see if *my* manager’s here...” the girl trailed off. Raising one index finger to tell Marla to stay put, she went into the mysterious back. Marla stood alone, listening to muffled voices through the wall. A minute later, the girl returned, accompanied by a thin young man with a goatee. He, at least –by nature of the goatee– looked old enough to drink.

“Hi ma’am, how can I help you?” the manager asked, putting his hands on his hips.

“Are you the hotel manager?” she asked hopefully.

“No, I’m the front desk manager, ma’am. What seems to be the issue?” The manager spoke in a loud voice. “Are you staying with us now?”

“She just came in,” the check-in girl whispered. They both looked at her with concern. Marla withered under their perplexed, waiting gaze.

“This is about my stay last weekend,” she mumbled. Both of them leaned over the countertop to hear her better. Marla clammed up, realizing that some of what she had to tell the manager could not be related in the presence of this girl, since indeed the girl was part of the issue. She had to get away, had to isolate the manager so that she could speak her proper mind. “I’m sorry,” Marla cast around the lobby. In the corner was a secluded seating area with a couch and some armchairs. “Could we just discuss this quietly over here?” she whispered. “Could we?”

The manager politely followed her away from the desk. They sat down by a gas fireplace that was not lit. Again, he asked what the issue was before she had the chance to think up the best way to describe it. In truth, there was no one issue. She’d experienced many cumulative issues throughout her stay, which rolled together like an icy snowball. Now all she had was the snowball of awfulness, and she could not sort out all the individual clumps of snow that had formed it– Marla wished her husband were there, for she

did not have a poetic mind, and she did not think this snowball metaphor would pass muster with the Front Desk Manager.

Instead, she tried to begin at the beginning. “I love this hotel. It’s a wonderful hotel,” she said. “My family used to come here all the time. Everyone knew them. I brought my kids here when they were young. I mean, we visited constantly. We loved this place.”

“Wow,” said the Front Desk Manager without feeling.

“Back then, the doormen knew us. The old manager knew us because he knew my parents. They used to give us free drinks, and free upgrades, and breakfast, and just, you know, we were treated a certain way. You used to treat people a certain way. Now the check-in girl won’t even smile at me, and she asks if I’ve ever stayed here before. You should know that I’ve stayed here before. We used to come here all the time. You should know me, but nobody knows me. And the room you put me in, it was this awful room with no sunlight. It was not the Admiral Suite. There was no porthole window. You could not even see the yachts.”

“We don’t have the Admiral Suite anymore,” the Front Desk Manager said, settling comfortably back in the lobby armchair. *Where did it go?* She wanted to ask. She did not know if the manager was being straight with her or merely humoring her in the way her children sometimes did. When she left, would he gather the check-in girl and the bellhop so they could all laugh at her? She couldn’t say. Her eyes weren’t what they used to be; she could no longer tell between an honest and a dishonest face.

“I don’t know if you’re hearing me,” she pressed on. “These sound like small things, but they’re part of a bigger thing. It’s about respect. An old hotel like this should still know how to treat people with respect.

The Front Desk Manager nodded politely. “I hear what you’re saying. You should sign up for our rewards program. That way, you can accumulate points each time you stay with us. Our guests with 5,000 points get a complimentary drink at the bar with their stay. Then at 6,000 points you’re entitled to a fifty-dollar credit on your breakfast.”

Marla did not know if she had any points. She had never heard of this system. “How— if I can’t remember how many times I have stayed with you, how many points would that be?”

“Unfortunately, our rewards system can’t count old stays, but if you’d like to get signed up now, I can—”

“No, there shouldn’t be a points system! It’s not about points! It’s about the gesture. It’s about recognizing someone and respecting them and remembering their name.”

“I shall remember your name,” he assured her, though she had never given it. “But I’m being promoted to our corporate offices soon to help oversee all our hotels, so it won’t be me managing the front desk when you come again.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever come here again,” Marla said. She meant that sorrowfully, but it seemed to amuse the Front Desk Manager.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he said, hiding a smile that infuriated her. Over his shoulder, the check-in girl was grinning too, like they were all in on some joke.

Marla stood abruptly. “I leave my home, and I come here looking for something *good*. But nothing’s good here anymore, so I guess I should have just stayed home. Everyone should just stay home and decay.” With that, she marched out of the grand lobby, but as soon as she stepped outside, she realized the bellman had her keys, so Marla went back and seized her keys from him. Going out again, she could not find her Cadillac Coupe deVille. She wandered for a long time in the parking lot, in the shadow of the hotel, searching for where he’d put it.

In a State of Pining

Jennie Peters

The land of pine trees and pinecones called our family's old Toyota tires to eat dirt.
Past the mismatch mailboxes. Past the wooden pole with the blue family street sign.
Past turning into the driveway with the yippy terrier. Twice a summer, trunk packed with liquor.
It was my brother who used to run to the water; Free. We buzzed around like bees.
Past the wild gardens and the thick woods. Played tag with cousins.
Past the thin markers at the cemetery where we'd get spooked.
We would run, arms out wide, barreling down the vertical rotting wooden stairs.
Pine needles sticking to the soles of our feet. Racing. No time to slow down.
We'd screech at the cold, ride the rush of freshwater air, sun-soaked rocks, piles of fresh cut firewood waiting to be stacked.
Down the street, fields of wild blueberry bushes flourished like the sea meeting the sky.
Our dad said, "If you can throw a rock and hit your neighbor's house, you're too close."
This place had it right. We ate hot dogs and pie at the picnic table.
The grown-ups churned their ice cubes in plastic cups.
We stayed up late past the card games, cribbage.
Past the pink lemonade sunset and counting fireflies.
Past snooping around the kitchen and past the lullaby of waves tapping the beach.
Tomorrow we would go to Bar Harbor and walk the Shore Path.
We would drive up Mount Cadillac, elated at the anticipation to view lakes, ocean and mountains all at once! Devour the best Maine lobster.
Here, the screen porch protected us from maddening mosquitos.
Our great- grandmother's quilts protected us from bad dreams.
These memories protected us from loneliness.
We grew up, and the family churns liquor in all different places.
It is the "tale as old as time" that ruined everything. Our family fought.
The sap makes the pine needles stick to your feet.
And fields like this will leave you stained blue.

Massachusetts Maple
Abbie Shanahan

I am a fruit of the deciduous tree
ever turning in season, never the same and yet,
a maple through and through

I rest in its heights
legs dripping down like saplings
in the sticky summer sun

I am the deckled edges
lover and leader, tender heroine
of the empathic, lived-in
words upon the page

I am etched in erratic stone,
a leftover trace of ancient ice
slowly dragged in the thaw and left
to create a hideout for a scared girl
longing to escape the noise

Feet covered in soil that speaks
in arrowheads
and remnants
of the ones who came before

City of Bones
Abbie Shanahan

In every heart there is a city
Washed in silt
Submerged
Remade

For some, it is Atlantis
A well of creativity and wonder
Where a curious amphipod
Might brush too close and stir
A sleeping magic from the depths

For others, it is Enfield, Dana, Greenwich and Prescott
The drowned towns of the Swift River Valley
A place called home
Picnics under the Buttonwood tree,
Cornerstones laid with sweat and blood

All of it breathing underwater
Lost to those who never
Pause
And feel what lies beneath

Goodbottom Cove

Dan Maloney

Beverly Pedersen's alarm sounds at 3:30 AM, same as it always does. She brews a pot of strong coffee and drinks it black with a donut, while listening to the marine weather radio channel. Partly cloudy skies and calm seas. The fog is sparse. Such days are as welcome as they are rare.

It is especially nice today. Beverly is going to see her husband, Lars, who has been dead for fifteen years.

She keeps on her feet while having her breakfast, and tries to move around to get the blood flowing to her stiff knees. All veteran lobstermen have aches and pains to subdue before they start the day. Beverly wastes no time on self-pity.

She packs food and drink for the voyage in a metal lunchbox – a poppyseed bagel with a small container of cream cheese, a tuna salad sandwich, a thermos of iced tea, and a whoopie pie. She hopes to finish in eight hours. At ninety, she would rather sell a catch a day late than work herself to a dangerous level of fatigue. She knows one fall on the slick deck of her boat, the *Iron Ram*, would be the end of her. The ocean gave her everything she has. And it also took her sweet Lars. It would take her, too, if she let it.

She dresses for the water before she leaves the house. She puts on a layer of flannels – important for warmth, even in spring. She dons her heavy oilskins, along with rubber boots, work gloves, and a weather-beaten Boston Red Sox cap. She consults her notebook to recall her trap rotation. It's not as easy to remember such things as it used to be.

She heads out to the wharf at quarter to five. Most of the coastal town is still asleep. The gulls are already out, though. Their cawing beckons Beverly to the water. As the aromas of salt and fish and engine fumes hit her for the first time, her heart races with anticipation, same as it always does, even after sixty years of these mornings.

She exchanges few words with other lobstermen on the wharf. They are all polite. There was a time when they used to try to help her or persuade her to hang up her boots. *Lobstering is not work fit for an elderly widow*, they would say. They don't say those things much anymore. Beverly has both a temper and a mouth, and anyone who knows anything in town knows not to make her angry.

She does an inspection of the *Iron Ram*, a Jonesport hull nearly as old as she is, and checks the fuel level, the hydraulic hauler, and the tide tables. The boat is small, caked with grime, its paint chipping – a living relic

of another time. But it still does the job. She fires up the single diesel engine, and she is ready to run out to her gear.

She waves to a few other old-timers as she steams out. But only the ones she likes. She's too old to waste any motion.

The work is slow, but smooth. Her distinctive pink-and-yellow buoys don't fuss in the tranquil water. The hydraulic hauler is her muscle. The process is repetitive. Haul up the traps, open the swing door, and sort through what he's in there. Lobsters must be of a certain size to keep; else they get thrown back. And they must not be carrying eggs – *berried*, they call it – or else they get thrown back. But she gets to keep the good ones. And then she stuffs mackerel into nets and ties them off, cinches them into the traps as bait, and lets the traps fall back to the ocean floor below.

She gets to ten trawls, or about seventy traps, before it is time to head out to the last one. That's only about a quarter of what she could do with Lars helping her, but it's enough to keep her busy.

Now it's time to go see him. She doesn't resist technology. The hydraulic hauler makes her work possible. She uses GPS navigation when visibility is low. The smartphone her daughter Violet bought for her sits untouched at home, but she does use it to call Violet in Boston once a week.

But when it comes to navigating to Goodbottom Cove, as Lars named it in 1957, she uses the old ways.

She steams due east until she spots the decaying white lighthouse on a small rocky island the locals call *Rocky Island*, in the usual straightforward style of Maine's lobstermen. She wheels the *Iron Ram* in a long, arcing motion about the island, until she lines the lighthouse up with a tall, but bare, pine tree, stripped and irreparably damaged by a lightning strike a decade ago. Then she powers forward in a straight line.

To passing boats, the mouth of the cove would seem like black pincers rising from the ocean depths to snatch them and drag them to Davy Jones's Locker. And that was if they wanted to make their way around the threatening shoal that stretched before it. Not something most would bother trying, for the slim chance of a small patch of bottom – that was to say, ocean floor crawling with lobsters and crabs. But Lars had tried it, and after his first haul from it, he named it Goodbottom Cove and kept it a secret from everyone. Everyone but Beverly.

Her nimble vessel skirts past the shoal and into the narrow lane that opens into the cove with practiced ease. The water is blue and green, with flecks of pale gold glittering off the waves from the light of the midday sun. Pine trees line the shore around the water, and cliff faces rise up behind

them, alive with the comings and goings of puffins, gulls, and even the occasional bald eagle. Coves are ideal nesting grounds. They provide sanctuary from the predations of land animals and the unforgiving ocean winds sent by Njord.

Beverly makes her way to the center of the cove and kills the engine. If Lars is coming today, it will be around this spot. But she doesn't know when. It could be minutes. Or it could be hours. The only thing she knows is that the moon was full last night, and that means he will come.

She takes a seat on a plastic bin at the tail of the boat and takes out her lunchbox. She glances at the hungry gulls circling overhead as she eats her sandwich and whoopie pie. Then she washes it all down with the iced tea. This is her favorite part of the day – when the hard work was done, and she could give her body a rest. When Lars was with her, he would always make her laugh at this time. No matter how poor a catch they had, or if they'd been battered by sharp winds and freezing rain the whole day – he would make her forget all about it then.

Minutes pass, then an hour. Beverly's muscles and bones stiffen and start to ache, as always happens when she stops moving for too long.

And then it comes. Sudden, preternatural darkness falls over the cove. Beverly moves to the wheelhouse and lights the single lantern, which gives off a feeble yellow light that stretches out only a few yards from the boat.

But while her eyes aren't what they used to be, she will be able to see Lars.

Whereas the fog had been scant throughout the day, it suddenly blankets her all around. And then a lane of it clears, and a boat enters the cove through the lane.

It is the *Iron Ram*.

Beverly stands and grabs the gunwale of her own *Iron Ram*, clutching it until her knuckles are white despite the soreness in her hands.

Lars is at the wheel of the ghostly *Iron Ram*. Both he and his boat seem as real as anything, other than a faint blue-gray glow that emanates softly from them, illuminating the dark surrounding waters.

She doesn't call out to him. She knows he can't see or hear her. She only watches.

He throttles the engine of his boat and uses a gaff to pull in his buoy. He doesn't have a hydraulic hauler. He pulls the line over the gunwale and hauls his trawl up, hand-over-hand. His arms bulge with muscle, his face grimaces with effort, and in a few seconds, the line of traps emerges from the water below. He grabs them with gloved hands and yanks them over the

rail. He shakes his head as he finds nothing inside, replaces the bait bags, and tosses the traps back into the ocean.

wonders why he never catches anything. Perhaps lobsters don't have spirits themselves. Or if they do, perhaps they are not condemned to remain the prey of men in the veil beyond the world.

Beverly sighs and sits back down as Lars steams back out into the open water.

And after a few moments waiting for the ethereal darkness to lift and the mists to clear, she fires up her single diesel engine and steams out of the cove and back to the wharf.

She arrives back around 5:00 PM. Her dealer, Chip, tries shorting her for the haul, and she gives him a tongue-lashing so foul, it drops his jaw. Then he bursts into laughter, and she smiles at him. This is always how they haggle.

As she goes about the rest of the day's business – restocking on bait, cleaning the deck and equipment, getting updated weather maps for tomorrow – her mind lingers on Lars.

She wonders if he has any existence aside from his daily visit to Goodbottom Cove. She wonders if he remembers who she is. Or even who he is. Many of her friends of the same age as her wake up each day having forgotten all that happened in the days, weeks, and years before. She wonders if that's what it's like for Lars.

But as she finishes at the wharf and heads home, she stops thinking about it. She has to make supper, take a shower, and get to sleep by eight o'clock. Her alarm will sound at 3:30 AM. Same as it always does.

In Conversation with Elizabeth Rosen

MJ: Every story begins somewhere, so I was curious about the origin of your piece in our issue, “A Man Dragging His Dog Over a Snowy Field.” What inspired this story for you one and what drew you to explore these characters and themes?

ER: There’s a huge field alongside a highway that I frequently drive, and it does have transformers in it. Passing one day, I saw what I thought was a man dragging a dead animal behind him on a rope. I don’t think he was, but the misinterpretation made me think What If?

MJ: As someone who formerly lived in New England and now lives in the South, with you being from New Orleans and then living in Boston for a little bit (and you now living in Pennsylvania), I am curious about if/how do you think these two very different parts of the country, the North and the South, have influenced your writing?

ER: Such an interesting question. One thing that strikes me about Boston and New Orleans is that, at least for the United States, they are both old cities, yet their founding sensibilities are so different. It’s their settings and sensibilities that have probably most influenced my writing, though, to be honest, I don’t write too many stories set in New Orleans because I don’t think I have yet figured out how to write about my hometown.

MJ: Can you talk a little bit about your time in Boston, and how being in the city may have influenced your writing and your growth as a writer?

ER: Well, there’s the fact that I took my first creative writing class there, of course, but Boston is my favorite American city. I still miss it even though I haven’t lived there since I graduated from B.U. It’s a city that belongs to a certain period of my life, so the stories and images I pull from there belong to a younger, less seasoned person, but one who was taking it all in with the wide-eyed enthusiasm and idealism of someone that age. When I think about the stories I’ve set there, and the characters who inhabit it, I see that most of those stories are usually about the concerns, experiences, or the points of view of someone who would be that age.

MJ: You recently had your chapbook, *Survival Skills*, published. What inspired this collection, what is it about, and what do you hope readers take away from it?

ER: At heart, I'm what you would call a catastrophist, and because of that, I've always been fascinated by what it is like to go through or survive something terrible. How does a traumatic experience, or even the threat of a traumatic experience, change the way we see the world and people around us? What do we have to do either physically or psychologically to survive and keep going? The stories in this chapbook are really about those questions.

MJ: What role does revision play in your creative process, and what kinds of changes do you typically find yourself making? With both your short story in the issue and your recently released chapbook, do you want to talk about the revision process with those projects (if there was any)?

ER: I love some parts of revision and find others more frustrating. I really enjoy noodling with language, so the wordsmith part of revision is a pleasure. Trying to figure out why a story isn't working on the macro-level is less pleasant, simply because it's not always clear, and meanwhile, you're excited about this new story you want to tell, but it's not landing, and you're desperate to figure out how to nail it. Sometimes it takes putting distance between the writing and revising to see it. Sometimes you need readers to help you see where the story needs propping up. Sometimes the story just defies you, and it goes in a drawer. I've got a few of those. Every now and again, hopefully not often, you write something close to your heart that you feel really stubborn about and have to wrestle with your ego about changing it.

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?

ER: I can't really point to anyone specific as an influence because I'm someone who attaches themselves to particular stories/books, rather than

a body of work by an author. I read a lot, so the influence comes by seeing how other people tell their stories and learning what is possible in fiction-writing. In terms of tradition, I think my writing probably takes more from the baroque and lyrical writing I associate with New Orleans, which is itself a mystical, ornate, and deeply complicated place.

MJ: What are you currently reading?

ER: A poignant novella-in-flash by Sumitra Singam called Mother Karma, and a hilarious short story collection by Dave Housley called Looney, as well as Julie Otsuka's When the Emperor Was Divine, which I fully expect will have me bawling at the end, as I have for her other novels.

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

ER: Two collections, one called The Maryland Stories, which is realism and set in a community around an estuary there, and the other some kind of genre hybrid where a non-human entity is the glue that holds the pieces together. But ask me tomorrow; you might get a different answer.

Contributor Biographies

Jennifer L. Bauman is an archivist, mother, adult horseback rider, and writer. She grew up in Pennsylvania but now calls beautiful Western Massachusetts her home. The woods, farms, small towns, and hills offer her constant inspiration. Instagram: @nennieb

Michael J. Carter is a poet and clinical social worker. A graduate of Sarah Lawrence College he holds an MFA from Vermont College and an MSW from Smith. Poems of his have appeared in such journals as *Boulevard*, *Ploughshares*, *MomEgg Review*, *Western Humanities Review*, among many others. He spends his time walking his hounds and knitting.

Kersea Calhoun is a queer educator and single mother whose poetry and creative nonfiction explore intimacy, emotional rupture, memory, and identity. Her work fuses lyric and narrative modes, cataloging the breakdown of language, identity, and relationships. She holds a B.A. in English from Colorado Mesa University and an M.A. from Arizona State University. Her work has been featured in the *CMU Literary Review* and is forthcoming in *Beyond Queer Magazine*. A transplant from Colorado four years ago, she now lives and teaches in Maine. IG: @poet_not_potter

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*, *Portrait of New England*, and others. He recently retired from Johns Hopkins and has also taught at Harvard and UNH. He lives in Baltimore, MD. He sold his house on Nantasket Beach in July 2022.

John E. Heard grew up in Dover, Massachusetts, a town west of Boston, along the Charles River. A retired international educator, he and his wife, Susan, lived in London, The Hague, and Istanbul. He also served as a consultant for a global education organization and visited numerous schools in the United States, Europe, and Latin America. Although he has seen much of the world, he still enjoys visiting New England, especially Cape Cod and the mid-coast of Maine. His article, "Magical Mayo, Ireland," recently appeared in the online magazine *In the Know Traveler*.

Jeanne Julian is author of *Like the O in Hope* and two chapbooks. Her poems have won awards from *Reed Magazine*, *Comstock Review*, *I-70*

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Eric D. Lehman is the author of 23 books, including *New England at 400*, *Quotable New Englander*, *A History of Connecticut Food*, *New England Nature*, and *Afoot in Connecticut*. His biography *Becoming Tom Thumb* won the Henry Russell Hitchcock Award and was chosen as one of the outstanding university press books of the year by the ALA. *Shadows of Paris* won Novella of the Year from the Next Gen Indie Book Awards, a Silver Medal from the Foreword Review Indie Book Awards, and finalist for the Connecticut Book Award. Find him at www.ericdlehman.org or Instagram @afootinconnecticut.

Dan Maloney is an emerging author of fantasy and horror originally from Connecticut.

Bob McAfee is a retired software consultant who lives with his wife near Boston. He has written nine books of poetry, mostly on love, aging, and the natural world. For the last several years he has hosted a Wednesday night Zoom poetry workshop. Since 2019, he has had 172 poems selected by 70 different publications. Two poems Nominated for Best of the Net. His website, www.bobmcafee.com, contains links to all his published poetry.

Jennie Peters lives in New Hampshire with her husband, daughter and two dogs. She spends an abundance of time in the outdoors; Hiking, paddleboarding, walking the beach, and sitting at cafes indulging in endless coffees and overthinking.

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Elizabeth Rosen's stories have appeared in journals such as the *North American Review*, *Baltimore Review*, *Pithead Chapel*, and *Flash Frog*, as well as been nominated for the Pushcart, Best Small Fictions, and Best of the Net awards. Her story "Maw Maw's Cheese Balls" is the 2026 winner of the *Raleigh Review* Flash Fiction contest. Colorwise, Elizabeth is an autumn. She mourns the loss of Tab and still wants her MTV.

Matt Rosenberg lives with his wife, two children, and crazy dog in Manchester, New Hampshire. He teaches at a Montessori School, where he works with children from four to thirteen years of age. He plays the electric ukulele in a Rock ‘n’ Roll band. He enjoys whittling, playing basketball with his younger son, losing philosophical debates to his older son, and being happily exhausted at the end of the day with his wife.

Abbie Shanahan is a lifelong lover of words and their particular kind of magic. She holds an M.Ed and Ed.S in Reading & Language. She is a highly sensitive soul whose writing tends to center around nature and emergence. She resides in Western Massachusetts with her family where she teaches reading to elementary-aged children. You can find more of her work on her page, *Lichen & Salt* (abbieshanahan@substack.com), and on Instagram @abbielynnshanahan

Bobby Slokes lives in Essex County, MA with his family. He likes to cook and be outside in the sun reading, running or walking the dog. His piece, “Beating Bobby Flay,” is about his mother and regret. If Bobby could have lunch with anyone in history living or dead, it would be her.

Emory Stevens is an emerging poet in his fourth year at the University of New Hampshire. His work has previously been published in print in the Nossrat Yassini Poetry Anthology, earning him first prize in 2026. He has also been published online in issue one of the *Empty Inkwell Review*. As a born-and-raised New England poet, he is deeply inspired by love, longing, death, freedom, grief, and natural themes. Harsh New Hampshire winters are his favorite seasons for writing

Leo Swainbank is an emerging writer from New Hampshire. He graduated from Middlebury College and has been published in Rosemont College’s *Rathalla Review*. [linkedin.com/in/leo-swainbank-80903b299](https://www.linkedin.com/in/leo-swainbank-80903b299)

Val I. Vanderburgh grew up in southern New Hampshire and now lives in Colorado with their husband and two cats. Their work investigates the modern condition. Find more in *Aphelion*, *Against the Current*, *Poetry Society of New Hampshire*, *The 99%*, *Vernacular*, and elsewhere.

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.

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