



**Northern New England Review**

# VOLUME 43 | 2023



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**VOLUME 43 | 2023**

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*Northern New England Review* is published as a creative voice for the Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine region. *NNER* publishes writers and artists who live in, are from, or have connections to Vermont, New Hampshire, or Maine. If

you live here, were once from here, lost or found your heart here, or are currently searching for it among the green hills, sparkling ponds, and rocky coasts, *NNER* has the poems, short fiction, and creative nonfiction you want to read.

*Northern New England Review* is edited and designed by students and faculty at Franklin Pierce University in Rindge, New Hampshire. Questions can be sent to Phil Lemos, editor, at [LemosP@franklinpierce.edu](mailto:LemosP@franklinpierce.edu)

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**Northern New England Review**

**VOLUME 43 | 2023**

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CONTENTS

12

MELISSA D. BURRAGE

BLIZZARD OF '78

MELISSA D. BURRAGE

13

ICE SHACK ON COLLEGE POND

RAY KEIFETZ

14

ON THIS ROAD WE WAVE

CADE ROSE

15

CHIONOPHILE

ALMYR L. BUMP

16

BLACK BIRDS SEE EVERYTHING

RUSSELL DUPONT

17

VERMONT MORNING

MONA ANDERSON

18

CLASS OF 1972 SEARCHING FOR MISSING CLASSMATES

20

MONA ANDERSON

LIKE RED TULIPS SHE PLANTS IN FALL

LIESL MAGNUS

21

AN ISLAND WE CALLED STAR, OR A HOME THAT I KNEW

28

JIM KROSSCHELL

LOVE SONG

FIONA PETERSEN

29

MY COUNTRY TIS OF THEE

MORIAH ERICKSON

31

OLD TIMERS

33

JARROD INGLES

WHITE MOUNTAIN DRIVE, 6:45AM

34

JEANNE JULIAN

NORTHERN BEACH AT DAWN

35

DAVID HUMMON

LANDSCAPE WORKSHOP

36

DAVID HUMMON

WHOSE WOODS

37

ANDREW MILLER

IT WAS THE RACCOONS

44

JEN DROCIAK

DEFENSE MECHANISMS

46

JEN DROCIAK

DANDELION WISHES

EMMA RHODA

47

DIANE

K.A. HAMILTON

49

MY MOTHER'S SCARF

K.A. HAMILTON

50

DUCKS

PAUL JENKINS

51

INSELBERG

52

PAUL JENKINS

THE DRAKES AT UNCANOONUC

WILL EVANS

53

LEARNING TO LEAVE NEW HAMPSHIRE

QUINCY ALASTAIR COOKE

62

THE TREE OF LIFE

JOSEPH COLEMAN

65

GHOST SHIP

ELIZABETH COLBERT

66

WHITEWASH TO PARAKEET GREEN

***In Closing***

70 CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

EDITORS' NOTE

*Maine. New Hampshire. Vermont*: The three states of Northern New England are worthy representatives of Americana, while featuring a unique flavor and style in heir own right. We tell stories that can

only be set in this three-state region, nestled in our little corner of the United States. It's the home of the unexpected. A stamp of American history, of rebellion and liberty, of innovation and progress, of beautiful coastlines and majestic mountain peaks.

*Northern New England Review* Volume 43 attempts to capture these snapshots in time with poetry and prose, in tightly crafted meanderings through Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont. We

strive to complicate easy narratives of place and homecoming with our unfurling dares and syntactical seedlings. Take, for instance, the (page 17), the by (page 31), and the of in “Not Long to Go” (page 35).

Take, for example, the way a conversation amongst locals at a Down East Maine cafe turns to a most unusual diasgreement in Andrew Miller's "It Was the Racoons." Or how a routine car trip can be an otherwordly experience in Jarrod Ingles' "White Mountain Drive, 6:45AM." Or how Russell duPont shows in "Vermont Morning" that dawn can be the perfect cure for what ails you. *NNER* values vivid, lyrical poetry and deeply resonant, tightly crafted prose that reminds us why we love it here.

We hope you enjoy these original explorations of personality, place, and memory as much as we enjoyed compiling them.

*—Phil Lemos*

NORTHERN NEW ENGLAND

REVIEW

*Melissa D. Burrage*

## BLIZZARD OF '78

It took my father hours to dig

a narrow path from our front door

a task he took to when the food ran out

when we used up all the chocolates in his bureau drawer and mixed them with honey to make fudge.

No, it was time to venture out

with our sled, and our boots, our hats and gloves

into the silence of the snow with its primitive simplicity to where the road use to be

without cars or walkways or yellow dotted lines.

We walked to town under pine boughs veiled in white that arched heavily over our heads

and greeted cheerful strangers in our neighborhood like congregates at a meeting hall

feeling closer to each than we've ever felt before or since.

**12 |** MELIS S A D . BURR A GEI

*Melissa D. Burrage*

## ICE SHACK ON COLLEGE POND

We arrived an hour before dark eager to try out our Christmas skates

You sat on a rough-hewn bench in a row six legs dangling, unable to reach the floor

Bundled in colorful padded coats, mittens pom-pom hats. I laced your skates while

A pot-bellied stove warmed you and

a thermos of hot cider filled your bellies

The chapel bell chimed the hour warning us that dark would come soon

That it was time to get out on the ice to glide with the novices and experts

Over the slightly bumpy frozen pond,

oak leaves encased like prisoners beneath cold feet

We held on to each other for a long while trying to stay upright, falling, then getting up

Pushing off with our right, then our left practicing, repeatedly, until confident

Until we knew we could let go that we could go it alone.

*Ray Keifetz*

## ON THIS ROAD WE WAVE

Dust hangs heavy over the road.

A fox fades, a moose looms, a driver waves. Backlit silhouettes, faceless,

nameless as they near

wave like injured blackbirds their one good wing and I wave back though knowing

none of this will lift.

Eyeless in the dust,

I wave at men. I wave at squirrels. I wave at moths. I wave at jays.

From his porch

an old man barely standing waves

a catcher’s mitt – glaring disaster orange. My hand lifts, another flutters.

Our hands, our paws, our wings flutter, flap, sway—

So few on this road wave a light

*Cade Rose*

## CHIONOPHILE

The roses sitting by my window decided to start wilting today, so I poured some water in to try and perk them up. It’s 5:15 PM,

but November in Maine tells me it’s nighttime. Reluctantly, I follow. The sun sets early these days,

so, for now, I’m stuck inside.

Slapped by a crisp breeze when I open the front door, I am reminded of winter’s arrival. My chapped lips

and stuffy nose detest dropping temperatures, but tranquility finds itself in the front pocket of my dusted-off winter coat.

Thirty degrees will feel

like a summer day soon enough, and when the snow comes, I know I’ll remember why I love the North:

the soon-to-be glistening wintry landscape becomes my everyday Monet. My roses have now wilted,

but I decided to start blossoming.

*Almyr L. Bump*

## BLACK BIRDS SEE EVERYTHING

Something to witness, a murder of crows meeting as mullahs passing proscription.

Or an unkindness of ravens unmoved, unsparing, watching

rank-scented roadkill.

A wake of vultures observing, waiting, viewing necrosis. That’s a fine kettle.

Black feathers glossy like anthracite coal, unstained by living; they skulk like foxes.

Work stops at sunset, darkness falls over skeleton remains

sheathed in parchment skin,

Pulled from an old hole, all unremembered.

Black birds watch and wait.

*Russell duPont*

## VERMONT MORNING

Hung over from too many at Big Ed’s cookout,

I lounge on Markin’s porch and watch the sun

creep over Pisgah.

Across the rutted road, cows graze their way

in the field, lowing softly; and the first crows caw, glide, dip and dive.

Beyond the pasture, shadows grow

in the thick woods. LeBrecque’s truck coughs to a start.

There is a lapse in time.

Morning breathes

and the day crooks its finger, beckoning me

to come along.

*Mona Anderson*

## CLASS OF 1972 SEARCHING FOR MISSING CLASSMATES

(Headline in local newspaper)

Maybe they moved

to Canada or California. Or Spain.

Not missing, just gone. Or do they avoid reunions by hiding in a cloud?

Are we missing

only if someone is looking for us?

Someone could be missing me this very minute, but I know where I am.

Sometimes we’re missing in the same room where someone is searching for us, invisible to each other,

lives lived alone together.

Our orange kitten, Einstein, was missing once, but he knew where he was. At the top of a tall oak

in the woods with no idea how to get down. We heard

his cries and my partner dutifully dragged out our longest ladder, pushed it into the snow against the tree and climbed

until he was tall enough to wonder

how he’d get down with a frightened kitten in his arms.

My mother was missing her teeth.

She missed them, lamenting their loss at each meal when food stuck between her bridge and gums.

Now I miss her, gone like her teeth.

I miss my children playing in the yard but I know where they are, creating lives of their own, apart from me.

The match to my favorite earring with the turquoise stone is missing. I’ve stopped looking, but it’s still missing.

So is the extra phone charger, my favorite jacket,

my mind sometimes. My Nexus e-reader has been missing for years. When we can’t find something, like the TV remote,

we say it must be with the Nexus

as though they’re sunning together on a beach in Florida drinking pina coladas, hiding

with the missing classmates from the class of 1972.

*Mona Anderson*

## LIKE RED TULIPS

SHE PLANTS IN FALL

When winter thaw collides with spring mud she dreads losing winter’s pause,

begs its hush to linger.

As dawn and dusk tangle, she forgets to eat or bathe,

her worn brown slippers padding in crepuscular circles.

But when chickadees outside rupture winter’s reticence and green spikes erupt gasping for breath,

her pulse quickens,

sizzles her sleepy body awake.

She plunges her hands into the soil that aches

with fresh life under a cloudless sky, too bright, serenaded

by peepers, too loud,

imagines her roots

swelling as spring rains resurrect her.

*Liesl Magnus*

## AN ISLAND WE CALLED STAR, OR A HOME THAT I KNEW

*...Thus departed Hiawatha, Hiawatha the Beloved,*

*In the glory of the sunset,...*

I grew up as the oldest of four in the southern reaches of the White Mountains, the place where the craggy granite peaks softened into rolling hills before melting into lakes and rivers that wound their way south towards Boston. Our roads were narrow and bumpy, hemmed in by meandering ridgelines and endless hardwood forests. The view from our front porch ended after a few miles, the Squam Range and the Sandwich Wilderness rising from the shore of the lake to the north and east and the Belknaps to the west. For the four of

us--cousins by name but siblings in all the other ways that mattered-- these peaks were the border for our world.

At 17, like many do, I left for college, and my first months in the North Country of New York found me nervous under the open sky. At home, the horizon was pierced by white pines, old giants that dug their roots into the sandy soil two centuries ago and declared their stubborn intention to stay. The southern slope of the Squam Range was scattered with rocky outcroppings strung together with a hundred miles of winding trails. The four of us would stand on the granite ledges watching clouds come rolling in

from the north, crossing Whiteface and Passaconaway, rippling over Chocorua and Doublehead before dragging their feathery fingers over the islands and drenching our view in a gossamer-spun cloud of white. Twilight would linger on summer nights while the sun slipped behind the mountains and then finally below the horizon that we couldn’t see.

In the North Country, crumbling silos stand empty next to Route 11 and the horizon stretches out in one long line. It all felt so open in those first few months and I remember distinctly the understanding that this must be what a mouse feels like the

second before the hawk swoops in. But besides a photo of my dorm room—a rainbow elephant quilt tucked in perfectly and stuffed animals curled on the bed--my first photos from St. Lawrence are of the sunsets. Purple, pink, grey, and dusky orange, brushstrokes swept out on the sky and cast against those crumbling silos. Deep, golden twilight sinking into night above the open fields. The sun falling to the horizon behind the houses on Park Street and the alpenglow that I didn’t think could exist without mountains to provide the backdrop filling Carnegie and Richardson.

Eventually, these sunset photos feature people, too, and sunrise photos become just as common. The open sky and the life that filled it became mesmerizing. The house where I lived for three long years had a parking lot that faced west. My housemates and

I kept an eye out for glorious nights when the colors shifted and danced, turning from pink to red to purple to gold and sometimes all at once before slipping below the horizon and leaving our little home standing, cast,

*In the purple mists of evening,*

that held in them equal parts nostalgia and promise.

New England years run in quiet circles, the progression of the seasons a slow and steady march whose drumbeat echoes in bird calls and shifting ice. Every year, mortality works its way into

November, when the splendor of fall has made way for the cold and aching damp that burrows into leaf piles and into cracks in the stone walls. Sometime in December the lake would freeze over and the ice, hard as iron, spreads from the shore and creeps between the islands and we four children worked our way out into a place that had become all our own.

Without the summer tourists, the lake was ours. We skied

from island to island, watching the wind rip across the broads and jumping from cove to cove to find the places where the snow has built up into drifts taller than we were. We would peer in the

windows of the shuttered summer camps, catching glimpses of the books someone left open on the coffee table and rattling the locks to see if we could get inside and glimpse in perfect stillness, the frozen memory of someone else’s life.

In time the wind would warm and the frozen lake darkened from a blinding white to a cold, cold grey. Soft spots appear around the reefs and the spring wind breaks up the ice and ushers in longer days and the fruits of spring and summer begin to beckon. The four of us would spend hours digging through the sandy loam on the streambed in the marshes and low hollow spots below the houses where we grew up. We saw the patterns that the stream etched in the marsh, the way it bent and curled around tree roots and moss- covered rocks, ducking under the banks and popping out again just over there.

In the spring and into the summer, the ferns in the hollow would grow up taller than we were. The four of us would practice sitting ever so still and watching the fragile green canopy tremble and flutter above us. We’d watch the weather, too, clouds rolling in across the lake and wind whipping up the spring trees hazed with green and new growth.

We’d watch the wild blueberries through April and into May while the buds swelled from dormant twigs, red tips poking through the cold brown wood. The youngest flowers on the blueberry bushes are pink and shriveled but as they grow with the lengthening days they turn white--cream colored bells dripping from green strings on the water’s edge. When the flowers fell, they’d cling to the granite shore before turning translucent and vanishing, eaten by a fish, maybe, or just dissolved and gone. The fallen flowers leave behind

a small green bud, clusters of nascent fruit with tiny crowns just starting to feel the sun. As the spring wears on into summer, the little berries grew to the size of peas by late June.

In July, green gives way all of a sudden to pink and purple and then to blue, blueberries dangling in clumps between brittle

branches and paper-thin leaves. Along the worn-in path on the shore, we’d pull down handfuls of berries from the highest bushes, delighting in their color and the way they burst on our tongues, staining our fingers indigo in the summer sun. Some days, we’d take one of the boats out to a shallow, sandy spot off Moon Island and swim out to a tiny island we called Star to a secret patch of blueberry bushes that we had found years before. On the windward side, where the waves crashed into the slimy granite shore, we’d stand on the rocks, waves grasping at our calves and the sun to our backs, pulling handfuls of highbush blueberries from wherever we could reach.

The seasons turned at the same speed as August days when we were growing up. They came into being like dawn, breaking slowly through the trees and misting the horizon with the grey- green light of new life and a new day. Summers came in full force, thunderstorms rolling over the lake, choreographing the lightning that danced across the ridgelines before breaking over the southern shore and sloughing off to the east. In the evenings, the leftover clouds painted themselves like brushstrokes in the col between Livermore and Cotton and hung the lake, night after night, in a purple-grey twilight the color of the coming frost.

Up on the ridge as September moves into night, the brilliant green of the maple trees fades to scarlet and then to brown, falling leaves from their close-knit canopies opening up the forest floor to chipmunks, songbirds, and tiny saplings that fall from giants as seeds before burrowing down into the soil, tucking themselves into bed as the summers spin into snow.

The wind picks up again and instead of bringing life to the lake it brings chill, dancing among the falling leaves and ushering out the seasons, beckoning them

*To the regions of the home-wind,*

*Of the Northwest-Wind, Keewaydin*,

where they’ll slumber, waiting for the measure in our years- long song when they’ll be called to come again.

I grew up in a house called Keewaydin, a name for the

northwest wind that my great-great grandfather found in the Longfellow poem called The Song of Hiawatha. It tells of the story of Hiawatha--a follower of the Great Peacemaker called Dekanawidah, the Huron prophet that first proposed the Iroquois Confederacy-- the Haudenosaunee. Hiawatha was born into the Onondaga tribe whose historic range makes up what is now the eastern Finger Lakes region of New York, close to the North Country whose sunsets

made their home in my heart. Dekanawidah, the Great Peacemaker, leaned on Hiawatha to persuade the Five Nations--he had a speech impediment, and Hiawatha’s skills as an orator were indispensable.

I grew up in a house with an Ojibway name from a poem about an Iroquois peacemaker on a lake with a name taken from the Abenaki language: Squam. The Haudenosaunee land stretched from Ohio River Valley south of Lake Erie all the way up to the St.

Lawrence Seaway whose pull is felt in the rivers that ran through the campus. However, besides his role in the foundation of the Iroquois Confederacy, not much is known about Hiawatha. He lives on in Longfellow’s poem and in the stories we tell about him and he and Longfellow connected my two earliest homes with a single, shining thread.

I was a landscaper for five summers, working for the families that own the big houses on the lake and the old camps that we ski to every winter. I spend half a day in their gardens, weeding, watering, raking, and in many cases, just sitting and talking. They’re old folks, a lot of them, and I think they paid me more for my company than anything else. But still, I woke their gardens up every spring. From under the piles of oak leaves and detritus that has blown into the windward corners of the barn, I’d reveal all the little green sprouts, echinacea and rudbeckia by the dozens, reaching their tiny arms towards the sun.

Week after week I’d watch them grow. The hydrangea bush by the steps got its leaves back, the daylilies next to the stone wall pushed out buds that bent under their own weight. The native geranium I planted years ago under the sapling maple springs into a riot of magenta in June. The astilbe and heuchera on the shady

side of the deck crept into color, deep purples and startling whites appeared all at once in July. Back over by the barn, the echinacea and rudbeckia patch came hurtling into August, delighting in their sunny corner of the barn, the sandy soil, and the summer rain.

One of my favorite clients was an old woman named Elsie.

Her husband was an architect, my mom grew up with her five children and most of her dozen grandchildren are around my age. She moved to Boston when the second World War forced her from her home in the north of the Netherlands and moved up to the lake when she married her husband. Her red farmhouse, with its two enormous barns and guesthouse down the yard, was tucked up away from the water, settled into old stone foundations and wrapped in dancing French lilacs. A few ancient oak trees stretched their limbs across the porches and fields, trunks twisting up to the sky and reaching like worshipers towards the sun. Elsie was married under one of them. Her children were christened under another.

This place and these people are strung through with stories, every name saturated with the life and legacy of four hundred years, and I grew up learning how to think at the pace of growing things. How to understand life on the scale of a mountain, how to accept things on the scale of the old oaks and to move through the years with the certainty of an old blueberry bush. They took their cues from the sun and the stars, the shifting days and nights, and I think that they have much more patience for the world than I do. The oak trees in Elsie’s yard have seen more than I know, and even the season- to-season changes just… slip by for them. Three hundred years old, and what’s a month? The same thing that is a gift for me, they take for granted: A revolutionary kind of patience, in its many forms, is a given virtue of the plants and places I love. Granite mountains, worn down through the long slow centuries, rocky cliffs and shores more or less the same in Hiawatha’s day as it is mine.

I live in Montana now, the Bitterroot and Lolo mountains framing my world like the Squam range did when I was little. I work deep in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, the Lochsa and Selway Rivers coursing past my tent at night. I hear wolf calls in the

warm, silver dawn and elk bugles reverberate up and down the river canyons. Huckleberries growing low in the underbrush and along the shores of mountain lakes are less plentiful than blueberries, but I’m learning to love them, too. The cedars are ancient and the vanilla smell of Ponderosa seeps through the summer and the legacy of the Nez Perce lives on in echoes.

I went home in November of this year, right as daylight savings turned the land towards sleep. The leaves were off the oaks, firewood piled up, ready and waiting. I put leashes on the dogs and walked down the yard. The chickens rummaged through the

fallen leaves, the naked branches of the beeches scraped against each other and the breeze coming down from the held the barest hint of frost. Down the path and out on the dock, the low water lapped at the lowest steps of the rock stairs and I looked north towards the familiar horizon that once was home and still is but isn’t. Whiteface. Passaconaway. Chocorua, Doublehead, Rattlesnake. And below the ridges, where the water met the land and the view continued, out of sight,

*To the Islands of the Blessed*.

*Jim Krosschell*

## LOVE SONG

I see that that three juvenile loons Have chosen this stretch of shore On the coast of Maine

To spend their winter Wailing love songs To future mates

On summer ponds, Like teenage boys Their voices breaking, As mine does

When I go backwards From the age of 70 to then, Not to mention going Sideways, now,

To you.

*Fiona Petersen*

## MY COUNTRY TIS OF THEE

As children, we sang “My Country Tis of Thee, Sweet Land of Liberty”

without questioning a single word. We were only children, after all.

We assumed, without a single doubt, that we were the brightest and the best,

That we would be forever cloaked in safety and freedom. What could possibly go wrong,

what could possibly change?

Today, a despairing cry was torn from me.

what do we do now that so much has proven false for so many, though not, of course,

for rich, old, white men, who like puppeteers,

pull the strings and run the show.

How do we fight back against their power and their fear?

Do not speak of Lady Justice; she who is blind,

but now is rendered deaf and mute as well-powerless. She has become a phantom, a ghost,

and we should be afraid:

black and brown, gay, transgender,

the disenfranchised, the poor, the immigrant desperate for a better

life,

each and every woman and girl.

What could possibly go wrong? What could possibly change?

Now we know.

Sweet Land of Liberty

*Moriah Erickson*

## OLD TIMERS

After the stoplight on China Road and Bay Street there's a junkyard tucked between the railroad tracks and the street. A big open pole building, steel,

like one would expect a garage to be with lifts and the mechanical smell of grease,

clattering tools making metallic clangs.

Outside there are a hundred different cars all in different states of disrepair, some crushed on the front ends, some doors mashed in, broken headlights, taillights and folded up

trunks.

There is no barking dog chained anywhere.

Today

in the October sunshine

sitting on an open tailgate of some smashed up blue Chevy two old-timers with threadbare t-shirts stretched across their bellies hold grease-stained paper plates perched on their folded thighs.

They are talking weather or politics

(these are the same old timers who advertise

who they voted for on the back of their trucks with great pride, even if they lost)

between bites of whatever was on those plates. One sucks his finger clean.

Maybe they work in the garage, but I doubt it. These guys are

of the age where they don’t work anymore, they

take their naps at two, with their mouths hanging open on recliners.

They’d wear navy coveralls if they worked, with names patched above their hearts.

I imagine their wives, sick of their gaping, snoring maws walking out the door, thinking

He can get his own dinner tonight.

*Jarrod Ingles*

## WHITE MOUNTAIN DRIVE, 6:45AM

Morning in New Hampshire, the winter world stands

like a Robert Frost poem— beautiful

inscrutable.

Mountains rise gray against a pink glow dreamt up

by the trees as a way

to finally touch the stars

that still linger against the day— a thousand departures

necessary for one arrival.

Is the vanishing of so many only bearable because we’re certain they’ll be back?

Or because we’re rarely

awake to see them take their leave with a final shining wink?

My mind rushes to make permanent this impermanent vision,

the eternal wild of day’s dawning— a million flares of color

blazing from settled snow.

*Jeanne Julian*

## NORTHERN BEACH AT DAWN

Note the presence of absence

of striped umbrellas, aluminum chairs, wooden stairs, afternoon glare.

No Ford F150s, no fence,

no lifeguard, no sense of a season. Absence of breeze.

Absence of coconuts, cottages, condos. Absence of night.

No kids with kites, no flight of gulls or grebes or Boeings.

No terry-cloth towels, plastic trowels.

Absence of fishing rods studding the sand. No coolers of Bud.

Absence of signage, surcharges, surfers. No moon, no horizon, no Burmese pythons. Absence of trawlers and trailers, sails and sailors. Absence of gators. Absence of palms.

Only a hush, and beyond, a faint blush, indigo,

a slow-growing glow, and calm.

*David Hummon*

## LANDSCAPE WORKSHOP

*"If you're going to paint, just paint."*

K. J., New Hampshire, 2022

This field, once a pasture, yellowed by the summer sun, walled by grey-green trees soon to turn with cold nights

this field, now a place for Adirondack chairs, a bench, blueberries, rows behind me and to my right

this field with that island of stones and granite ledge, topped by scrub trees, a small pine, upstarts.

"Simplify," she said, "you don't need individual leaves,

not even branches, the lines of your pen, just shape, color."

So I leave out the blueberries, the blue sky, the soil

and my patch of shade, the farmer who once worked here,

the pain in my hands, the worry, the thoughts of you and your dying mother, yesterday and tomorrow,

and paint this field, once a pasture, yellowed by the summer sun.

*David Hummon*

## WHOSE WOODS

for Louie, October 2022

He was slumped over in his wheelchair when I arrived, belted in, reading a large book nestled in his left arm, his fisted hand holding the corner.

Looking up, he frowned, then smiled when I unmasked, and greeted me with words I could not hear. Sitting close, I told him of my day, then shared two poems,

and he came alive, pointing to the bedside table, his hand trembling, where I found a worn Frost,

and read aloud, "I'm going out to clear the pasture spring," always a good place to start.

I passed the book to him, and he reclaimed his glasses, turned the pages slowly, until he stopped,

looked up, his snow-whiskered face shaking, nodding, and read, attending to each word, each phrase,

and I could hear nothing but the rhythms of his breath, the sweep of easy wind and downy flake, until the end, and he looked up again with the joy and wonder

that belie sleep.

*Andrew Milller*

## IT WAS THE RACCOONS

I’ve always wondered why people can get so angry about killing animals. We eat meat, don’t we? And some folks get bothered about lots more than pigs, chickens, and cows. They’ll get into a dither if you build a road or drain a swamp and wipe out a few woodland critters.

However, a conversation I overheard last summer made me think differently.

That conversation took place at the “Men’s Breakfast" in a small restaurant in Downeast Maine. My wife and I aren’t Mainers; we were born and raised in Kentucky. Since we teach during the winter, we can spend our summers on the Maine coast. After we arrived last May, Stuart Fedder, who lives next door, invited me to join him and other men for their weekly gathering at the Captain’s Café. It’s a homey little restaurant known for its fish chowder, lobster rolls, steamed lobster, and traditional breakfasts. They mainly serve fishermen and townspeople.

The breakfast eaters are 20 or so older men, many retired, who have known each other for years. They sit around a line of tables in a small room off the main dining area. These get-togethers are uneventful; the same people come each week and talk about the same things. They discuss the price of lobsters, boat repair issues, the number of tourists in town, and the weather. The men avoid politics except when it comes to Town Meetings. They are pleasant enough, although they still treated me like an outsider.

They have an unusual way of settling the check. The servers provide a single bill that includes everyone’s meal. Each man estimates how much he owes and tosses his contribution on the table. One fellow determines if the accumulated cash matches what’s needed. On the first pass, it usually does not, so a call goes out for more. The men dig back into their wallets, and eventually, everyone's breakfast, including tip, is covered.

Occasionally, someone will bring a guest, usually a relative or friend from out of town. Right before Labor Day, my neighbor Stuart brought his son-in-law, who was visiting from Pennsylvania. Jason was short and slim with sideburns like out of the 60s. He shook hands with everyone, answered questions about what he did for a living and how he liked Maine. It was obvious that the men lumped Jason with me as being from "away." I had always thought of Pennsylvania as more northern than southern and was surprised they didn’t claim kinship with him, especially since his in-laws are deeply rooted here.

Stuart and Jason took seats opposite me. We were near the head of the table, close to windows that looked out over the street. Stuart handed a menu to Jason.

"Now, this is on me," he said.

Jason touched his father-in-law’s arm and smiled.

Stuart dropped his menu without looking at it and asked Marty, who sat next to me, about work on the golf course. The Coastal Country Club was built in the early 20th century, and there’s a long-term plan to redo the greens, sand traps, and fairways. The owner wants to modernize everything, make the course more challenging. Jason followed the conversation but kept quiet. Likely he did not play golf, although his father-in-law played several times a week.

Two ladies started taking orders, working their way down both sides of the table. I selected bacon, eggs, and an English muffin. Marty ordered a three-egg cheese omelet, a sausage biscuit, and a bowl of oatmeal. His doctor told him the oats would lower his bad cholesterol. Stuart wanted scrambled eggs, sausage, and

a grilled muffin, a specialty at Captain’s Café. These are made by halving and buttering day-old muffins, then caramelizing the cut sections on the grill. Some men complain they are the cook’s way of foisting off day-old leavings, but others counter that once fried, they are superior to those straight from the oven. That tired discussion was aired again—mainly for Jason’s benefit—although he didn’t seem interested. He pulled out his phone, scanned emails, and added cream to his coffee.

Our food began to arrive, and the chatter slowed. Stuart and Jason spoke in low tones about buying lobsters for a family

get-together. After they agreed on logistics, Stuart asked Wilson how his grapes were doing. Wilson, who’s hard of hearing, used to run a bank in Vermont. Now he has severe arthritis and can’t take more than a few steps without a walker. Despite his mobility problems, he’s very active. I regularly see him taking refuse to the recycling center or shopping in town. He’s also an avid golfer and zooms around the course in an electric cart. He navigates to his ball using the walker. He has a slight tremor in his right hand, and a small puddle of coffee always accumulates in his saucer.

Wilson spread a lump of raspberry jam over his toast. “Raccoons got every last one.” He took a big bite, then a long drink of coffee.

Several years ago, two neighbors built a gazebo for him, and the vines reached the top this summer. He spends a lot of time tending to them, clippers and other tools stowed in a little basket slung over the walker. He also cares for a bed of gladiolas along the driveway.

“Well, that’s a crock,” said Stuart.

“I’ve been nursing them for years.” He set his coffee cup down with a bang. A dab of jam clung to his upper lip.

“You need a have-a-heart trap,” said Carter, who sat at the head of the table, back to the windows. “I’ve got three. You’re welcome to them.” Carter is a very big guy, over six feet tall, and weighs 250, maybe more. He always orders two breakfasts: a stack of pancakes or waffles, then a plate of eggs, toast, sausage, or ham.

The others were always after him to ante up for two meals. Even so, Carter was a bit of a celebrity for being able to consume so much with so little effort. Those sitting next to him felt inadequate if their plates weren’t heaped with food.

Wilson said he had ordered two traps online, but the raccoons ate everything before they arrived.

Carter shrugged. A server, likely in her late twenties and quite pretty, set a plate of pancakes in front of him. He elevated each with his knife, spread butter, and drizzled on syrup. He sliced

out a wedge, stabbed it with his fork.

“ Once you catch them—then what?”

Wilson stared at his plate while he pondered the question.

Carter assumed that Wilson hadn't heard and started to repeat himself, but Wilson interrupted. “Tote them to the gravel pit south of town.”

Carter shook his head. “Bad idea. They’ll migrate back to your place.”

Jason picked up his muffin. “What do you mean?”

Carter ignored Jason and spun his plate to bring the uncut pancakes closer. “I got into that last year. Took a couple of raccoons down by the shore. Next day, they were back.”

Jason spoke up again, his voice louder. “How do you know they were the same raccoons? Maybe they were new ones, moving into the territory—"

Carter dribbled more syrup on his pancakes and glanced at Stuart. “Looked the same to me.” He turned to Wilson. “I quit transporting them.”

Jason leaned forward. “What do you do with them?” Carter waved his hand like he was shooing a fly off the table. “Just let them set.”

“What do you mean—'let them set?’”

Carter cleared his throat. “Wait till they die, then truck them to the landfill.”

“How long does that take?” “To get to the landfill? “For the raccoons to die.” “A week or so.”

Marty rapped a spoon against his glass to get Wilson’s attention. “Hey, Wilson,” he called, “shoot them. That’s what I do.” Jason turned to Marty. "While they're still in the trap?"

“Sure.”

Carter took a long drink of tomato juice. “Once, a big one flipped the trap over and got stuck upside down. He didn’t last long.” He slid the empty pancake plate away and hauled in his second breakfast: scrambled eggs, fried ham, and whole wheat

toast. He stared at the ham. “I can tell they’re dead when flies start buzzing around.”

The conversation stopped while a server worked her way down the table, refilling coffee cups. She had two pots, one for decaf and one for regular. This server was old and had a tired-looking, wind-blown face. She probably used to work on a lobster boat. The good-looking one was at the other end of the table figuring the

bill. While the older one poured, I wondered how guys from back home—those who hunted along the upper Kentucky or Green rivers—would react to this discussion. For them, shooting raccoons would have been the first step, quickly followed by butchering and eating.

Jason leaned forward. His face had taken on a reddish cast. “Now let me get this straight.” He pointed his fork at Carter. “You let the raccoons starve to death—”

Stuart laid a hand on Jason’s arm. “Now, son—"

Jason brushed the older man's hand away. He focused on Marty. “And you shoot them while they’re in the trap.” His voice was getting louder and drowned out the others. He tossed his fork on the table. “Think someday you’ll graduate to ‘ducks in a barrel?’” Marty looked to the left and right. He started to speak, then stopped.

Jason glared at the two men. “Tell me again—what are those traps called?” Suddenly, the room was quiet. The only sounds were a light clatter of dishes in the kitchen, muffled voices from the main dining area.

Carter exchanged glances with Marty. "Just a damn minute—”

Stuart lifted his hand as though to shield his son-in-law. "Now, let's all take it easy."

The two servers backed against the wall. The good-looking one started for the kitchen. Jason pushed his chair back and stood up. His eyes swept the table. It seemed like he paused on my face longer than the others. Maybe he expected me to say something.

Stuart tugged at Jason’s sleeve. He had thrown his shoulders forward like he was going into a fighting stance. Carter stood up. His Adam’s

apple bobbed up and down. Two little veins bulged out on the left side of his head. Stuart jumped to his feet and draped one arm over his son-in-law's shoulder. "Come on…."

Jason grabbed his wallet. He slipped out a pair of twenties. “Let me buy you guys breakfast.” He dropped the bills. One landed on his eggs, the other fluttered to a stop next to Carter’s juice glass. Jason strode toward the door. Carter started to follow, but Marty gripped the big man’s arm. “Leave it alone, Carter, leave it alone.

The kid’s gone.”

Stuart set a couple of ten-dollar bills next to his plate. A few seconds later, he was on the street, running after Stuart. The others got to their feet and pulled out their wallets. Wilson had a tired look on his face as he tucked two fives and three ones under his plate.

Maybe he blamed himself for starting the conversation. A flicker of jam was still on his upper lip; most of the original smear had either been licked off or wiped away. After a few minutes, all the men were gone. The café owner set the check in front of me. I collected and counted the cash. There was a lot more than needed. The servers would divvy up fifty dollars.

I skipped the next two Men's Breakfasts. Just too busy packing, I told my wife. It’s a 1,200-mile trip to Louisville and takes four days. I went to town several times but never ran into Carter or any of the others.

Now I’m back in Kentucky. Many months and hundreds of miles from the Men’s Breakfast. But that conversation still haunts me. It was the raccoons.

The other day, I learned a new word: gibbet. It was from a book by Bill McKibben that my granddaughter said I should read. The subtitle "A Graying American Looks Back…" made her

think of me. A gibbet is an instrument of public execution, such as a guillotine, iron cage, executioner's block, impalement stake, or hanging gallows. According to McKibben, in 1775, a slave to John Codman was hanged, tarred, then displayed in an iron gibbet for several years. Twenty years later, Paul Revere casually referred to that site during his midnight ride. Gibbetting was also a method

of execution. The accused was set on an impalement stake or inside a tiny cage to die of exposure, thirst, and starvation. Jesus was gibbeted.

I can’t stop thinking about those raccoons. Spending days and days in a tiny cage—maybe stuck upside down—gradually dying of thirst and hunger, wallowing in their feces and urine. Or watching a man approach with a gun, knowing you were about to be shot. What a way to die.

Why not just drive a few miles and turn them loose?

I should have come to the kid's defense. Or tried to defuse the conversation. But it's too late now. Anyway, we’ll go back next summer. My wife likes it there.

*Jen Drociak*

## DEFENSE MECHANISMS

I am not an armadillo

able to instinctually roll myself into a ball, and enclose my body in its own armor,

to defend against an imminent threat.

Nor can I burrow

deep into the cool, moist earth to escape for just a moment until the threat subsides.

I am not a porcupine able to hide my bare face,

keep my belly to the ground, and swat my tail at an assailant.

Nor do I have a reserve of sharp quills to dislodge against a predator

during an attempted attack.

I am not you

able to turn inward,

and construct an impenetrable emotional barrier

when fearing the one you’re falling for will break your heart.

I only know how to wear it on my sleeve.

Instead, I am a scallop pummeled by the tide

and washed ashore on the hot sand

awaiting the inevitable piercing beak of a herring gull

to pry open my loosened shell and bore a hole into my exposed underbelly.

Instead, I am an Earthworm my underground tunnel

flooded by an intense summer rainstorm,

my naked body rising to the surface of the lawn only to become the red-breasted Robin’s next meal.

*Jen Drociak*

## DANDELION WISHES

We were consumed

not by our typical logic, reason,

and cautious and calculated approaches to digging in the dirt and planting a seed

but by pheromones and endorphins, butterfly kisses,

and dandelion wishes.

Once we had the first sweet taste of untethered freedom

we simply threw caution to the wind and gently blew the dandelion’s seeds into the warm, spring breeze

in hopes that at least one

would land in a patch of willing soil instead of the cracked city asphalt.

And with the innocence of wide-eyed children we believed that spring would yield to summer, a weed would become a flower,

and we would not hurt one another.

*Emma Rhoda*

## DIANE

Dusty windowpane dusted in snow. You look out—

past the never-fixed broken pane from a break-in the flaking wood frame

the prickly winter bushes coated in light snow the crumbling sidewalk

the quiet asphalt road.

When you moved here this place was a city

destination.

a ville

a hopping downtown

Parents with prams, men in suits, kids on bikes. But the mill closed,

and you thought:

“Now’s as good a time as any.” and retired—

and so did the city.

Retired from uniforms boxed lunches and hairdos.

Retired from storefronts

family restaurants and chipper realtors.

You took up cooking—

checkered scarf tied around your thinning hair, spending hours in the kitchen

stirring stews

measuring by heart

and watching the flame under the pot.

You had cooked stew

wild stew

stew with no written recipe the night of the break-in.

The night of the loud crash, the shattering glass.

The night you laid still as a mouse under the sheets in a house passers-by thought had been long abandoned.

Since the break-in you’ve stopped cooking— retired from that too,

aprons dishes

and the grocery store.

Now you sit in your window and watch—

watch the whole thing play out before your eyes— everything

and nothing at all.

*K.A. Hamilton*

## MY MOTHER'S SCARF

She wore my mother's scarf today The one with threads of brown She ran around the snowy trail And only once fell down

I almost threw that thing away For lack of sparking joy

But then she picked it from the pile And claimed it as her toy

Now it dances in the air

Twin tails that flow behind her To her it's an accessory

To me it's a reminder

*K.A. Hamilton*

## DUCKS

I went to see the ducks today Without my daughter dear.

No one to chase the ducks away, No one to cause them fear.

No one to chase around the edge Or stop from falling in.

No one to stuff back in the car When it's time to end.

I went to see the ducks today Not sure what I would see.

But when I got down to the park There were no ducks for me.

*Paul Jenkins*

## INSELBERG

My solo daily drive in, Drive up,

Reveals grand Monadnock’s peak. I conjure it a breast

While maintaining proper speed. A root of terror, inspiration,

The crest summons me Towards labor,

My piercing daily ascent. I brake quite often Approaching the spire, Cautious, dutiful,

Aware of heightened calculations. That attritive victor, inselberg,

Has vanquished sterner stuff than I. Gaia, lend mercy to one

Who approaches below, and alone.

*Paul Jenkins*

## THE DRAKES AT UNCANOONUC

(after Yeats)

The leaves cling to December trees And crunch beneath my feet.

On winter water three drakes glide To nature’s hidden beat.

I cannot see their toilsome gait,

But watch, spellbound, and simply wait.

Fifteen years have found me weary, Pensive, pondering still

What basic bonds she has established To soothe my witless will.

For she has practiced lenience And coupled with it lover’s sense.

Dull leaves descend in final curtain And cover freezing turf.

In spring the drakes will seek their hens To grant them sense of worth.

While we will study harmony And navigate domestic seas.

*Will Evans*

## LEARNING TO LEAVE NEW HAMPSHIRE

It was more than just a place; it was somewhere you could be where you were the center of everything, where the center always held and the world always circled around you. That’s how my father described it, and he was right for a while.

It is late afternoon, almost evening, and the August sun buffs everything—sky, mountains, grass, even the clapboards of the house. I am playing catch in the yard with my father and two older brothers while my mother and sister, Dottie, shell peas on the back steps. A huge, solid man, my father stands in the dappled shade beneath an old apple tree. He pitches the ball to Roy so fast it whops in his mitt, and then more slowly to Bob, who calls “Harder!” hurling it back. Occasionally—the moments I wait for—my father lobs one to me. He throws, and the ball lands squarely in the oiled pocket of my mitt (it doesn’t glance off the fingers or roll from the mitt to my feet). My catch brings a cheer from my mother looking up from the pods in her lap, her eyes dazzlingly blue, hair as bright as the finish on a newly minted penny. Around us, her gardens glow. Tomatoes hang heavy on stakes between rows of yellow squash and corn. When I close eyes I can see the petunias, pink and white and red. I can smell the loamy scent of the earth and the roses and zinnias and sunflowers.

It was 1966. That summer, or so it seems now looking back, we saw no signs in New Hampshire of the tensions splitting the country. No riots or demonstrations, and nothing to suggest anywhere that our world might not be changeless, as ordered as the rows of vegetables that filled my mother’s

gardens. But in the fall my brother Roy went away to a place called Viet Nam, and I attended the afternoon session of

the local kindergarten. Though my teacher was young and pretty and her class was sometimes fun, I hated spending time there. Maybe it was that first day my mother brought me to school—left me, was how it felt—and I watched when she turned and waved back to me from the end of a long corridor. But I began to fear I’d been separated from that shining summer world, was afraid some gap had opened up between it and me, and that, while I was away at school, that world might change forever.

And then one day it did.

I seem to remember standing by a narrow window there, watching snow descend through trees. But it is probably more likely that I never did such a thing, since it was only

the first of November, a little early for snow, and I am fairly certain now that none of those classroom windows was as dark as the one in my memory. In any case, I walked home. I know this because my father’s truck was parked in front of the house, and because he was almost never home so early in the day. Inside, I suppose I made some attempt at hanging up my jacket, and then went into the kitchen, which smelled of split- pea soup. My mother stood at the stove. When she heard me, she turned, slowly, as though the air in the room were thick, and I knew what I’d feared had happened. Her eyes were wet and red, her face the faded gray of an old photograph. My father sat at the table, weary-looking, drawn, staring down at the cap in his hands. He was still wearing his coat.

People sometimes say that a death draws a family together. It wasn’t true for us. My father ran a milling machine and usually dressed in work clothes stained by metal chips.

But at the funeral he wore a suit—I had to study this other man to be sure it was really him. Though my mother did her best to keep up with running the house, she seemed to move like someone caught in the world of a dream. Dottie looked

after me, while Bob, who had always been distant though we shared the same room, slipped to a place inside himself where no one else could reach him. In disbelief, we endured

the flowers, the covered dishes of food, the minister’s coming and going, and the invasion of other outsiders. My father’s aunt, my great-aunt Kate, took it on herself to move in with us. What remains in my mind from her visit that week is an image of her crooked teeth.

One night when she’d gone, I lay awake. Bob had not come to bed yet, and I’d left the door ajar so light would shine in from the hall. Around me, the house stood quiet, except for the occasional murmur of voices and the sound of the television. Then I heard the crack of the staircase beneath my father’s weight.

He passed by the door, ghostly, my room growing black for an instant. And then I heard him next door in the bathroom, a sound hard to describe. I crept out of bed to the hallway, where I watched from the bathroom door. He wretched violently, on his knees, clutching the toilet seat.

Before I knew it my mother appeared and led me back to my bedroom, where she kissed me and told me to go back to sleep and quickly returned to my father. For what seemed a long time afterward, I sat in the darkness, listening. He hacked loudly and spit. Then the sounds of the toilet flushing and water running in the sink. A little later, they passed by my doorway on the way to their room at the end of the hall. First, my father, heavily. Then my mother, much smaller, hurrying. When she returned to my room to look in on me, she settled me under the blankets and sat on the side of the bed.

“He’s better now,” she said, trying to reassure me. But I could tell from the sound of her voice in the dark that she didn’t really believe it.

I didn’t realize until I got older how guilty my father felt. I was—perhaps more than most children—a self-centered child, and my father wasn’t the sort of man who talked about

his feelings. He had been a machinist all his life: in the years this story takes place, for a company that manufactured parts for industrial equipment; and earlier, for the Army during World War II. Though he was miles from any fighting, he let my brother join the Marines. And then, in the second week of his tour, Roy stepped on a mine.

I kept hoping my father, who could fix anything, would somehow fix this too, and that my life would return to the way it had been before I’d gone off to kindergarten. But

a box arrived in the mail filled with my brother’s things. And one afternoon, by accident, I discovered his door was locked and I couldn’t go up to his room anymore to sit on his bed or touch his clothes. I remember trying the door more than once, and on other afternoons, but each time I felt myself standing again at the end of that long corridor, looking back at the world I’d left.

That winter was stark and gray. There must have been days when I played outside, when the snow was neither too wet nor deep, but those days, at least to my memory, have been lost somewhere or misplaced. I had switched to the morning session at school and would come home in time for lunch. My mother and I and the dog, Molly, would be the only ones there. My mother tried keeping me busy inside with games she’d invent or coloring books. But her days were filled with housework, and she sewed to earn extra money. I would hang from the counter, whining. Or I’d sit at the kitchen table, thumping my heels on the rung of the chair while she sorted and folded laundry.

“What’s the trouble? Itchy?”

I’d slump, nodding glumly. In the end I’d get up and, feeling sorry for myself, I’d take my clothes from the top of the dryer and trudge upstairs to my room. Sometimes Molly followed me, the click of her nails on the wood.

One afternoon I came home from school and found my mother on the back staircase. She sat on a step, her face to

the wall, tears spilling down her cheeks. But she rarely showed her grief. She held us all together and somehow got from one day to the next while my father, like Jacob with the angel, wrestled something he couldn’t see. The anti-war movement was taking hold. My father, when he came home from work, would sit with the evening paper, quiet, then curse suddenly. Later, he’d watch the TV news, chain-smoking Lucky Strikes. After dinner he’d go out to the barn where he kept a maul and block, or he’d sit by himself upstairs or else go down to the cellar. He had a workshop there. At the lathe, he would work for a while with what looked like a fluted chisel, pine chips falling curled on the lumpy toes of his boots. Then he’d lay the chisel aside to measure with a tape or a caliper. But at times his eyes would glaze with thought, his hands look heavy, still as stone, and he would stand, absently holding the chisel while the wood continued to spin.

He was inevitably involved in an accident at the company in town where he worked. I never learned how it happened; he wouldn’t speak of it. But I know from piecing together information over the years that a man who was working near him had lost part of a hand. And while no one had blamed my father, not even the injured man, I know there were rumors around the shop and that men wouldn’t work with him.

He was out in the barn one afternoon where he smashed a sled with an axe. One night he went down to the cellar, and before the hiss of shattering glass—a jar full of bolts, it turned out—his sudden sharp curses rang beneath the house. My mother asked him to go to the store one Saturday afternoon, and he shouted when she reminded him.

“Didn’t I say I would!”

Later, when he hadn’t come home, she stood at a window in the living room, wiping her hands on a dish towel. It was already dark outside, but she seemed to be watching the snow.

I thumped my heels on the sofa. “I’m hungry. When is he coming home?”

“Soon.”

“I know, but when!” “Any minute now.”

She stood for a while longer, then turned and looked at me suddenly. “All right then, let’s start supper. Run upstairs and get Dottie and Bob.”

Silent, we ate in the dining room, my father’s seat vacant, my mother’s attention shifting occasionally toward the window. When we heard the truck in the driveway, her worry seemed to lift. Outside, the truck door slammed. Then we heard him bang into the kitchen. Something heavy crashed to the floor, and my father roared “God damn it!”

My mother quickly rose. “Wait here,” she said.

We could hear her voice in the kitchen. “Oh! What happened to you!”

“Never mind what happened!” “Who hit you?”

“Nobody did!”

“Then what, did you get in an accident?” “Christ, no, a fight!”

“With who?

“Some God damn hippie!” “Where?”

“The fucking store!” “Who was it?”

“I told you—nobody! Some long-hair from the shop!”

We entered just as my father slammed the door of the freezer. Blood streamed from his nose, and the collar hung off his jacket. In his hand was a tray of ice. He crossed the floor to the sink, my mother close behind him.

“Here. Let me help you.” “I don’t need your help!”

“Ed, please, let me, here, look. You’re going to—”

“Nooooo!”

He swept his arm backward, easily knocking her down. One hand flew over her head, and she fell to the floor like a doll. His eyes wild with rage, he turned and looked at her lying there, and then he looked up at us. Dottie rushed to my mother. On the floor lay an empty grocery bag, the bottom wet and ripped, a broken jar of apple sauce, some cans, and a loaf of bread.

“What the hell are you looking at!” He glared across the room as though we’d accused him of something.

Bob dropped his eyes to the floor.

“No one,” I started to say, and then I began to cry.

When I dared to look up again, my father’s face had softened. And as he took in the scene around him, he seemed embarrassed or surprised. His nose was bent and swollen, and the knees were out of his trousers.

I began to learn something that day I could not have explained at the time.

\* \* \*

That March, when the snow was still deep and wet and spring seemed impossibly far away, I sat by the high, wooden counter in the kitchen while my mother stirred something green in a pot.

Pea soup again. I hoped it wasn’t for supper. Bob and Dottie weren’t home from school. My mother and I were getting over the flu, and now pea soup. I remember scuffing toward the pantry, tripping over my laces.

“Tie up your shoes!” my mother called as she turned and hurried upstairs with a basket of clothes on her hip. “And don’t go outside, hear me?”

I thought no one else in the world understood how I

felt.

I pushed and kicked open the door, went in, and

slammed it shut. The room was cold and smelled of dust. The shade was pulled to the sill. Garden tools stood in a corner—a

spade, a hoe, some tomato stakes. There were newspapers stacked on the floorboards and a cabinet filled with jars.

I sat on a sack of potatoes and coughed into my knees.

From across the room I noticed two fishing poles tangled in line. I remembered moping around in the kitchen the day before Roy left home. He walked past me without a word. He came back with the poles and a coffee can, and my heart flew up in my chest.

We rolled down the drive in my father’s truck, and I sank back into the seat. I looked up at Roy at the wheel—he had just turned seventeen. He had bright red hair like my mother’s. With one hand he could lift me over his head. I held the can tightly between my knees and could smell the earth inside it as we bounced and swayed down the road.

Though the pond was surrounded by picnic tables, it seemed sacred to me. It was good to shut the door of the truck and listen to that solid sound echo far off in the woods. We sat near the bank of a feeder stream, the place we always sat.

The water was the color of tea. It swirled over mossy rocks. We baited our hooks and cast our lines and watched our worms drift downward through soft, yellow shafts of sunlight. We had the whole pond. We had the whole place to ourselves. The center of everything. No one else in the world but us.

When my line pulled taut, I jumped up. I didn’t know whether to reel the fish in or snap it onto shore, so I handed the pole to Roy. He took the fish off the hook, tossed it back in the water, and knelt to wash his hands.

My throat began to ache. “I’m going to miss you,” I said. My chin fell to my chest, and I tried very hard not to cry.

“Eddie! Are you in there?”

The pantry door jerked open, and I heard my mother let out a sigh and felt her looking down at me. I had slid between the potato sack and an empty cardboard box.

“I’ve been looking all over the house for you! What are you doing in here! You’re going to catch pneumonia! It’s

freezing in this room!”

My throat felt thick, and it was hard to talk. “I don’t

like it.”

“What?” she said.

“Pea soup!” I screamed, and I punched at the wall with

my fists and kicked it with my feet.

She sat on a chair with a broken seat. “I know you don’t,” she said. When she said nothing more, I looked up. She seemed to be somewhere else, some place I couldn’t see, looking off past the dusty walls of the room the way she watched the news at night. In her hand was a crumpled

hankie. Her hair was tied up with a scarf. A strand of her hair had come undone, and it hung across her eyes. In the light, her eyes were gray. For a moment, I was scared.

Then she pushed herself up and stood, tucked her hair behind her ear, and with one hand smoothed her dress.

“I’ll make you French toast,” she said. She held open the door and looked back at me.

I got up, reached my arm around her waist, and we walked into the kitchen.

*Quincy Alastair Cooke*

## THE TREE OF LIFE

The tree has existed for millennia. It existed before the People rose from the mud to walk the land. It existed before birds nested in its boughs, and beasts found comfort within its shade. It is possible the tree existed before time, growing the world from its roots as the universe was created.

No one knows.

All the People know is they must return to it. When they have lived their full lives, their backs bent and feet unsteady, the tree sings to them, calling them home. One cannot refuse the call, nor does one ever want to.

The tree is eternal.

The People gather around the tree when one of them is called. The warriors surround the tree in concentric rings, kneeling on the earth with their hands raised. They call to the tree, singing its praises. Man or woman, each voice is deep and rumbling, like the groan of the trunk in wind. They thank the tree for its gift of life.

They sing of its beauty, of its wonder.

The tree is pleased.

Closer to the tree the shamans sit and add their voices to the mix. There are five shamans: one for each generation. It is how it has always been and always will be. Old and young, their voices are light and soft, like the whisper of the leaves when the tree is happy.

As it is now.

Dancing around the tree is its familiar. No one knows whose child the familiar once was, nor if they youngster is a boy or girl.

Perhaps it is both. Perhaps the familiar, too, is eternal. None but the tree can remember. The familiar’s voice is high and ringing like the white gem which grows at the base of the tree. It rings when the

thunder shudders the valley with its voice, reminding the People the

tree protects them. The gem eats the lightning to protect the People from its wrath.

The gem begins to glow now.

An earthy grandmother of an age too high to count is helped through the choir of penitents by an attendant. To be an attendant is an honor bestowed to few. Only the attendants know how they are selected, and by whom. They are forbidden to speak of it. They are forbidden to speak at all once they are selected.

It is tradition.

The grandmother shuffles closer to the tree, her legs trembling as she places unsure foot after unsure foot along the path to her glory. She may stumble, but the attendant will not let her fall. To allow such would be blasphemy. Blasphemy is worse than any other sin, and the punishment suits the crime.

The blasphemous cannot return to the tree.

She is close now, the warriors and shamans and familiar rising their voices in a crescendo which shakes the earth. Birds take flight and beasts flee before its power. Even the clouds rush away, leaving the moon and stars to witness the triumph of the ceremony.

It is time.

The choir raise their voices into one final harmonious note which splits the heavens, and they hold it long. The root gem shines with the light of eternity. The grandmother reaches a trembling hand forward and places her palm upon the gem.

The tree takes her soul in a flash of light and crash of thunder which rattles the bones of those present. Her body, now empty, is reduced to the dust whence it came. The remnants of her husk drift to the base of the gem, now dark.

The attendant falls to the ground. The honor of being so close to the soul of the tree comes with a sacrifice: their skin has been charred and, in some places, boiled away. The shamans collect them and take them to the place of healing. They may survive to help another called rejoin the tree. Some do.

Most do not.

T he warriors stand and walk from the grotto. Their work is done. They return to their homes and their families. Tomorrow, they

hunt. Tonight, they lay with their husbands and wives in celebration of life.

It is not tradition, but it is encouraged.

The familiar is gone. No one knows where it goes. No one saw it leave. Perhaps it was never there.

Time marches on, as time does. Generations beget generations. The People grow up, grow old, and return to the tree. In a cold room devoid of life, a small light amongst a bank of other small lights flickers every few years, indicating a power drain in a nuclear battery set inside a colony ship by hands long since decayed and themselves turned to dust.

It has been eons since the ship left its berth. It existed before the solar system towards which it travels. It existed before the galaxy through which it passes was more than just rocks and dust. It might have existed before time, creating the universe around it to have something in which to fly.

No one knows.

*Joseph Coleman*

## GHOST SHIP

The water is green from the rain.

A red breasted nuthatch lands on our sails, rests on the exhaust pipe, flies off. All is gray. A cool mist gets cooler.

Tuna heads, ½ frozen in the bait box, mouths gaped, locked in rigor mortis. An eye, opaque, hard, bounces in the tin tray. I throw it in the sea. Gulls screech and fight. The old bait, now milky

soft bones. We see light in the gloom. We are too far out to mourn the dead. I smell my hands. I’m here.

*Elizabeth Colbert*

## WHITEWASH TO PARAKEET GREEN

I was a Covid virgin. I thought I had a super

immunity. I was not going to get it. Then my brother, who lives 1000 miles away, called to say his whole family had

Covid, and funny enough that day my coughing started. Did I get Covid from a phone call? I was very surprised to see those two lines appear on my Covid test. The first

round of Covid wasn’t that bad, I took Paxlovid and it was manageable. A week later I got rebound Covid, which was much worse than the first round and I was down for the

count. On my couch for the month of January, watching HGTV’s Restored by Ford, all three seasons.

I should say rewatched. I forgot I had already

watched the entire series thanks to a slightly less than sharp 60 plus year memory and Covid fog. Leanne Ford, the Diane Keaton-esque designer and her backwards hat wearing with

unruly tufts of hair peeking out brother, Steve, are quirky and playful and talk with a slur that connotes just waking

from a nap or slight drunkenness. The formula is the same, the homeowners clear out their cluttered, messy homes

which in of itself is a big improvement, Leanne instructs

her brother to knock down some walls, and then she paints everything white and stylizes in a minimalist, sleek way.

The girl loves white. She even painted a couch white once.

Whitewash it all! I do worry where the homeowners will put all their crap once HGTV takes away all the beautiful furniture and their outdated, overstuffed couches return,

and they find that Leanne has taken out half their kitchen

cabinets for a sleeker design. Where will their food processor

go?

Why do I get satisfaction from watching the

transformation of a stranger’s messy home into a magazine worthy abode? I have never been in their messy homes and will never visit their transformed one, so why do I care?

I guess I’ve always liked tidying things up, helping other people get situated in their lives.

Before recently moving to a new town in a new state, I called every boatyard and marina in search of a home for my husband’s beloved boat. I also found him a new office

space, cutting his commute from two hours to just fifteen minutes, taking care of all the logistics of moving his office. I signed us up for a local club so we could meet people –

he met a lot of old men and is even a board member now. And I found him a group of guys to play golf with every Wednesday. I set him up for a nice little life in our new

town.

I just didn’t do that for myself.

There has been a lot of time to reflect during my

Covid isolation. I turned sixty-two this month and I’ve been looking backwards. Having been a stay-at-home mom with

three children there is no career to reflect on, no pats on my back. One of my college friends just retired after being a literal rocket scientist for almost forty years, now that’s

something!

And now, about to come out of Covid isolation I am thinking to what lies ahead. I spent the last year and a half renovating my new home. There has been a steady stream of carpenters, painters, plumbers and electricians all waiting

for my direction and for me to locate materials during the Covid supply chain slowdown. I’m nothing if persistent and it’s all done now. The house is ready, but am I?

Leanne has come in and knocked down all my walls and is asking what is next. The past and its choices are set in stone, immovable. I’ve been so busy making everything nice for my husband, my kids, my aging mother, that I didn’t

plan for myself.

January 2023 has not been a whole lot of fun, though Leanne and Steve you did help! And now I’m having foot surgery and will find myself once again couch bound. Time to reflect, plan, tidy up my life. Whitewash any old resentments and self-doubt and choose what is next. No one, not even Leanne, is going to do it for me.

I bought a pair of designer parakeet green sandals for my January birthday. They were a splurge, especially since my ugly toes can not currently fit into them. I am eagerly waiting for my post-surgery boot to come off, just about the first day of Spring, happy to be two footed once again. Ready to walk down my next path, a sun drenched, whitewash of possibilities.

I have figured out a way to work HGTV magic on everyone else’s life. I am not sure how to do it, but I am persistent and I am ready to do it for myself. The designer sandals sit atop my bureau, waiting for me to open the box and put on that beautiful parakeet green newness.

CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

MONA ANDERSON, a retired clinical mental health therapist, is co-author of *The Art of Building a House of Stone*. Her work has appeared in *Pleasures Taken, a Writing it Real Anthology*, *Gyroscope Review*, *Capsule Stories*, *Persimmon Tree*, *Constellations*, and *The Poet's Touchstone*. Other poems will be published in the Spring 2023 issue of *Soul-Lit, a journal of spiritual poetry*.

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ELIZABETH COLBERT was born in the Bronx and lived among an extended Italian-American family, who later moved en masse to Westchester County. Elizabeth has a degree in Economics- Accounting from the College of the Holy Cross, earned her CPA, raised three children, and then returned to her true love of writing. She had an essay published in the June 2021 issue of *Northern New England Review*.

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1

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