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RAGGED COAST: STORIES FROM THE EASTERNMOST EDGE

By

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Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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Master of Science  
in Environmental Studies

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Ragged Coast: Stories from the Easternmost Edge

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*Ragged Coast* is a collection of essays about coastal Maine—its land and seascape, its colorful characters, and the ways in which people have made a living from the ocean and tidal waterways over the years. The author grew up in Maine and lived there again in her early 20s, and the essays blend personal narrative with researched inquiry into the historical, economic, and environmental forces that have made the Maine coast the place it is today and that will continue to shape it going forward. The collection also explores themes of home and belonging in a particular culture and landscape and what it feels like to watch a place you love change.

## Contents

Vacationland .....	1
The Narrows.....	15
Outlaws of the Wild East .....	21
Ice Harvest .....	30
Other Maines.....	39
American Eel .....	48
An Education .....	58
Theorema Egregium <i>or</i> Do No Harm .....	70

## Vacationland

Downeast Maine bills itself as sunrise country, and rightfully so. Stretching from roughly Acadia National Park to the New Brunswick border, it is the easternmost part of the easternmost state, and as such is the first place in the country to see the sun's rays each morning. What they don't advertise, but what is equally true, is that it is also sunset country. It gets dark here before anywhere else. I just watched the sun go down at 3:30, and the thin strip of peach sky silhouetting the spruce trees to the west is quickly fading to black. I am in Lubec, Maine, in December. I have two cans of soup, half a baguette, and a book of local ghost stories. It is going to be a long night.

To get here, I drove for three hours on roads cracked and crowned, potholed and frostheaved. I passed abandoned grange halls and well-kept Methodist, Baptist, and Congregational churches. I passed Tree Stump Guns & Leather and, just down the road, the wood-shingled Cave Hill School, where a single child in a blue coat swung on a rusty set of swings. I drove along a high glacial esker and through lowlands and salt marshes, through thick forests of spruce, fir, and beech, and through wide-open blueberry barrens. Everywhere, the ground was littered with boulders. I passed roads called Harm's Way and Horror Hill. I passed hand-painted signs advertising maple syrup, camp wood, live bait, and fill. I saw neat stacks of lobster traps and great, slovenly piles of buoys. I drove a stretch of road famous for being haunted by a headless woman named Catherine who hails passing cars for a ride at night. Woe unto the driver who does not stop for Catherine, for he is surely doomed. Along this stretch of road, I was followed for a ways by what looked in my rearview mirror to be a hearse. When I got to Lubec, I drove to the hardware store and bought myself a splitting axe. I paid in cash, and the old man behind the counter pulled out a pad of carbon paper and handwrote me a receipt.

My parents own a shack here, on seven and a half acres of scrubby forest on a peninsula that sticks up into Cobscook Bay. The shack was built to house workers at one of the sardine canneries that lined the peninsula during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This part of the coast used to be filthy with canneries—Lubec alone had 23 at its peak. Now there are none. Across the road from my parents' shack lives Larry Handzlik, a retired lobsterman and semiretired hunting guide. Larry is wiry and of indeterminate age, with a beard down to his ribcage. He lives in an unfinished house with his wife, their daughter, her husband, their three children, and a pride of cats. Down the road a bit lives Uncle Clam. I've never seen Uncle Clam and neither have my parents, but we infer that's what he is called from the big sign out front of the house that says "Uncle Clam" in loopy script and the spray-painted messages that cover the rusted-out old buses and cars in his front yard. These change with the seasons, but the two that I can make out while driving by say "Uncle Clam wants you to believe in magic" and "Uncle Clam wants you to eat with him." Perhaps if I had more journalistic zeal, I would test that second statement, take it as an invitation to knock on the door. As things are, with the pandemic abetting my strong natural instinct to avoid any nonessential interaction, I just keep driving.

"When one really knows a village like this and its surroundings, it is like becoming acquainted with a single person," wrote Sarah Orne Jewett of the fictional Maine town of Dunnett in her book *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. "The process of falling in love at first sight is as final as it is swift in such a case, but the growth of true friendship may be a lifelong affair." When I was growing up in central Maine, the Cobscook Bay region was my family's sole vacation destination. We would camp at the state park, canoe in the quieter backwaters, get ice cream in Lubec during the few brief years that it supported an ice cream parlor. The town of Lubec is silent. Most of the buildings—clad in the gray, salt-weathered shingles ubiquitous in

coastal Maine—are empty. If you fail to make the left-hand turn onto the single downtown street, you will find yourself on the bridge to Canada. It is not a classically inviting place. It is stark and challenging; it holds one at an arm's length. But nothing keeps passion alive quite like the aloofness of one's beloved. I went to college in Massachusetts, and as an adult back in Maine I lived in the hip city of Portland and the quaint Midcoast region. I upped and moved to the west coast and then to the Rocky Mountains, but the Downeast's pull never weakened. I had fallen in love with this place a long time ago; now I'm here, tentatively, to see if we can be friends.

These ghost stories, though, are proving something of a barrier. A fire burns merrily in the stove, a pot of soup warms atop it. And outside the back window lies a black, howling landscape stalked by restless spirits. I was expecting this book to be a compilation of centuries-old apocrypha, but the stories are horrifyingly recent and well documented. The ghosts are vengeful husbands; lonely children; withered, baby-snatching wraiths. Bloodstains reappear on the floor at the site of a murder in a house in Jonesboro, no matter how many times the flooring is replaced. A black-suited man and a woman dressed in a white nurse's uniform appear at the bedsides of the dying at a nursing home in Milbridge. Sources are contemporary, on the record, identified by first and last names.

And it's not just a matter of old houses: the land and sea here feel wild, chaotic, sentient. The dead lights of Downeast—glowing orbs of green and blue and white that can move through the air and under the sea—have been witnessed for centuries and have defied the explanatory capabilities of the Federal Aviation Administration, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and the National Weather Service. “Cobscook” is the Passamaquoddy word for “boiling tides,” and the bay is an ice-cold lesson in fluid dynamic chaos. The tides rise and fall between 24 and 30 feet, and strange currents bring the coldest water south of the Arctic Circle to

shore. At the reversing falls in Pembroke, water flows uphill, and between Eastport and Deer Island, the largest whirlpool in the western hemisphere churns to life four times daily at the change of the tides. The Old Sow, as it is called, is less a singular maelstrom than a seething, swirling matrix of something that resembles consciousness. The surface looks thick and textured, pulled downward but yearning upward, like it longs to abandon its horizontal axis and spiral into the sky, like it's about to erupt in an indiscriminate, joyfully devastating display of sheer will. Cobscook Bay makes one understand why humans have gods, how some features and tricks of physics have such power that they demand personalities and create their own mythology.

To the Puritans, all of Maine was the Devil's country. Where a wilderness exists, there a garden should be made. The economic and spiritual well-being of their society in the New World was dependent upon taming and cultivating this land, but the thin, rocky soil and brutally cold winters rebuffed their efforts for generations. Early New Englanders believed in the Devil with a fervor that seemed to burn hotter even than their belief in the Lord. The Devil was real, he could take many shapes, and his realm was everything beyond the small clearing that you and your family had hacked in the forest. The civilizing, godly force of agriculture never made it into the Downeast region. The only crop that is harvested commercially is wild blueberries, and they aren't even cultivated: all one needs to do is set a controlled burn every few years and the blueberries will be the first plants to succeed the fire. The wilderness was never turned into a garden and, perhaps thriving on a lingering sense of Puritanical failure, the Devil still lurks in these parts. During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he made several appearances at local watering holes and dens of potential sin, including the Twin Spruces Dance Hall here in Lubec in the 1940s. Tall, dark, handsome, and cloven-hooved, he shut the place down and, by the look of things, I'd say no one has danced in this town since.



It's not just the Puritans and their descendants who see the Devil wherever they look. The Micmac and Passamaquoddy have lived here for millennia, and the landscape is populated with all sorts of disturbing figures in their lore. The most terrifying devil figures are the ones born of our own failings, thus the Puritans' frenzied work ethic. Kewahqus, demons in the Passamaquoddy tradition, used to be people until they committed the most heinous act of greed imaginable: cannibalism. Then the human they used to be froze solid and became the icy heart of their new kewahqu self. They are creatures of the hungry winter months, pale and emaciated and so ravenous that they have chewed their own lips off, leaving a ragged, bloody ring around their mouths. When they become angry, they grow taller than the tallest tree but stay just as gaunt, and the sound of their cries alone can kill a person with fear.

The wind has picked up and the banking plastic around the outside of the shack is whipping around noisily. I retreat to the loft, where I lie in bed listening to rodents scurry around in the insulation and swatting the cluster flies that have warmed up enough to come out from wherever it is they spend the winter. Finally, I turn the lamp off and pull the covers up, but I do not really sleep. At some point in the dead of night, a lone coyote starts barking and howling nearby. I don't know that I've ever heard a single coyote before. When they are in a pack, their cries are eerie but fundamentally joyful, and I understand their social purpose. This one, though, wailing and yipping and ululating all alone, makes my blood run cold. Why is it all by itself? What has it done to alienate the other coyotes? I think of the screaming kewahqus haunting the woods around me, grit my teeth, and wait for the dawn.

Morning is announced by the roar of a couple big pickup trucks: seaweed harvesters on their way to put in at the tip of the peninsula. I drink a cup of coffee and watch a flock of huge,

Jurassic turkeys wander by. They are so big that they can eat the withered apples that still cling to the branches of the old trees down by the pond just by stretching their necks. The woods here are black spruce, balsam fir, and shaggy, many-trunked yellow birch. The soil is so thin that the trees don't so much grow *in* the ground as *on* it— roots spreading out in all directions over the rocks and moss like the tentacles of the kraken. I once had a discussion with a Montanan friend about which state's woods were scarier. The main thrust of my argument was that there are grizzly bears and mountain lions in the Montana woods. I can walk through the woods in Maine and feel relatively confident that no wild animal is going to kill me, I said. Yeah, but they're so dense, he countered. There are too many trees. You can't see anything, it's easy to get totally lost, and they just feel spooky.

There are a few old copies of *The Quoddy Tides*, America's easternmost newspaper, lying around, so I flip through them while I eat breakfast— a strange parody of a morning routine, given that the first issue I pick up is more than a year old. There are articles about the start of the scallop season and the recall of the tribal chief after a close election. There are recipes for sweet potato souffle and Norwegian whisky balls. There are classified ads for deckhands, mates, galley cooks, fish processors, engineers, and captains. There is the shipping news: "The *Star Kirkenes* arrived on September 25 from Wilmington, N.C., loaded 5,400 metric tons of wood pulp for Italy and sailed on September 26. The *Crown Jade* arrived on October 5 from Dutch Harbor, Alaska, unloaded pollock and sailed the same day." Correspondents aggregate news from each of the tiny towns in the Cobscook Bay region and send in their report: "Dennysville has a traffic light! But, alas, it is only temporary." From the town of Charlotte, "A speedy recovery is wished for Lana Vining, who had surgery on her wrist on December 7 in Bangor."

And the letters! My god, the letters. Not for *The Quoddy Tides* the 200-word limit. These letters run a full column each, sometimes more, and these pages are often the arena in which discussions and fights between people play out over the course of months. “To the editor: In his letter rebutting my letter of October 25, Mr. Fred Pierce is mistaken when he states that rights for ordinary people only started with the Enlightenment. The Magna Carta of 1215 was not just for the nobles. It gave all English subjects the right to justice and a fair trial. To quote: ‘No free man shall be seized or imprisoned...’” etc., etc.

What the newspaper makes clear is that, hidden among the woods and barrens, separated by long stretches of lonesome road, and at times drowned out by the crashing surf and howling wind, there is a community here. There are concerts and sewing circles, protests and town meetings, points and counterpoints, the desire to see and be seen. Despite the century-long outmigration of people and capital, there is still a functional human ecosystem in this place, depauperate as it might be.

Coffee drunk and news read, it is time to get out and make the most of the limited daylight. The sky is blue for the first time in days. The roadside is lined with the rust-colored skeletons of milkweed and goldenrod and thin, weedy cherries covered in finger-like black galls. Driving south down Seward Neck, I cross Mill Creek as it flows out into Cobscook Bay. This was once the location of the Electrolytic Marine Salts Company, one of the most daring hoaxes in a town that has seen more than its fair share of booms and busts. The company was founded in 1897 by Charles Fisher and the Reverend Prescott Jernegan, childhood friends from Massachusetts, with the stated goal of extracting gold from seawater.

“One is at a loss to comprehend the enormous wealth floating in solution in the ocean,” the fraudsters wrote in a prospectus they used to drum up investors from Massachusetts,

Connecticut, and New York. “At the lowest estimate, a cubic meter of seawater contains gold to the value of \$65 million. It is probably nearer the mark to place it at \$100 million.” They claimed to have chosen Lubec as the site of their facility due to the high tides and strong currents that sent huge amounts of seawater flowing through the narrows every day. More likely, though, it was chosen for its remoteness, far from the prying eyes of any skeptics.

The prospectus worked and money began pouring in. Fisher and Jernegan got to work, hiring 100 men to convert the gristmill to its new purpose. The *Lubec Herald* published this account in July of 1898: “The inlet to Mill Pond accommodated 240 accumulators of which sixty were pulled up each week. Thus each box was under water a month before its turn came to be examined. During that time the water, chemicals, and electricity had time to work their magic.” What that magic entailed was Charles Fisher, an accomplished diver, seeding each “accumulator” with a small amount of gold before it was hauled up. The gold was then sent to the investors, hundreds of miles south, as tantalizing proof that the system was beginning to work and that they would soon be rewarded beyond their wildest dreams. So many people wanted in on the scheme that construction was begun on a second extraction plant. By the time investors started to get restless, wondering when the big payout would come, 700 laborers (more than half the current-day population of Lubec) were employed by the Electrolytic Marine Salts Company, and Jernegan and Fisher had disappeared to Europe, pockets heavy.

My first destination is the easternmost spit of land in these United States, somewhat confusingly named West Quoddy Head. It is a state park now and home to a proud, red-and-white-striped lighthouse. One of the final lighthouse keepers to live here before it was automated 30 years ago was a man named Bubba Eaton, whom I once heard swear he let a ghost in to use the bathroom at 2:00 in the morning during a heavy fog. He would often hear the sound of a

spoon swirling in a coffee cup when he was otherwise alone in the kitchen, and he always slept with the lights on when he was on duty. West Quoddy Head is a high headland jutting out into open ocean. To the east lies the Bay of Fundy, and if you were to chart a course due south, you wouldn't hit the mainland again until Venezuela.

The tide is going out, and the air is cold and pungent with spruce and rockweed. I walk along a trail with an impenetrable forest of lichen-covered toothpick trees to my left and rocky cliffs to my right. I stare at my feet to navigate a treacherous section of ice and mud, and when I look up, I am eye to eye with a porcupine placidly stripping bark from the branches of a fir tree no more than five feet away. The trail rises higher and higher and the drop to the ocean becomes sheerer and sheerer until I reach Gulliver's Hole, a narrow inlet surrounded on three sides by 150-foot cliffs. There isn't a barricade at the cliff's edge; rather there is a bench perched about a meter back. West Quoddy Head State Park invites their visitors to consider the abyss.

I bypass the bench and instead scoot myself right up to the lip and let my feet dangle. Far below, the green-gray waves foam to white as they break against the small sliver of shingle. Above me, the morning's blue sky has been covered by high, bruise-gray clouds. Looking out to sea, I spy the distant bulk of a huge freighter ship departing from Eastport, carrying windmill blades, wood pulp, frozen fish. It's headed to Europe, South America, maybe even Asia. This is why I love coasts, peripheries, geographic extremes: the sense of both isolation and connectedness to the great Everything Else. A raven flies low over my head, croaking, and the ship lets loose a few low, melancholy farewell bleats. I think that I could sit here for the rest of my life. The tight coil of restlessness that keeps launching me from place to place has relaxed: I've sprung as far as I can go. On the occasions when I've been asked what my favorite place on earth is, I have answered West Quoddy Head State Park in Lubec, Maine. Previously, this

proclamation held no normative force, but now, my youth only relative and no longer absolute, a little voice inside my head asks, *Well, what are you going to do about it?*

Back to the car and, since the tide is nearing ebb, I drive to the sandbar which extends for a mile out into the channel that divides Maine from Campobello Island, New Brunswick. As I sit in my car eating lunch, I notice birds beginning to amass in the dozens, then in the hundreds. Mostly seagulls but the odd crow as well, circling above in a downright Hitchcockian display of force. I watch them through the windshield, and then, just when it's about to stop being merely interesting and become unsettling, they depart all at once, heading west en masse with what purpose I cannot guess.

I start walking out the sandbar. Like so much in Maine, it's not actually sand, mostly rock ranging in size from gravel to boulder. I see a partially buried hubcap and imagine that it's still connected to an entire car interred in the ocean floor. I see a piece of green sea glass and realize that one rarely finds sea glass anymore—everything comes in plastic or aluminum these days, whose afterlives in the ocean are much less romantic. Then I see a mangled carcass emerging from the sand. It is barely recognizable, parts misplaced or just plain missing, a Picasso rendering of a deer. I stare at it for a while. Its partially buried ribcage looks like a portal to the underworld and its headless spine arches high into the air as gracefully as a ballerina. I take some gulps of the cool, wet air to steady myself and walk on. Ahead of me, a figure comes into view. It looks like a child, hunched over, back to me. Then another, and another. I slow my pace but keep walking. Eagles, it turns out. Eight, ten, twelve bald eagles, mostly full-sized but drab-feathered juveniles. As I approach, they rise one by one and resettle farther ahead, a wave of eagles in air.

At the end of the bar, I walk between seaweed-and-barnacle-encrusted logs that stand upright on the seafloor like an underwater forest. They are all that remains of an old herring weir, an ingenious fish-trapping design that has been employed in these waters for hundreds of years. I see a robin's-egg blue lobster trap lying on the ground and go over to investigate. There is no buoy, so the trap must have been lost or perhaps purposefully cut by a rival fisherman with an axe to grind. I push aside the seaweed that covers it and see a small flounder buried in the mud along its axial plane. While crouching down to look at it, I notice tracks in the mud and piles of casings from sandworms and bloodworms. It is fascinating out here, an almost overwhelmingly rich alien world. I want to keep poking around, but I am a mile out in the ocean. I've timed everything conservatively: the tide isn't even all the way out yet. It will be hours before the sandbar is fully underwater again, yet an uneasiness remains. I am far outside my realm, and it feels hubristic. *What if it comes rushing in all at once?* I think. *Just to teach me a lesson.*

Lots of people die in these waters. When I was in high school, Lubec lost three fishing vessels and their crews in one year. Sometimes the bodies are found, but more often they are not. One of the boats that sank in 2009, the fate-temptingly named *Bottom Basher*, was so thoroughly torn apart by the currents that no piece of the vessel larger than a kitchen table was found. More than three years later, a dragger hauled up a wallet belonging to one of the crewmen whose body had never been recovered. The water is too cold and the currents too strong for a robust lobster fishery such as is found elsewhere along the coast, so people in the far Downeast eke their living from the ocean in marginal ways. They fish for what herring remain, they dive for sea urchins, they dig for bloodworms and scrape periwinkles from the rocks, waking each morning with a sneaking suspicion that the coming day might be their last.

I'm getting cold and, at 1:30, the daylight has already started to weaken, I swear. I can make out a blaze-orange speck of a person on shore, just standing there. I start walking back inland, and the speck doesn't move. It doesn't seem to be a clammer or a wormer. I realize that the sight of a lone figure whose purpose I cannot make out is spooky. Ghosts probably don't wear blaze orange, but there is something about the way it just stands there where the sandbar connects back to the main beach, as if waiting for me, knowing that I can't go elsewhere, that makes my skin crawl. I remind myself that *I* have no obvious purpose wandering around the ocean floor, also dressed in blaze orange. Maybe we are both making each other equally nervous. Finally, I get close enough to see that the figure is carrying a small white bucket, and I relax. Going to the beach at low tide to pick things up is as worthy and comprehensible an activity as any in these parts. The person bends down, picks something up, places it in the bucket. She is a woman, probably about my mother's age. We nod at each other as I walk past.

The last stop before the shack is a parking spot outside the tiny, sea-green library where I can crib some WiFi and check the weather for the next day's drive. All of the Downeast region is beyond the range of my budget carrier. A friend recently asked why, given that this is a part of the state I enjoy spending time in, didn't I switch to a cell provider that could offer some coverage in that area? The answer, I told him, is that I don't switch because, if I did, then I would have service. This would no longer be a place apart—not wilderness in any strict sense, but a whole realm where I can drive for an hour in any direction, pass through many small towns where people are born, grow up, and die, and still not get a shred of service. Sorry, I can tell people, I'll be out of reach for a while. *I'm going Downeast.*

I try not to romanticize this isolation too much, though. On the property adjacent to my parents' to the south, there is a reminder of how this place can reject people who come to it



naively. Hidden deep in a thicket of cherries that tear at my jacket and leave welts on my face is the skeleton of a straw-bale house, abandoned for two decades. The circular cinderblock foundation still stands, but the walls are gone and the rafters all askew from the central pole—some touching the ground, others angling skyward. There are lots of five-gallon buckets, a white bathroom sink, and a wood-fired cookstove with a ceramic coating of mint green. It was built by some back-to-the-landers from North Carolina who shivered through one dark, lonely winter and then fled back south, never to be seen in these parts again. When I ask my mom about it later, she says, “The North Lubec Road is littered with big ideas.”

I like to think that I wouldn't be just another fly-by-night fool, that I could make it here even after the first blush of passion had faded. Find some job doing whatever needed to be done, plant a garden in raised beds, add my ghost to that parallel city whenever the time comes. Back in the shack, I start another fire as the sun sets imperceptibly earlier than it did the day before. There is no wind this evening, and everything is quiet except for the hissing and popping of wood in the stove. This place feels both more and less real than anywhere else—thin at the barriers between this world and the next, thick with stories and history and myth. My brain feels like mush from the previous night's lack of sleep, so I don't even try to read and just stare at the flames as they shift and dance.

In the morning I rise early and put the place in order as the sun creeps over the horizon. I watch a bald eagle alight on the top of a spruce tree on a branch that looks impossibly slender, unable to bear its weight. On the empty, open road, I find myself incapable of driving the speed limit, dawdling five, ten miles below. I'm heading west, for now, but only because there is no other direction to go from here. One hand on the steering wheel, one cradling a coffee cup, I

notice a fine layer of marine mud beneath my fingernails, which I'll miss like crazy when it is gone.

## The Narrows

*Believe me, my young friend, there is nothing—absolutely nothing—half as much worth doing as simply messing about in boats.*

—Rat, *The Wind in the Willows*

I was standing on the town dock in Richmond, Maine, when a man on a boat motored up with a proposition. It was a Sunday afternoon in early October, still warm though the sunlight was starting to weaken, a prelude to the dark months ahead. I had paused while out for a walk, staring aimlessly at the water and being lulled by the slight motion of the dock under my feet. The boat was perhaps 22 feet long with a green and white canopy and an overly large outboard motor. The man was squat and powerfully built, red faced, approaching 70.

“Care to go for a spin?” he asked.

I felt my face crack into a surprised grin but shook my head. “Oooh, no thanks.”

“Okay,” he said simply, shrugging. He turned the wheel and started heading downstream. Then, after just a few yards, he turned abruptly back upstream and pulled up to the dock again.

“All I’m going to say is, this might be the last nice weather we get this fall. Rain’s coming in tonight.” We looked at each other. The motor sputtered and chugged cheerfully.

I was 24 years old, and I had decisions to make. I was working on a vegetable farm and had to decide soon whether to leave in December or stay on through the winter and perhaps for another full growing season. I was restless, convinced that I *should* leave Maine, but for no good reason and with no good idea of where I wanted to go. And I was catastrophically in love with a 30-year-old who I could sense was beginning to lose patience with me. These conundrums—none of them earthshattering, all of them of my own making—had finally started to intrude into my consciousness after months of living blindly, blissfully in the present. The man in the boat was right—it was a beautiful day, the trees ablaze with fall color, golden light slanting through

the still-warm air and making the river sparkle. I could see a gathering darkness to the south, but above me the sky was blue.

“You know what? Sure,” I said, “let’s go for a spin.”

“That’s the spirit!” he crowed.

I climbed aboard and he sat me down on a padded vinyl bench in front of the wheel.

“Alex,” he said, extending a leathery, square-fingered hand. His eyes were a very light blue, and he wore a sweatshirt with U.S. Marines insignia on the breast.

The Kennebec River splits in two in downtown Richmond and flows on either side of Swan Island. The island is four miles long and was once home to a settlement called Perkins, which is now a ghost town. We set off down the western branch, motoring along at a leisurely pace and chatting. He pointed out his riverbank property as we passed, talked about the small-engine repair business he still ran informally out of his garage. We reached the southern tip of Swan Island and looked out across the gray, wind-ruffled expanse of Merrymeeting Bay. I could see the powerline corridor that ran past the farm and guessed that the spit of land ahead of us was Pork Point.

“So if you’re coming at it from the north,” said Alex, extending an arm over my shoulder from his position behind me at the wheel, “there is a wicked shoal at about one o’clock from the point. It’s easy to run aground on it if you don’t know exactly where to go.”

The wind was picking up and I felt a few pinpricks of rain against my face.

“Uh-oh,” said Alex. “Do you mind if I speed up a little to get us back to town before the rain gets bad?” I told him I didn’t mind. He let loose a cackle and opened the throttle, sending us rocketing out into the bay. I couldn’t help but shriek, my face pulled taut across my skull by the wind and the spray stinging like needles.

Having a boat in Maine is the ultimate freedom, akin to having wings. The state has 3500 miles of coastline—5300, if you count the islands—and its many long, narrow peninsulas and broad tidal rivers make travel by land wildly inefficient. Ask an old timer for directions between two points on the coast in a car, and you might very well receive “Oh, you can’t get theyah from heyah” as a response. A winding, hour-long drive can become a straight-shot, five-minute rip once you trade car for boat. E.B. White, who lived on the Maine coast and sailed its many nooks and crannies, wrote that a small boat “is not only beautiful, it is seductive and full of strange promise and the hint of trouble.”

I had discovered this for myself only a few months earlier when Tom (the 30-year-old in question) had found himself unexpectedly in possession of a boat. It had belonged to his father, Mike, a permanently hallucinogen-addled contractor who loved building things but hated fixing them and whose M.O. was to pawn his toys off on his son as soon as a problem arose that he didn’t want to deal with. The issue with the boat was not even a mechanical one—the last time Mike had taken it out fishing, a few mackerel had slithered into the bilge and were rotting there, reeking. The boat went to Tom, who spent an afternoon flushing the bilge in his driveway, and then the two of us spent the next few months ecstatically almost-dying at sea. We dodged lobster boats in pea-soup fog off Stonington, got spun like a top in the narrows of the Kennebec River and swamped by open-ocean rollers at the outer edge of Casco Bay. I came to love the belly-flipping feeling of sitting in the prow as we slapped up and down across the waves and delighted in feeling like an explorer in my own home. From a boat, the state I had grown up in took on an added dimension of both mystery and radical accessibility. Everything looked new viewed from the water, and I could get to it all.

Tom and I started going camping on the uninhabited islands that make up the Maine Island Trail. Though most are privately owned, the islands are open to anyone who can make it there under their own steam, and some even have established (though primitive) campsites. On one of the countless Ram Islands that dot the Gulf of Maine, we pitched our tent on a bed of moss in an apse of pine and spruce. We fell asleep to the sound of seals barking and awoke to fledgling ospreys plummeting out of their nest above us and shrieking with terror and delight at their newfound freedom. Our boat was stranded high and dry until the tide came in in the afternoon, so we spent the day lounging on the rocks and watching the ospreys gain confidence in flight and reveling in the solitude of our kingdom.

En route to an island called Hell's Half Acre in an archipelago known as Merchant Row, we found ourselves caught in a thick fog, unable to see where we were going or what hazards lay before us. After a tense hour of motoring into the unknown, the fog parted—suddenly, violently, like gauze being torn apart by invisible hands—and we found ourselves in a bubble of blue. Blue sky and blue water all around, dazzling sun above us, the circumference of our snow-globe world still ringed by fog. Everything seemed to vibrate with a subatomic clarity after our morning of impenetrable gray. A school of porpoises surfaced to our port side and escorted us for a ways. Tom gave a whoop, squeezed the throttle, and we shot off towards the gray-green islands that were finally coming into view.

I thought that had been fast. *This* was fast. Tom's boat had a 40-horsepower motor. Alex's boat had 200. We went screaming past what Alex had assured me was a very dangerous shoal, then rounded the southern end of Swan Island and headed back north on the eastern branch of the Kennebec. Not letting up on the throttle at all, Alex pointed out the long stone jetty that had been built by the Army Corps of Engineers at the mouth of a tributary river to disperse

sediment and keep the dredged channel clear. From atop the rocks, a flock of cormorants regarded us, black wings spread like scarecrows in the wind.

“How fast are we going?” I yelled over the roar of the motor and the rush of wind in my ears.

“80, I reckon,” he yelled back.

I started laughing, gasping as the air forced itself down my throat. The riverbanks were flying by, moving with a pace and fluidity that reminded me of racing games at the arcade.

About two-thirds of the way north on Swan Island, another island—Little Swan—calves off. They’re separated by a calm, shallow backwater called Lovejoy Narrows that I had explored before by canoe.

“I’m going to attempt something that has never before been done,” Alex announced, turning the wheel. “I’m going to shoot the narrows at full speed!”

*I’m going to die*, I thought, looking at his red face and maniacally glinting eyes. *I’m going to die on this river with this wild old man*. I gripped the edges of my seat and leaned forward into the rain as we raced between the islands. Branches hung low over our heads, and rocks and snags crowded into the channel from both sides. As we approached the north end of Little Swan, I started to exhale. But then Alex wrenched the wheel again, turning us towards a gap between Little Swan and a smaller, nameless island—really just a rock with a single tree clinging to it—that was barely wider than the boat.

“No!” I yelled, adrenaline rush finally turning into genuine alarm. Alex was laughing like a madman. My eyes felt like they were glued open, though, so I watched with amazement as we cleared the gap with a foot on each side, the prop sending clouds of scum and algae up from the rocks just inches below it.

Back out in the main channel of the river, Alex calmed down. He eased up on the throttle and we rounded the top of Swan Island at a reasonable pace, then slowed to a crawl as we approached the no wake zone in the marina. The rain had let up—it had probably never been more than a sprinkle, though each drop felt like a bullet at 80 knots.

“There,” said Alex, “wasn’t that fun?”

I opened and closed my mouth a few times, then finally managed to say yes, yes it was. He pulled back up to the dock, gallantly helped me disembark, and wished me a good evening.

I started walking unsteadily up the hill back towards my apartment. Tom was coming over for dinner that evening, and he would have questions, “what the fuck?” chief among them. He asked this of me not infrequently, never in anger, though his tone over the months had shifted from admiring to weary. He had spent the weekend looking at farm properties to buy or lease, his concerns becoming more and more terrestrial. I could feel myself changing in his gaze, my own strange promise and hint of trouble becoming less seductive by the day.

Surely Alex didn’t offer such a wild ride to every stranger he saw standing on the dock, so I wondered what had made him do so today. Maybe it was just the knowledge that winter was coming and that this would be his last ride for a long time. But part of me needed to believe that it was more than this, that he’d seen in me something rare and appealing. A certain cockiness, maybe, that made him feel young again. Maybe a shadow of my creeping doubt and indecision that made him think I could use a distraction. What I felt in myself, as I crested the hill and walked up the stairs to my apartment, was the need to arm myself story that I could keep telling long after this chapter had ended.



## Outlaws of the Wild East

Twenty-two miles offshore, surrounded by the slate-gray swells of the open North Atlantic, lies Matinicus Island. It is a shard of granite two miles long by one mile wide, topped by gnarled, wind-stunted black spruce, and home to some 70 hardy souls, many of whom bear one of three last names. Nearly everyone on the island makes their living from lobstering. The Bunkers, the Youngs, and the Amesese own the boats; people who can't trace their island lineage back 200 years must content themselves with the backbreaking work of setting and hauling up traps, known as sternmanning. Matinicus is the most remote of Maine's inhabited islands, and the scariest. I have never been, and my fascination is mixed with fear. I know that even my status as a lifelong Mainer would not get me far on those shores. One visiting writer, hoping to quench his nostalgia for childhood summers spent in friendlier parts of the state, described having to hit the ground more than once while walking past the shacks on Probation Point, as the resident sternmen delighted in taking potshots at seagulls that just happened to be flying low over his out-of-state head.

There is not much to do besides brood in a place like this. There's no bar, no movie theater, not even a store at which to distract oneself from grudges, resentments, or heartbreaks. In the winter, the ferry comes once a month, and when the county tried assigning a cop to the island, he was run off in a matter of weeks. All groceries and other necessities are delivered by plane, a plane that often can't get through when violent nor'easters roar to life, lowering the sky and raising the ocean until they seem to meet. The bar for belonging is high, and so are the consequences for any perceived trespass.

In June of 2009, a lobsterman from the mainland named Alan Miller set about 400 traps in the water off Matinicus. State law demarcates zones in which certain lobstermen are allowed

to fish based on their place of residence, and Miller's Zone C license technically encompassed the waters off his hometown of Owl's Head and Matinicus. As further insurance, his wife, Janan, had grown up on Matinicus and her father, Vance Bunker, was a lobsterman there. This wasn't enough for some local lobstermen, though, and tensions flared over Miller's incursion into the island's territory. Over the course of the summer, Miller had his trap lines cut several times. Bunker allegedly defended his son-in-law's right to fish off Matinicus in a tit-for-tat manner.

On July 20<sup>th</sup> at 6:00 a.m., Chris Young and Weston Ames, scions of the other two boat-owning families and, according to different reports, either stepbrothers or half-brothers, forcibly boarded Bunker's boat, wrestled him to the ground, and threatened to kill him for cutting their traps. Bunker fought them off with pepper spray. A few hours later, Young and Ames came across Miller's boat and chased him back to the harbor. Janan, onshore and listening to the radio that fishermen use to communicate, had heard Young and Ames issuing threats against her husband. She rushed down to the dock, carrying a shotgun that she later claimed she didn't know how to use, just as the four men—Miller, Bunker, Ames, and Young—converged.

Janan had her shotgun. Bunker, her father, carried a .22 pistol. The Bangor Daily News reported that there was a .45 semiautomatic pistol lying on the passenger seat of his truck. NBC reported that there was a .45 and "an AK-47 Soviet-style assault rifle with 270 rounds of ammunition." Accounts of what happened next vary, but Bunker describes it like this: "Wes grabbed the shotgun and started taking it away from Janan," he said. "Once he grabbed the gun I didn't know what the hell to do. I shot twice. The first time at Wes, and I missed.<sup>1</sup> The second time Chris lunged for me." This time, he didn't miss. The bullet struck Young in the throat, and thus the Lobster War of 2009 turned from cold to hot.

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<sup>1</sup>Another lobsterman on the scene testified that Ames yelled, "You missed, you dumb bastard." Bunker claimed the words were, "Dumb fuck, you missed." Ames maintains that he pleaded, "Wait a minute!"

Disputes over lobstering ground are nothing new and are not limited to the frontier islands. Jim Acheson, an anthropologist at the University of Maine, has been studying lobstermen since the early 1970s. In 1988 he published a book called *The Lobster Gangs of Maine*, an exhaustive study of the social structures and mores of lobstering communities in the Midcoast area, the central unit of which is the harbor gang. “Fishermen who place their traps in the territory of another gang can expect swift retribution, normally in the purposeful destruction of their gear,” Acheson wrote. Gang membership is based upon a lifetime’s worth of presence and loyalty, and hiatuses are not allowed. “One man, whose family has been settled in a coastal community near the mouth of the Kennebec River for more than 250 years, left town with his parents when he was eight years old. When he returned to town at age thirty-three, he tried to go lobster fishing, only to have his fishing gear destroyed repeatedly....The fact that he was a deputy sheriff...made no difference.”

Acheson’s informants are all nameless and are assigned few geographical identifiers. Perhaps standard anthropological practice, in this book it takes on more than a whiff of authorial self-preservation as he describes the Cosa Nostra-style hierarchies of the harbor gangs and their campaigns of intimidation against interlopers or even their own members who transgress in some way: lines cut, boats sunk, dinghies filled with rotten bait, outhouses set aflame. Harbor gangs are led by a “king,” one of whom Acheson writes about at length. This unnamed king’s “style of power is authoritarian. He has the capacity to bully other fishermen or the cooperative manager and to discipline them for real or imagined violations of norms. Many times the king himself does not impose discipline openly but uses some of his followers as messengers, although members of the harbor gang always know where the message originated.”

The king of South Freeport in the '70s and '80s was a man named John Coffin. I know this because my father worked for him as a gangly adolescent, fresh from the bayous of southeast Arkansas and enough of an alien to be regarded as a novelty, not a threat. Coffin was a master of vertical integration: he was both a lobsterman and the harbor's dealer. He sold bait to the other fishermen, rented them slips at the wharf, and bought their catch off them at the end of the day to resell to distributors in Portland. His power came from his charm, his humor, and his unrivaled skills as a raconteur. He may have ruled with a lighter hand than Acheson's king, but his dominance was undeniable. My dad worked mostly on the wharf, selling lobstermen bait in the morning and unloading their catch in the afternoon. They would all return to the wharf at approximately the same time each day, and Coffin "got off his boat talking and never stopped talking," as my dad remembers. After all the boats were unloaded, the gang would convene for a ritualistic bullshit session behind the bait shed. Coffin would hold forth, dispensing choice morsels of strategic information, trash-talking certain absent fishermen, and making those assembled double over with laughter and feel glowingly in on the joke, part of something.

"His job," my dad said of Coffin, "was to be the...I don't know if 'alpha male' applies here, but he had to be on top. He had to be in charge, and he had to be unchallenged. And since lobstermen are all very independent sons of bitches, that's a really hard job." With the shark-like skill of a career politician or a mean girl in a high school lunchroom, Coffin would start rumors, assign pejorative nicknames, and cast aspersions on the character and competence of anyone who happened not to be present. Any lobsterman who had a complaint, no matter how valid, was dismissed as having a "hair 'crost his ass." Anyone who'd made a mistake or displayed a lack of judgement "ain't got sense to pour piss out of a boot." This idiom had a pungent basis in reality: when you're busy hauling traps on a rough sea in foul weather, you don't have the time to take

off your oilskins when nature calls, so lobstermen would commonly urinate in their rain pants and the piss would collect in their boots. My dad, new to the business and a self-described stupid teenager, often heard “Christ, Eddie, you’re numbna hake!” and it took him months to figure out that “numbna” meant “number than,” and “number” meant “dumber.” The worst insult of all, though, was to be called a dub. A dub is the lowest of the low, a fool who shouldn’t even be allowed to look at a lobster boat, let alone captain one. In anthropological terms, “Dubs have low prestige and are accorded little deference.” In the words of one of Acheson’s informants, dubs “just don’t have a nose for fish.”

Gene Higgins was a dub. An ugly little man with an ugly little boat, it was known that “you could be mean to Gene, and Gene would never do anything back to you; he wouldn’t shoot a hole in your boat like somebody else might.” One of those somebody elses was a man named Charlie Barnett, a violent, paranoid drunk who took every opportunity to terrorize my dad at the wharf, blaming the bait he’d been given for his poor catch, and who was famous in town for having unloaded so many bullets into the chimney of his house that it collapsed.

A man by the name of Frank R. Soule, a former paint-store manager, decided to get into lobstering out of South Freeport and was immediately viewed with distrust. Healthy savings from his previous life allowed him to purchase a nice boat and good equipment, and he caught enough lobsters to escape being called a dub. Still, he needed to be put in his place. Coffin, in a shining example of Yankee ingenuity and thrift, stumbled upon a nickname that required no work on his part and allowed him to hide behind a veil of plausible deniability: Frank R. Soule. Said with a thick Maine accent, where R is pronounced “Ah,” the name became Frank Asshole.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In 2005, PBS aired a documentary about regional accents called *Do You Speak American?* I watched it with my parents and remember my dad laughing in delight and surprise when John, more than two decades older but apparently still very much in charge, appeared on the screen as the sole example, the Platonic ideal, of the coastal Maine accent.

“People laughed,” said my dad, his understanding of the situation matured in the intervening 40-odd years, “but he was clearly Frank Asshole. He was the character that John invented...and that pegged him in the hierarchy pretty down low, and so the other guys could be mean to Frank. And they were.” Even my saintly father caught on to the fact that he could mess with the man with impunity. Frank drove to the wharf each day in an immaculately maintained, lemon-yellow Volkswagen Beetle that was the laughingstock of the other fishermen but his pride and joy. One day, my dad and his buddy Royce, who also worked at the wharf, took a bucket of clams and shoved a few into the slot in the back of the driver’s seat where the lever that adjusted the backrest went into the leather. There they rotted, irretrievable, and stank to high heaven.

My dad would sometimes go out on John’s boat to help put out traps in the spring and bring them in in the fall, but he craved more time on the water. So when Frank R. Soule offered him a job as a sternman one summer, either unaware or forgiving of my dad’s role in the clam incident, he accepted.

“I’m not sure how I got away with that,” he mused. “I felt bad about not working for John, but I wanted to be a sternman.” The teenaged Eddie was not an important enough figure for this to count as a betrayal worthy of any retaliation. If anything, the other lobstermen probably thought they deserved each other: the Arkansan and the Asshole motoring obliviously out to sea.<sup>3</sup>

Chris Young survived the shooting, but the unrest continued. During the years of the recession, the “boat price” of lobster, or what the lobstermen were getting paid by the dealers at

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<sup>3</sup> To avoid leading my father to certain conclusions, I didn’t share any of Acheson’s anthropological theory with him until the end of our conversation. When I finally read aloud Acheson’s description of the king, I heard my dad’s hand slapping the table with recognition on the other end of the line. “That’s exactly what John was!”

the wharf, had dropped from \$6.50 to as low as \$1.60 a pound. Tensions were so high on Matinicus that the state issued a two-week moratorium on any lobstering in the aftermath of the shooting but rescinded the order four days later after the fishermen challenged the ban in court, saying that those weeks during the prime summer softshell season were essential to their livelihoods, even though they were barely covering costs. Vance Bunker was arrested, released on bail, but temporarily banned from the island. A few weeks later, in Owls Head, the town where Alan Miller lived, three boats were sunk in an apparently unrelated dispute. The rubber hoses in the water-intake valves had been cut, filling the boats' bowels with seawater. It was the final stop in a ritualized escalation of property damage: lines are cut, gear damaged, and dinghies set adrift before a boat is fully sunk. The owner of one of the sunk boats had already lost 200 traps that season and thought that he was to blame for the whole thing by originally being from Lubec, at the far northeastern tip of the coast, even though his long-term girlfriend was from an established fishing family in Owls Head. Donald McMahan, owner of another sunk boat, wasn't sure why he had been targeted. "We haven't quite figured it out," he said. "You've got some idiots here, is what you've got."

Vance Bunker and Janan Miller were acquitted of all charges against them in 2010, and tensions returned to their standard simmer on Matinicus. Perhaps helping to smooth over the remaining hard feelings was the emergence of a common enemy: Canada. Lobster catches in Maine have soared as the waters off Connecticut and Cape Cod grow too warm and the lobsters migrate northward. The warmer waters also mean that the lobsters molt earlier, so more of them are being caught as softshells, which aren't durable enough for long-distance transport and must either be eaten locally or processed. No canneries remain in Maine, so the lobsters are trucked to processors in New Brunswick, which from year to year garners a response ranging from irate

letters to the editor from Canadian fishermen to angry mobs turning trucks around at the border. Annual yields in Maine have been more than 100 million pounds every year since 2011, peaking at 130 million in 2016. When prices are good, it's a goldrush for coastal towns. But the warming is inexorable, and the lobsters are on the move again, migrating into colder waters farther offshore. Catches are already declining. It's gentle now but will soon become precipitous: the Gulf of Maine Research Institute predicts that lobster populations in the gulf will decrease by more than 60% in the next 30 years.

There are other factors at play, too. Once a community of fishermen and bootmakers, Freeport, where my dad lobstered, has now become an outlet mall barely disguised as a town. Driving down the main street, you pass the L.L. Bean flagship store, a Fjallraven, a Banana Republic, and a headspinning number of home goods stores displaying ceramic bowls and throw pillows more expensive than my monthly utility bill. Portland's harbor now welcomes cruise ships and oligarchs' yachts and is lined with gleaming condos to house the recent arrivals from Boston and New York. Only 20 miles of working waterfront remain along Maine's 5,300 miles of coastline. In the south it is being lost to development, in the north to decay. And what will happen to all the foul-mouthed, independent sons of bitches when their habitat and livelihood are gone?

In September several years ago, at the start of the fall hardshell season, my boyfriend and I took his boat out for a weekend of camping in an archipelago off Stonington, a gray-shingled village of 1000 and one of Maine's most productive lobstering harbors. Our first destination was an island called Hell's Half Acre, which had been a favored hideout for a previous era's outlaws: rum runners smuggling booze into Maine from Canada. Our boat was nothing fancy—a 16-foot



aluminum Lund with a 40-horsepower motor—and we had no lights and no navigational aids besides a series of charts from the early ‘90s that a friend had found at the dump and given to us. On the drive up the coast, Tom had been talking about setting a few traps of his own in his home waters at the mouth of the Kennebec, and I had been trying to convince him that it was a bad idea.

When we got to the boat launch, we were greeted by a pea-soup fog, but we put in anyway, trusting that it would soon burn off and wanting to take advantage of the morning calm. As we exited the bay, though, the fog only grew thicker until we couldn’t see any of the islands ahead of us or the shore behind us. We crept along, the motor essentially idling, across flat gray water and made uneasy jokes about how perhaps we’d already died, and this horizonless bubble of dead calm we found ourselves in was purgatory. Among the provisions for our island getaway were several bottles of vinho verde, Tom’s taste for which surely precluded him from ever gaining entry into the brotherhood of lobstermen, and I opened one and took a sip. Then, through the fog, we heard the rumble of a motor larger than our own.

“Shit,” we said in unison.

Out of the gray came a lobster boat, taking on shape and definition like a ghost as it approached. Tom killed the motor, and the boat passed narrowly in front of us, leaving us bobbing in its wake. From the stern, above the name *Christina Marie* painted in navy blue script, a man turned to look at us. He wore green rubber overalls and a T-shirt despite the chill, and had a face beaten to agelessness by wind and sun and rain and salt. He squinted, gave a brief, unfriendly jerk of his head, and then turned back to his lines before the fog swallowed him up once more.

## Ice Harvest

One Saturday, in the quickly fading light of a December afternoon, I walked down to the frozen river with my friend Norah. We were 17 years old and spent our weekends rambling the trails and roads of our town, talking about the lives we were sure were finally about to start in a few months' time. The western branch of the Penobscot River as it flows around Marsh Island is called the Stillwater. It is wide, deep, and generally true to its name. We had gotten a lot of rain in the weeks before and then the weather had turned cold. Thick sheets of ice were pushed up over the bank, making it hard to tell whether we were standing over land or water. We shuffled along side by side through the fierce wind that was being funneled down the river. Neither of us had crossed the Stillwater on foot before. It appeared to freeze solid every year, but not far downstream was a hydroelectric dam that played tricks with the currents and flow rate and made the ice hard to trust. It was too early in the season to make an attempt—just shy of the winter solstice—but we were talking about it. Having declined to participate in some of the high school rites of passage (breaking into the scarier of the two abandoned mills, climbing to the top of the water tower to smoke weed), crossing the river felt like a meaningfully risky adventure during our last winter together before college.

“I don't know,” said Norah, squinting out towards the middle of the river where we could see a channel of open water. “It's just so far.”

“But if it stays this cold? For another week or two? We could get on all fours, distribute our weight...”

I wiped a string of quickly freezing snot on the back of my mitten. Then, without ceremony, the slab of ice we were standing on detached from the shore with a crack and sent us sliding down a 45-degree slope into the dark, frigid current.

I love the ice, even when it betrays me. I love waking to baroque frost patterns on a window, I love crunching through the lace on top of puddles after a cold night in fall and the thrill of taking the first step that *doesn't* crunch, of having my weight supported by water. I love the sounds that ice makes and the sounds of the names we give to its many manifestations: “shuga” for spongy sea ice, “frazil” for slush in fast-moving currents, “nilas” for smooth ice less than ten centimeters thick. It’s a substance so varied and alien that it demands its own language and stretches everyday descriptions into metaphor. Ice makes pancakes as it forms, candles as it melts, grease upon the ocean’s surface. It gathers around partially submerged roots and twigs as perfect globes or fat, woeful teardrops. In Maine, a state shaped from the bedrock up by ice, the freezing of lakes and rivers each year is a cause for joy. The ice is a frontier that opens up in the coldest, darkest months, a liminal space in which we exist as something more than mere terrestrial creatures.

Norah and I eventually hauled ourselves ashore; or rather I hauled us both ashore, clawing my way up the ice that sloped over the bank while Norah held onto my leg and trailed in the current. Back on shore, we hugged each other and shrieked and squished our toes in our icy, sodden shoes, trying to decide what our next move should be. Soaked to our chests and coursing with adrenaline, we set off up the steep hill away from the river and towards another friend’s house, where we could get dry clothes and tell our tale. By the time we got to our destination, we had christened ourselves the Ice Queens.

Orono, where I grew up, is perhaps forty miles from the ocean as the crow flies but still on a coast. Leading down to the banks of the Stillwater River is a series of terrace-like landforms left by the ocean’s retreat 13,000 years ago. This ghostly coastline is a relic of ice. Between 40 and 15 thousand years ago—the blink of an eye in geologic time—the state was covered in an ice

sheet more than a mile thick. When the glacier retreated, which it did rapidly, it left the land below it so depressed that the ocean came rushing in. Over the course of the next few thousand years, the land slowly rebounded, springing into shape and sending the sea back from whence it came. The whole state is a palimpsest of successive glaciations. Ice smoothed and planed the mountains, stripped soil from entire regions of the state and deposited it in others, and left massive erratics strewn across the landscape like cairns made by a race of visiting giants.

Ice used to be big business in the state. The town of Richmond, where I lived in my early 20s, sits on the west bank of the Kennebec River at the north end of Merrymeeting Bay. The bay is actually a confluence of rivers: six flow in, and one flows out. It's close enough to the ocean to be tidal, but the water is fresh, not brackish. The bay varies wildly in depth, from channels navigable by large ships to bars of sand and grass that can barely be cleared by a canoe, and in the winter it freezes so thick that it often has to be broken up by a Coast Guard ice breaker come spring. Richmond has a population of around 3000 and a one-street downtown but a surprising number of grand houses. Rusted-out pickup trucks and trailered snowmobiles sit in the front yards of Greek Revival mansions. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the area was the ice harvesting capital of the world. The first ice houses were built on the Kennebec River in the 1820s by a Boston merchant named Rufus Page. Soon after, Frederic Tudor joined him. Tudor, the first in a series of men to earn the title "Ice King" over the generations, was the son of a wealthy attorney from Boston. He had broken with family tradition by refusing to go to Harvard and instead had thrown himself into a variety of harebrained schemes before landing in the ice business.

Workers cut ice into blocks weighing as much as 300 pounds and guided them along cleared canals to the base of a horse-powered conveyor belt that took the blocks up a ramp into the insulated ice house. There they would keep for months. The harvest was not for local use,

though. The ice was packed in crates of sawdust and sent in ships to the West Indies where it cooled the drinks of slaveholders, who in turn sent cotton back to New England textile mills. But the Caribbean wasn't far enough for the ambitious Tudor. In 1833, he declared his intention to sell ice to India, a four-month boat journey away. One hundred and eighty tons of ice left Boston Harbor in May and 100 tons arrived solid in Calcutta in September. It was an immediate hit with the British colonial administrators, and India quickly became the largest foreign market for Maine ice. By the 1880s, iceboxes were becoming commonplace in US households to preserve produce and dairy, and domestic demand soared. Over 1.5 million tons of ice were being harvested in Maine annually by a workforce of tens of thousands, with the majority coming from the rivers of Merrymeeting Bay, whose proximity to the ocean kept shipping costs low. The Kennebec is the largest of these rivers, but as it became crowded, ice harvesters fanned out to smaller tributaries. In a call for investors in his Cathance River business printed in the *Bowdoinham Advertiser* in 1886, one S.D. Thorn wrote, "The quality of the ice secured on the Cathance is always excellent and generally much preferable to that taken from the Kennebec." He assured investors that "The Bay has lately been carefully dredged at the government's expense, and large schooners can find entrance with no difficulty... We have locations and facilities for erecting houses to contain from 3000 to 30,000 tons." "It's the best goldarn business in the world," wrote another ice harvester. "There's nothing to do but set back and let the river freeze up. It always freezes enough for the whole world, and the world can't do business without it."

Extravagant fortunes were made on the bay. In the years between 1870 and 1890, Maine ice created more wealth than California gold. The boom tapered off and then dried up altogether as electric refrigerators became commonplace in the years after the Great Depression. The

money disappeared and the workforce with it. Several ghost towns dot the maps of the region to this day, existing, if at all, as a collection of white clapboard houses amid the encroaching forest of beech and fir: Perkins, Hayward, Cedar Grove, Iceboro.

Ice harvesting is now the pastime of only the hardest, most dedicated Mainers. But Merrymeeting Bay and its constituent rivers are hotspots for feverish winter activity of a different kind. In early January the fishing shacks start going up, dozens of bustling little villages sprouting from the ice. Smelt camps run around the clock, renting shacks by six-hour intervals on the incoming and outgoing tides. Each shack is perhaps 10 feet square, outfitted with a few chairs and a woodstove. A rectangle running the length of one wall is cut from the ice, although you have to keep dredging it as it tries to freeze over. Above this opening runs a bar with twelve or fourteen lines hanging from it, each line bearing several hooks. Most camps give you bloodworms for bait, but smelt prefer the taste of other fish, so the first few things you catch, whether they're perch or some of the smelts' brethren, are sacrificed. The strongest-stomached smelters make a point of biting the heads off the first fish they catch. Every few minutes, you jiggle the bar to make the bait dance in the water. During the weeks that the smelt are running, there are always people on the ice, no matter the weather or time of day. On a good tide, you can catch hundreds of the slim, silvery fish, methodically pulling up your lines and filling your coolers. Even on a bad tide, when the smelt are running few and far between, you can revel in the strange liberation of existing on the ice—an ephemeral space only available for a few months a year, solid under your feet but where the laws of land don't seem to apply.

The last time I went smelting was with my father and brother on a morning tide from 6:45 to 12:45. My brother grumbled at me for booking an early tide when he had to work in the afternoon and couldn't get drunk.

“Come on, Siobhan,” he said. “Fishing isn’t really the point.”

The shack we had reserved was on the Cathance River. When we arrived in the frozen lilac dawn, a pack of boys was wrestling and tackling each other with gleeful savagery onto the hard ice. Their thick snowsuits usually provided enough padding; sometimes they did not, and we would hear a *whump, crack*, followed by a high, wounded keening. We drank instant Café Bustelo heated on the woodstove and slowly carved away at a pan of brownies, but from the shack next door where the boys’ parents were fishing, we could hear the cracking and hissing of cans, despite the early hour. Smelting is a good excuse for bad behavior: once, following a party, the man I was dating struck out for the shacks on the river behind his house at 2:30 a.m., Mason jar of weed tucked under his arm, looking for someone willing to trade for smelts. After being turned away by several shacks, he found a sympathetic audience—a Cambodian bachelor party up from the north shore of Boston doing lines of coke off the top of the cold woodstove, unbaited hooks hanging idly in the water. He returned home at 6:00, bearing no fish, and didn’t get out of bed for twelve hours.

During ice-out in late March and early April, friends and I would arm ourselves with Miller High Lifes and grappling hooks to ride the ice floes up and down the tidal Eastern River: find a lead in the pack ice, paddle out to a suitable floe and run the canoe up on it, make ourselves comfortable but keep the grappling hook handy in case our camp started disintegrating under our feet and we needed to wrangle another one. We would set up lawn chairs, plant flags. An old-timer acquaintance in Richmond, whom my friends and I called Driveway Steve after his preferred habitat, misted up when I told him about this pastime. He had done the same when he was younger. His one word of caution was to keep our floes less than 30 feet long, otherwise an

overzealous warden might fine us for not having bow and stern lights, as had happened to his brother-in-law.

I would tell myself that, in the grand scheme of things, this pastime wasn't even particularly risky. It seemed that every spring at least one person died trying to drive a snowmobile across open water during ice-out. One day in March, my boss, who lived right on the shore of Merrymeeting Bay, told me that he'd watched two brand-new pickup trucks go down while trying to pull shacks off the ice, a slow-motion disaster that gave the drivers time to get to safety and Nate time to sip his coffee at the window and shake his head at their hubris.

“Silverados, I think,” he said. “All the bells and whistles. Lotsa chrome.”

In January of 2019, the moon appeared in the Presumpscot River just west of Portland. A disk of ice with a diameter the length of a football field formed in one of the river's wide eddies, rotating slowly in the lazy circular current. It was otherworldly in its scale and its beauty. Some sections were opaque and milky; others were clear, letting the black water below show through. The disk spun counterclockwise at an unhurried pace that suggested forces far larger and older than I could understand, a piece of the cosmos dropped to sea level. I watched aerial videos of it taken by drone and imagined its movement to be governed by the music of the spheres.

I was not alone in my fascination. Spectators flocked to the suburb of Westbrook to watch the disk make its slow rotations. National and international news outlets interviewed physicists to get an explanation of how the disk had formed and what kept it spinning. The phenomenon wasn't unprecedented—in 1895, *Scientific American* published a report detailing a “revolving ice disk” near Bedford, New York, and others have been documented in Michigan and Washington—but the formation in the Presumpscot dwarfed all other examples by a factor



of ten. The local ducks seemed to love it, clustering along the edge to ride the ice like a merry-go-round. For the previous three years, the Presumpscot had been best known as the home to an elusive, 10-foot serpent that two Westbrook police officers claimed to have seen swallowing a beaver on the bank, but now that was forgotten.

Less than two weeks after the disk formed, the temperature spiked to 50 degrees and an inch and a half of rain fell, eating away at its perfect edges and leaving its face pock marked. Adding to its woes was a man named Christopher Angelo, who made a pilgrimage from New Jersey to hack the ice into a peace symbol with a chain saw.

“I’m making a giant peace sign and I want it to spin around so bad and create that visual for people to see of peace making the world go around,” he told the Portland Press Herald. The people of Westbrook were not sympathetic to Angelo’s cause, with some calling for him to be “deported” back to New Jersey. Such measures proved unnecessary. It turned cold again, and Angelo and his chainsaw couldn’t keep up with the inexorably refreezing river. He returned to New Jersey of his own accord and left the disk to continue its serene, indifferent rotations.

When I go back to Orono for the winter holidays, I always end up walking alongside the Stillwater. It doesn’t matter how snowy or icy it is on the trail; I make a point of trudging along until I get to a copse of white birches that I’m particularly fond of. I came here alone at the end of 2013 when I had just returned from a semester in Russia and my head was still spinning. I came here at the end of 2015 with my friend Paul, when he told me his father had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. I came here with Norah at the end of 2018, when she returned home after a year and a half of living with her husband in the Dallas suburbs and wept with relief to once again be surrounded with cold air, clean water, and silent trees. It’s my favorite place to

listen to the river. After sunset, when the ice starts cooling and contracting, it makes a strange music, of both this world and another: tectonic creaks and groans, deep-space pizzicato twangs.

The winter in Maine is still cold, but it's no longer consistent. Weeks of single-digit highs are followed up by a warm downpour. The ice on the Stillwater freezes solid, then it disintegrates into a mass of loose floes that whisper and hiss past each other and make the river look like a huge, rough-skinned snake. The smelting season on Merrymeeting Bay starts later and ends earlier, and the remaining ice harvesters no longer cut blocks 24-inches thick. Most discussions of ice these days have more than a hint of eulogy in them. There are already words being coined to describe this sense of disorientation and loss. *Solastalgia* for the feeling of homesickness while being at home, *eremocene* for a depauperate era defined by a loneliness of our own making. The native people of Baffin Island in Canada have a word, *uggianaqtuq*, that means to behave strangely and unpredictably. It is used to describe both physical environments and human populations: when the ice behaves strangely, so do the people. Every environmental catastrophe is also a cultural catastrophe, and a personal loss.

It's easy for me to get lost in thoughts like these as I stare out at open water that should be frozen, trying to rationalize feelings of sadness and unease by giving them names. But the ice still comes, at least for now, and when it is with us it demands action over reflection. It demands to be explored, used, lived on. I have a friend whose winter ritual is cutting two holes in the ice about 20 feet apart, diving through one and surfacing through the other. Under thick ice, it's easy to become disoriented and lose track of the exit hole. I've never done it with him, and it's undeniably stupid. But when he emerges and flops back onto solid ice, muscles tensed and eyes wild from the cold, he lets loose a hoarse, primal yell and says, *I feel so alive*.

## Other Maines

On a mid-August day in 1607, a ship named the *Gifte of God* landed at the tip of a peninsula at the mouth of what is now called the Kennebec River in what is now called the state of Maine. It's a beautiful area, to the modern eye, and its miles of smooth sand beaches make it a rare find along Maine's ragged, rocky coastline. A few days later, a ship called the *Mary and John* arrived. The two ships carried about 100 colonists, all men and boys, sent by the Plymouth division of the Virginia Company to settle the landscape and extract its riches. They immediately got to work building a fort and storehouses with wood from the thick forests that covered the interior of the peninsula. After a few months, about half the men packed up and took both boats back to England, where they were needed for other company business. The remaining 45 men struggled through a brutal winter. They'd arrived too late to plant crops to fill the storehouses they'd built, and several men, including George Popham, the colony's ostensible leader, died from hunger and illness. Raleigh Gilbert, Popham's successor, lived "a loose life" and had "little zeale in Religion," according to the writings of another colonist. Doubtless thinking of the title and estate he stood to inherit back in England, Gilbert complained that there were "no mynes discouered, nor hope thereof" on their godforsaken spit of land. "The feare that all other winters would proue like this first" eventually led him to order the men, mostly discharged soldiers, to try their hand at another craft: shipbuilding. During the winter and spring, they built a pinnacle that they named the *Virginia*, and, upon its completion, the entire company fled back to England.

More than 400 years later, the peninsula (now contained within the town of Phippsburg) maintains the rough, desolate feel of a place "founded" by 45 lonely men. Harpswell peninsula to the south and Boothbay peninsula to the north sport wealthy summer-home enclaves and eerily perfect downtowns, but Phippsburg is something of a black hole on the map. It's common to hear

people refer to “the two Maines.” The first Maine is the wealthy southern coastal counties. The second Maine is everything else. Residents of both refer dismissively to “the other Maine.” In the Midcoast area, the two can exist side by side. While Popham Beach State Park on the eastern side of the Phippsburg peninsula draws crowds in the summer, the western side is a largely uninhabited expanse of forest, crisscrossed with ATV trails and abandoned gravel pits littered with ammo casings and empty nips of Fireball Whiskey and Allen’s Coffee Brandy. Bisson’s Center Store, a low-slung, sway-backed, gray-shingled building illuminated inside by bare bulbs hanging from wires, is the source of these libations. Every time I have gone in, to pay for gas or buy a bag of chips, I have found myself in line with a collection of hollow-eyed men buying tiny bottles of liquor. Phippsburg is a place that makes me ask why I love it. It’s beautiful, yes, but so is all of the coast. Compared to the wealth and glamor and 4000-square-foot cottages of Boothbay, Phippsburg is pleasingly ragged and comes across as authentic and unchanged in some important way. The Maine I love is happily provincial; a little unfriendly; of the locals, by the locals, for the locals. But that notion of authenticity requires examination and can reveal itself to be hollow, if not downright ugly.

The two centuries after the failure of the Popham Colony proved difficult for English settlement, with attempt after attempt being rebuffed by a confederation of Wabanaki tribes who used the area for fishing and shellfishing grounds. By the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, though, the colonists (who became Americans) were gaining a foothold and establishing farms and villages along the peninsula. It was into this milieu that Benjamin Darling arrived. Born a slave somewhere in the south, Darling was granted his freedom after saving his owner in a shipwreck. In 1794, he purchased a small island off the west coast of the peninsula for £15. Today, Maine is the whitest

state in the nation, and recent increases in diversity have been limited to Portland and Lewiston, the two largest cities. At the time, the racial animus of white settlers in Maine was directed largely at the Native Americans, so the arrival of Darling in the community was met with little resistance, and he married a white woman, the beautifully named Sarah Proverbs. They had children, and their children had children, and in the 1840s the expanded clan moved to another island nearby, called Malaga. Over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Malaga Island became a haven for Black and mixed-race families from across New England and also for Acadians, Native Americans, and immigrants from Scotland and Ireland who were wary of Anglo society on the mainland. The residents of Malaga fished, gardened, did chores for folks on the mainland. And for a few decades, everything seemed to be going fine.

One hundred and fifty miles to the northeast as the crow flies, a similar community had taken shape. London Atus was brought to the town of Machias as a slave by the Reverend James Lyon in the lead-up to the Revolutionary War. Machias, though remote from the colonial seat of power in Boston, was a hotbed of revolutionary fervor. Lyon served as the chair of the Committee of Correspondence, Vigilance, and Safety and tried, unsuccessfully, to spread the rebellion to the maritime provinces of Canada. In the summer of 1775, the British in Boston were in desperate need of lumber and firewood. A loyalist merchant in Machias, Ichabod Jones, made a deal with the British to trade them timber for provisions such as flour and pork. When the vessels arrived from Boston—two sloops laden with goods under escort of the armed cutter *Margaretta*—the colonists refused to do business with the British and the first naval battle of the Revolutionary War commenced. It was a brief, almost farcical affair—a ragtag bunch of revolutionaries armed with pitchforks and bullets made from melted-down spoons running off a British warship—but it changed the fortunes of the teenaged London Atus, who participated and

was hailed for his bravery. Atus became an expert mariner and served as Machias's emissary to the revolutionary government in Cambridge, sailing back and forth through British blockades to relay information and goods. He also made a tidy sum as a privateer, such that after the war he was able to purchase a house and employ a white maid, Eunice Foss, whom he eventually married. They produced twelve children, and over the following decades, Atus's descendants and other Black folks, many of them drawn to the area by the burgeoning shipping trade, settled a few miles west of downtown Machias. They built houses and stores and a school. Atusville, as the settlement is now called by historians and archaeologists, became an important point on the Underground Railroad. A series of tunnels led from the settlement to the water, and it is thought that Atusville's relatively large population of skilled Black sailors ferried many escaping slaves up the coast to Canada.

Back down the coast near Phippsburg, residents were drawing on the legacy of the Popham colonists and taking to shipbuilding with a level of zeal and innovation that would be felt around the world. By the 1850s, there were 22 shipyards lining the lower Kennebec River near Phippsburg and Bath, cranking out more than half of the wooden ships that were sailed under the American flag. Barks and brigs, sloops and schooners, they slid off the rails into the Kennebec and spread out across the globe. None made a bigger splash than the clipper ships, though. Clippers were narrow-bodied, three-masted ships with an astounding amount of sail area that allowed them to travel at hitherto unattainable speeds. They sailed to Asia for tea, spices, silk, and opium and around Cape Horn to bring equipment, mail, and prospectors to California during the gold rush. Clipper ships brought the Mainers who manned them all around the world, and they brought the world to Maine. People knew Singapore as well as they knew Searsport. The state became, for a while, cosmopolitan.

The heyday of the clipper ship was brief, though, as heydays often are. When an era is in full swing, it can have such force, such a feeling of inevitability, that it blurs memories of the past and makes it impossible to imagine a different future. But any era is a delicate thing. The Civil War and its attendant economic downturn slowed the pace of international trade, and in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, steamships began to outcompete sailing vessels.

As shipping jobs disappeared, the settlement of Atusville began to disintegrate, its residents either moving away in search of opportunity or being absorbed into the broader white population. In *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, published in 1896, the old Captain Littlepage laments the post-clipper ship parochialism of the Maine coast:

I view it, in addition, that a community narrows down and grows dreadful ignorant when it is shut up to its own affairs...In the old days, a good part o' the best men here knew a hundred ports and something of the way folks lived in them. They saw the world for themselves, and like's not their wives and children saw it with them. They may not have had the best of knowledge to carry with 'em sight-seein', but they were some acquainted with foreign lands and their laws, an' could see outside the battle for town clerk...they got some sense of proportion....Shipping's a terrible loss to this part o' New England from a social point o' view, ma'am.

“Of old, muskets drove the Abnakis off the coast of Maine. Today, money is driving away another race.” So began an article in the September 1909 issue of *Harper's* titled “The Queer Folk of the Maine Coast.” “Between Kittery Point and Quoddy Head ‘resorters’ have acquired hundreds of headlands and thousands of islands. A phalanx of cottages fronts the sea....Cove and cape, the coast is pretty well monopolized by non-residents; ‘no trespass’ signs are so thickly set that they form a blazed trail.”

The turn of the century saw coastal Maine blossom into Vacationland. Gilded Age tycoon families such as the Rockefellers, Carnegies, Vanderbilts, and Astors built luxurious compounds, and cottages and hotels sprung up to cater to the less obscenely wealthy. The shipbuilding

industry was in severe decline, so the state was eager to attract tourists and their money. The Phippsburg peninsula, with its beautiful sand beaches, was ripe for development. But there was the small matter of Malaga Island.

The entente between the islanders and the mainlanders that had held for generations had begun to fray. The island started to become infamous, and newspapers from both Maine and away ran lurid articles alleging all types of gross and sinful behavior on the part of its inhabitants. In 1902, the *Bath Enterprise* declared life on Malaga to be “Not Fit For Dogs.” An extraordinarily long sub-heading alleged “Ignorance, Shiftlessness, Filth and Heathenism” and declared the community “A Shameful Disgrace That Should Be Looked After At Once.” “No worse heathenism we imagine could be found in far off heathen countries than can be found on this godless island, scarcely more than a dozen miles from Bath’s city hall and Sagadahoc county courthouse,” the paper fretted.

The early 1900s was high tide for the American eugenics movement, and the view that mixed-race and poor people were innately unfit was widespread. In 1906, the Bath paper lamented the “strange mixture of black and white, white men living with black negresses and white women with colored men.” Gawkers would cruise past Malaga in boats and report that the islanders were all riddled with syphilis and obviously insane; it was even claimed that the children had horns.

In 1911, Governor Frederick Plaisted visited the island for himself. In a statement to the *Brunswick Times Record* he said, “The best plan would be to burn down the shacks with all their filth. Certainly the conditions are not creditable to our state, and we ought not to have such things near our front door,” adding “I do not think that a like condition can be found in Maine, although there are some pretty bad localities elsewhere.” Since the islanders had never formally



purchased Malaga, it proved easy to get rid of them. A white family from the mainland was recruited to claim ownership of the island, and the state of Maine ruled in their favor and then purchased the island for \$400. A member of the governor's executive council who was also a doctor signed papers committing eight island residents to the Maine State School for the Feeble Minded in the town of Pownal, and at the beginning of 1912, the remaining islanders were told they had six months to leave. The state provided them no monetary compensation or help finding a new place to live, but when the eviction agents arrived on the island on July 1<sup>st</sup>, they were shocked to find the island bare: the residents had dismantled their houses and ferried them off the island piece by piece. Since there were no living residents to evict, the agents turned their attention to the dead. They exhumed the Malaga cemetery, combined the remains in large, anonymous coffins, and reburied generations of islanders at the School for the Feeble Minded. To this day, "Malagite" remains a slur among some residents of coastal Maine. To call someone a Malagite is to call them lazy, shiftless, stupid, subhuman.

I stopped in Machias this winter on my way to the town of Lubec where my parents own property. Machias still has the feel of a frontier town: if you're heading east, it has the last big grocery store, the last McDonald's, the last downtown where you might reasonably expect to see a pedestrian. I'd read that London Atus's gravestone was in the Court Street Cemetery near downtown, though his body was thought to have been interred elsewhere, likely in the unmarked burial ground used by the residents of the settlement that bore his name.

There was no car access to the cemetery, so I parked in a small lot outside what appeared to be a preschool and walked. The air was cold and the sky mostly clear. The stones in the

cemetery were listing and lichen covered, the ground gently hummocked with centuries' worth of bodies. A metal clip on the line of a bare flagpole clanged plaintively in the wind.

*Capt Joel S. Crowley*  
*July 25, 1824 Lost at sea Oct. 16, 1869*  
*His wife Harriet C.*  
*Oct. 12, 1822 – June 30, 1919*

*Lucia H.*  
*Wife of Fred A. Hill*  
*Died July 20, 1865*  
*25 yrs. 6 mos. & 25 days*

*Sarah E.*  
*Wife of Bradford Varney*  
*Died Apr. 29, 1851*  
*19 yrs.*

Some of these Mainers had likely seen far more of the world than I have. I kept poking around, but I didn't have a clear idea of where to find Atus. I saw several gravestones with the last name of Foss, his wife's people. I saw one tiny stone made of white marble and askew from its base that just read "Little Tommy." I felt a weight settling onto my shoulders, a familiar feeling that I often get in cemeteries or riding a train through a city at night past thousands of lighted windows: so many stories, so many consciousnesses, so many lives lived. When I was younger, this felt oppressive, but as an adult confronting a highly uncertain future, I have begun to find it comforting. The afternoon sun bathed everything in a golden, nostalgic light that made it easy to view history not as an inevitable forward march, but as a series of contingencies and accidents. This place I love could have been different. What if the world had kept traveling by ship? What if people had not learned to equate color and poverty with illness and sin? There are countless other Maines buried in Machias and Phippsburg and on the grounds of what used to be the Maine State School for the Feeble Minded.

The shadows were getting long, and I still had an hour drive ahead of me, so I abandoned my search for Atus's grave and headed back towards my car. I felt at home, whatever that might mean. As I walked along the side of the road, I kicked an empty Fireball nip in front of me.

## American Eel

The lights appeared on the rivers of Maine in the spring of 2011. I first saw them one night when I was driving home in the dark along the stretch of the Penobscot River where the tide's influence finally wanes to nothing: the pinpoint illumination of headlamps and broad swaths of brightness cast by light bars atop trucks parked on the bank. The scene was eerie, even though I knew what was going on. On tidal rivers all across the state, people were out, working in the chill of newly ice-free water, netting and bucketing what looked to be tiny threads of silver but which were, by weight, ten times as precious. Elvers.

Elvers, also known as glass eels, are a juvenile stage of *Anguilla rostrata*, the American eel. The species can grow up to five feet long and weigh more than fifteen pounds, but eels are generally not caught as adults. Rather, they are sieved out of the water when they resemble short strands of vermicelli, raised to adulthood in aquaculture operations in Asia, and then eaten around the world. Order unagi in a restaurant in Portland, and the eel on your plate has likely returned to Maine after a several-year, nearly antipodal detour. Elvers have been swimming up Maine rivers for millennia, so why was it only a decade ago that people started meeting them there in any significant number? The story of the elver is a story of a world connected by boat and by plane, by fat stacks of cash and invisible tendrils of taste. It is a story of regulations passed in Europe and tectonic plates slipping under Japan. It is a story of boom, bust, and black market. It is a story of Aristotle, Freud, and the limits of our scientific knowledge.

“The eel is neither male nor female and can engender nothing,” Aristotle wrote in his *History of Animals*. While he was puzzling over the European eel, *Anguilla anguilla*, eels on both sides of the Atlantic have the same life histories. “Nor was an eel ever found supplied with either milt or spawn, nor are they when cut open found to have within them passages for spawn

or for eggs." An early empiricist, Aristotle was working from whats to whys, from observable facts to explanations. If eels were incapable of mating and reproducing, they must come to exist by other means. Aristotle posited that eels "grow spontaneously in mud and in humid ground; in fact, eels have at times been seen to emerge out of earthworms, and on other occasions have been rendered visible when the earthworms were laid open by either scraping or cutting."

It sounds laughable now, but this theory of spontaneous generation was used for centuries to explain the existence of all sorts of animals whose sexual processes could not be readily observed. Pliny the Elder, writing more than 300 years after Aristotle, explained that eels scrape their bodies against rocks, and the particles that fall to the mud become new eels. Izaak Walton, in *The Compleat Angler*, published in 1653, offered several hypotheses about their provenance, including "that Eeles are bred of a particular dew falling in the Months of May and June on the banks of some particular Ponds or Rivers (apted by Nature for that end) which in a few dayes is by the Sun's heat turned into Eeles."

To this day, much about eels eludes our understanding. What do know, or what we think we know, is this: both American and European eels are catadramous, meaning that they spend most of their lives in fresh or brackish water and return to the ocean to spawn and die. Particularly, they return to the Sargasso Sea, an area of the Atlantic Ocean defined not by any land boundaries but rather by the presence of huge rafts of sargassum, a type of free-floating seaweed. The first documented stage of the eel lifecycle is the larval stage. Called leptocephali, larval eels are only a few millimeters long and look, in close-up, like transparent willow leaves. The leptocephali of both eel species are carried by the currents of the North Atlantic Gyre in a clockwise circle that first takes them along the east coast of the United States, then past Iceland and down the west coast of Europe. The American eel larvae mature quicker and begin leaving

the current and swimming towards shore in North America, while the slower-maturing European eel larvae keep drifting.

Even the journey to American shores can take a year or more, after which time the glass eels—now several inches long but still translucent except for their black spines and haunting, inky eyes—start swimming upstream into fresh water and, should they happen to enter the mouth of a river in Maine, through the gauntlet of nets that greets them. They travel only by night and rest in the mud during the day. Some elvers elect to stay in tidal waters near the coast while others push far inland. Wherever they end up, they remain for a long time—in some cases, as long as 25 years—as they mature from baby glass eels to adolescent yellow eels to full-grown silver eels. Finally, following some secret calling, they abandon their freshwater homes and return to the Sargasso Sea.

Until recently, this last statement was only an assumption. During the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a Danish scientist named Johannes Schmidt sailed all around the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, trawling for leptocephali and charting his course in the direction the smallest larvae seemed to be coming from. Finally, in 1921, he found himself in the Sargasso Sea among the tiniest leptocephali and declared that to be the breeding ground of the elusive eel. For nearly a century, scientists took this as fact, even though no eels had ever been seen mating there. In fact, no adult European or American eels had ever been seen in the ocean at all. It wasn't until 2015 that a group of scientists attached radio transmitters to 38 eels captured in Canada. They were all then released along the coast of Nova Scotia. Ten transmitters immediately went dark. Twenty-seven transmitters showed the eels heading south along the continental shelf for a time and then blinked out one by one. But one transmitter showed an eel swimming 1500 miles over the course of 45 days to reach, as long hypothesized, the northern edge of the Sargasso Sea.

However, many of the questions surrounding eel reproduction that troubled the best minds of antiquity remain unanswered. Eels have still never been observed mating and will not do so in captivity. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, an Italian anatomist found a female, egg-bearing eel, but more than a century passed before an eel was found with male reproductive organs. In one of history's many strange footnotes, perhaps the most prolific seeker of eel testicles was none other than a 19-year-old Sigmund Freud. As a zoology student working at a research station in Trieste, Italy, he spent a summer pawing through the innards of some 400 unfortunate eels without finding what he was looking for. The reason eel gonads are so hard to come by is that eels do not sexually mature and differentiate until they begin their journey back to their breeding waters. For some, this might be at age 8, for some at age 20, and for some, never. Sexual differentiation is the beginning of the end for an eel, as they die after they spawn. Eels in captivity, who aren't able to answer the call of the Sargasso, never fully mature and thus live lifespans ten times as long as some of their wild counterparts: the oldest American eel on record lived to be 88, and one European eel that was kept in a well in a Swedish village reportedly lived for 155 years.

The elver fishermen I saw on that drive ten years ago were on the forefront of something big. The elver season starts in mid-to-late March. Fishermen set fyke nets at low tide—huge funnels anchored to the riverbed and supported up top by floats. Glass eels swim close to the surface, and on nights when they are running, you can see them streaming through the dark water like tens of thousands of souls in search of a body.

People all over the world eat eel in some quantity, but today Japan accounts for more than 70% of all eels consumed worldwide. However, their domestic fishery for both adult and glass eels has collapsed, with catches falling by more than 90% since the 1960s. Prior to 2010, Japan imported glass eels from both the United States and Europe, but in December of that year,

the E.U., citing its own dwindling eel stock, banned all exports. Maine is one of two American states with a legal elver fishery, but the other, South Carolina, only issues a dozen permits. This left Maine as the only place in the world with the ability to export elvers in anything like the quantity that Japan demanded. As a result, the average per-pound price skyrocketed from \$185 in 2010 to \$900 in 2011. Licensed fishermen who had let their nets lie idle for years suddenly turned out in force. That spring, on March 11<sup>th</sup>, Japan was struck by the powerful Sendai earthquake and the accompanying tsunami along the northeastern coast. Among the incalculable destruction caused by these events was major damage to the nation's aquaculture facilities. Generations of relatively slow-growing eels were lost. In 2012, the average elver price in Maine jumped to \$2600 per pound, and things got wild.

At the time, there were no catch limits for permitted fishermen and no regulations governing the process by which fishermen sold their catch to the middlemen who then resold the eels to Asia. The state had issued 407 elver licenses, but as the financial reward grew more and more dizzying, legality seemed to matter less and less. There may have been a limited number of licenses available, but the eels seemed limitless.

“In 2012 and 2013, there was just hundreds of people poaching, ya know. Just friends of friends and brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers and uncles and cousins. All going out and going after that mighty dollar. Because one of their family members had a license so they could go out and sell all the eels,” explained Darrell Young, a licensed elver fisherman, to a visiting documentary crew from *The Atlantic Monthly*. “We’re so poor here,” he went on. “We have no money. So when you’re settin’ there thinking that the eels are worth \$2000 a pound, a little cupful of eels, ya know, you could go get a quarter of that and fill your refrigerator full of food or pay a bill maybe.”



“It didn’t bring the community together, it tore people apart,” said Rick Sibley, another fisherman, of those heady times. Those with licenses resented the poachers, but both legal and illegal fishermen alike would steal eels out of their neighbors’ nets and bring them to the buyers as their rightful catch.

One of those buyers was Bill Sheldon. Described by press outlets from *The Bangor Daily News* to *National Geographic* as “Maine’s elver kingpin,” Sheldon is the reason the elver fishery exists in the state at all. Mainers have been fishing for yellow and silver eels for centuries, but it wasn’t until the 1970s that they began going after elvers. In 1970, when Sheldon was a young man working for the Maine Department of Marine Resources, he took a call from an American attaché in Tokyo. The Japanese, facing the collapse of their domestic stock, were looking for a new source of glass eels and wondered if Maine had enough of a supply to start a commercial fishery. Sheldon spent the next year documenting robust eel populations in rivers and streams across the state, and wrote a paper outlining best practices for a Maine glass eel harvest. A small commercial fishery began, with average prices hovering between \$15 and \$30 a pound through the 1980s and into the 1990s. As other Atlantic states closed their elver fisheries over the course of the ‘90s, prices climbed towards \$100 a pound. But no one was prepared for the goldrush that hit in 2012.

By then, Bill Sheldon was long gone from government work and had established himself as one of Maine’s largest glass eel dealers. He bought eels from his pickup truck, paying out more than \$12 million dollars in cash over the ten-week season.

“I’d have to go to the bank three times a week and get 600 grand in cash to pay the fishermen,” he told *The Atlantic*. Everyone was nervous. Sheldon hired an armed bodyguard. Randy Bushey, another buyer, was once pulled over for speeding at 2:30 in the morning.

“I had a .45-caliber handgun under my left arm, a .45 in the glove compartment, a 12-gauge shotgun between the seats, and by the way, a .22-caliber pistol on my belt buckle,” he remembered. “The cop said, ‘Why do you have so many guns?’ I told him I had a hundred pounds of eels and more than a quarter million dollars in cash.”

Over the course of the season, fishermen could make enough money to buy a house and a new truck, pay off all their debt, put their children through college. It was head-spinning, but also terrifying. As Bushey told a *National Geographic* reporter, “If I handed you \$80,000 on a riverbank at midnight, what are you going to do? Run.”

In 2014, the state finally intervened. Buyers were no longer allowed to roam the riverbanks handing out cash; they had to do business out of a fixed location and pay by check. At the behest of the Atlantic States Fisheries Commission, Maine also began imposing a yearly catch limit, which ranges between 9000 and 11,000 pounds per season. There are between 2000 and 2500 glass eels per pound, so the yearly allowed catch represents between 18 and 27.5 million eels. Fishermen were relieved to no longer be engaging in shadowy, back-alley, cash-for-eel transactions, but they were upset by the quotas. Darrell Young, who told *National Geographic* that he can neither read nor write, nevertheless founded the Maine Elver Fishermen’s Association to lobby against further restrictions from the state or the ASFC.

The Maine elver frenzy had also caught the attention of the feds. From 2011 to 2014, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s Office of Law Enforcement conducted an undercover investigation of glass eel poaching and smuggling named Operation Broken Glass. Dealers were buying elvers from states without a legal fishery, bringing them to Maine, and mixing them with shipments of legally caught eels. Within Maine, buyers were setting up unreported cash transactions with fishermen who kept catching eels after they had exceeded their quota. Among

the 21 men indicted in the scheme was Bill Sheldon. It was determined that, during the span of the investigation, he had bought and sold 281 pounds of poached and trafficked elvers. These eels, valued at \$545,000, represented only a tiny fraction of his business over those years, but it was enough for a federal court to sentence him in 2018 to six months in prison, a \$10,000 fine, and three years of supervised release.

The elver fishery has settled down somewhat in recent years. Prices are still high, ranging from \$900 to \$2400 a pound, but fishermen and buyers are no longer bristling with guns, and, in the aftermath of Operation Broken Glass, poachers and traffickers seemed chastened. But one fundamental question remains unanswered: should we be catching glass eels at all?

“If you catch all the babies, you’re not gonna have adults.” This is the stark message from Douglas Watts, an author and self-appointed guardian of the eels in Maine. In 2004, Watts filed a petition to have the American eel listed under the Endangered Species Act, which was rejected by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service. One result of the eels’ nocturnal, mud-dwelling, idiosyncratic lifestyle is that getting a population estimate is notoriously tricky. Anecdotally, we know that eels are extirpated from some parts of the Atlantic coast and are headed that direction in the Saint Lawrence Estuary, due to a combination of historical overfishing, pollution, and dams. News about the weakening of the North Atlantic Gyre is also alarming: as leptocephali, the eels are entirely dependent on these currents to carry them to shore. Adult eel landings along the eastern seaboard are far lower than they were a few decades ago, but the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission has declared Maine’s eel population to be “depleted but stable.”

It's hard to imagine that stability lasting, though, if year after year some 25 million eels are taken out of the water in one of the few places on the continent where they have access to

clean, undammed rivers, 25 million eels who will never have the chance to reproduce themselves. On the biggest nights of the elver run, the rivers seem to fizz, alive with countless tiny, ghostly bodies. Reports from a century ago say the rivers used to boil.

In many respects, the American eel is a very American eel indeed: commodified and globalized, the object of fevered speculation and feeble attempts at regulation. A belief in Aristotle's principle of spontaneous generation seems to undergird our approach to everything—animal, vegetable, and mineral—that has had the misfortune of being labeled a “natural resource” and the economic system that has been built out of this exploitation. Surely we can take all we want, because more will appear, born of the mud and the sun and the rains that fall in spring. Surely the money will keep flowing for our children as it has for us, streaming from the blinding white, can't-look-directly-at-it plasma of supply and demand.

But eels are so much more than the dollar value we've given them. They are so captivating because they harken back to a time when the world was fundamentally unexplained and when much of our knowledge was pure poetic speculation. Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, eels remain an unyielding primordial mystery. How do they move and how do they mate? Where do they come from and where do they go? Once an eel turns silver and begins its migration back to the Sargasso Sea, its stomach disappears. It becomes a single-minded ascetic ribboning through the dark Atlantic waters. Eels captured in this state have survived for more than four years without eating. Aristotle wrote that eels, “When removed from the water can live for five or six days; for a longer period if north winds prevail, for a shorter if south winds.” While this is something of an exaggeration, they can survive on land for hours, slithering around like snakes. It makes sense that for millennia people have looked at eels and asked, *what the hell is that?* And

I think this is good, the sort of epistemic humbling that our species needs more of. The eel seems to be living proof of the Sartrean maxim that existence precedes essence. We may never fully know the eel, never be able to reduce its nature to some irreducible core. What is important and undeniable is that—for now, at least—the eel does exist—a thing apart, a strange, slippery singularity.

## An Education

“So the story goes that agriculture is what allowed for civilization as we know it to develop.”

I was sitting at the kitchen table in my bosses’ house on a still-cold April night, one week into a farm apprenticeship. Brendan was telling us the big story, but he kept getting distracted.

“Although, I recently saw an article about hunter/gatherer societies, both ancient and contemporary. We have this idea that it’s a tough life in which you’re spending a huge amount of time and energy just getting the calories you need to survive, but it turns out people living in those societies spend only about 20 hours a week ‘working,’ or gathering food. You might say, ‘well, surely they’re not as well nourished as they could be.’” Brendan looked around, daring us to say this. “But tooth and bone analyses show that, no, they’re doing just fine and are as well nourished, if not more so, than people in agricultural societies.”

A momentary pause. I drank the room-temperature dregs of my beer.

“So you might ask yourself, as a farmer, what the fuck are we even doing here?”

Another pause. Annie and Ashley, the other two apprentices, said nothing.

“And the answer is, I don’t know. I really don’t know sometimes.”

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I had just turned 23 years old and was in possession of degrees in philosophy and Russian, and a deep awe (in the true sense of the word, bordering on horror) of the vast swath of time that lay ahead of me. After four years of staring at screens and constructing elaborate arguments made largely of words that my computer underlined in red, I was desperate for work that felt like *work*, to produce *things* that could be held and smelled and tasted. A philosophy-PhD-bound friend of mine approvingly noted that I was “performatively and practically rebelling

against the socialization process that was meant to lock [me] into the intellectual side of the division of labor.” I told him to shut up, that I was just farming.

Brendan and his wife Brady owned Morning Dew Farm, a scrappy, 10-acre operation in the Midcoast region. As a couple, they were a study in opposites. Brady was petite, even keeled, unflappable. Every word and every movement seemed calibrated for maximum efficiency. She had grown up on the property that was now the farm’s home base. Brendan was large, unregulated. He could be garrulous, expansive, wildly funny, or he could collapse into himself, sucking the air out of a room in a way that felt shockingly literal. They had a tow-headed, snott-nosed, precociously chatty three-year-old daughter and had met in college at Johns Hopkins, where Brady had studied environmental science and Brendan philosophy.

When that piece of information came to light during my interview, I felt conflicted: intrigued, but also slightly resentful, as if I had discovered what I thought was a locals-only watering hole in a foreign country only to meet another American tourist at the bar.

Maine has been at the forefront of the small-scale, organic agriculture movement for decades. The Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA) was the first organization of its type in the country, and the apprentice program draws serious aspiring farmers and curious dilettantes from all over. I couldn’t tell which one I was, at least not at first, but I hoped I was the former. I wanted to love something unambivalently, to commit myself with the fervor that I saw on display at potlucks and apprentice workshops, where beautiful young people in coveralls and Muck boots talked earnestly about low-impact tillage practices and shared quasi-spiritual experiences they’d had in humid, respiring seedling greenhouses.

In Brendan, however, I had found someone whose capacity for ambivalence matched my own. He often seemed surprised to find himself living the life he was—married, a father, a

knowledgeable and successful farmer who'd already been in business for more than a decade—and dismissed as performative the passion I saw and envied in my peers.

“A lot of them are just lifestyle fetishists,” he scoffed one cold spring morning as I watched him patch his down jacket with duct tape.

One afternoon a few weeks into the season, the apprentices met with Brady and Brendan individually. We were supposed to be doing independent projects in what free time we had. I had discovered an abandoned patch of hops and announced my intention to rehabilitate it. I'd done some cursory research on soil nutrient needs, eyed a couple plans for trellises, and then done nothing as the weeks passed. I went into the meeting expecting some gentle prodding, but instead, after asking me how I was settling in and if I had any pressing concerns, they got to the point: Brady was pregnant, due in October. I offered my congratulations, which they shrugged off. This was just a relevant piece of information they were sharing with all their staff. I left, still wondering if I should say anything about the hops. Later that evening, Brendan came into the barn and rummaged around in the tool corner for a while, then poked his head into the kitchen, where I was making dinner.

“Oh, and one other thing,” he said, eyes roaming in what seemed like a conscious effort not to meet mine. “I've noticed that you read a lot.” I acknowledged that I did. “I think that's great and honestly I envy you.” There was a silence. “I guess what I'm saying is, don't worry about the project. Just keep reading.”

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On an early May morning, Brendan came out of the house wearing a vintage Operation Desert Storm sweatshirt, something made for a specific unit in commemoration. That war had been fought when he was 10 years old. I felt a familiar prickle of outrage, the same kind I had



felt in college when I saw the prep-school hockey players spitting tobacco juice into sawed-off soda bottles, rich boys playing at being poor. We headed to one of the high tunnels to harvest kale and hakurei turnips. Brendan noticed me eyeing his shirt.

“Isn’t this thing dope? I got it at a thrift store.” I nodded noncommittally. “Have you read any Baudrillard?” The question was not what I was expecting. I hadn’t. “It’s actually kind of interesting,” he said, deploying what I had already come to recognize as an introductory phrase to a long soliloquy. He talked about Baudrillard’s reporting from the Gulf War, hyperreality, and how we had all been conditioned to expect an uncanny level of clarity, vividness, perfection.

“And it hurts all of us, you know?” he said, deftly wrapping a twist tie around a bunch of hakurei. “All the customers at the market *think* they want nice, local, organic produce, but what they really want is something whiter than white, more turnip than turnip.”

It soon became clear that both Brendan and I were meta-consumers of culture. He didn’t have the time and I didn’t have the technology to watch movies or TV, but we read reviews of them in *The New Yorker* and heard snippets of the same interviews on NPR. Hovering over the fields of decidedly things-in-themselves vegetables was a fog of talk, divorced from all referents. Once, driving back from leased land late at night after transplanting tens of thousands of seedlings after the heat of the day had passed, we had a dreamlike conversation about Kevin Durant’s controversial move to the Golden State Warriors. Neither of us watched basketball; we had just read the same *New York Times Magazine* article about it and were now desperately play-acting at being informed members of the culture in order to fill the hours, to keep from falling asleep at the wheel. We’d given up any claims to knowledge that involved a metaphysical relationship between the knower and the known entity and found ourselves in a Wittgensteinian language game. I tried to explain this thought to Brendan, then laughed as I had to acknowledge

that I barely remembered the contours of the argument anymore, whatever solidity those ideas had had in college dissipating in comparison with the overwhelming physical realness of everything on the farm: the smooth heft of a storage cabbage; the tacky petroleum softness of hydraulic grease; the warm, bristly undeniability of the pigs as they jostled for a place at the feeder.

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In early June, the caterpillars emerged from their silk tents in the oak trees and the air started to whirl with martial dragonflies. The season began in earnest. I'd wake up at 5:00 and go to the barn to eat a breakfast that, over the course of the summer, came to contain less and less food and more and more coffee, as though my body, despite the heavy work, were somehow becoming immaterial. Check on the pigs, harvest as much as possible before the dew burns off, wash and pack for markets and deliveries, transplant, pause for lunch eight hours into the day. High summer has its own laws of physics. Time stretches and contracts, ordinary bodies perform superhuman feats, box trucks are somehow made to hold more than their capacity.

I'd been convinced that farming would provide good source material for writing, which I was just beginning to tell myself might be something I wanted to do. But it is much easier to write about events than routines; much easier to capture strong emotions than a vague, buzzing exhaustion that asymptotically approaches contentment. The weeks and months passed in blur and I wrote nothing more than perfunctory journal entries (*Saturday morning. Cut salad greens and cilantro. It's going to be hot again*) and the odd fragment that never quite became a poem. Whenever I saw family or friends and they asked *what I'd been up to*, I found myself unable to tell them. When working individually, many of the other crew members listened to music or podcasts or books on tape. Brendan went so far as to buy me an Audible.com subscription, but I

never used it. I kept waiting for the boredom to hit, but my mind was happy to wander. My thoughts became, or I came to recognize them as, increasingly nonverbal. They were flashes of silver: minnows in a stream, fireflies among the dark treetops, unburdened by meaning.

I hadn't spent much time in this part of the state before moving there. Two hours south of where I grew up, the Midcoast area attracts a certain type of visitor—wealthy, genteel, fond of antiques—that my parents were not. Route 1, the Atlantic Highway, runs through the quaint, picture-perfect seaside villages of Bath, Wiscasset, and Damariscotta. In summer, Route 1 is mobbed by cars with out-of-state plates, and I spent, cumulatively, what must have been hours sitting in the sweltering delivery van waiting to turn left from the farm road. The area is beautiful, though—long, ragged peninsulas; wide, blue-green tidal rivers; countless high, rocky islands—and not too far from Portland, the state's cultural capital. I could see why people liked it. And they have liked it for a long time: the area has been settled for longer than almost anywhere else in New England, and the history is everywhere. Old forts dot the coast, and once I was asked to housesit for a family who lived in an eerie old farmhouse that had been built in 1710.

After spending 60 hours a week with my hands in the soil, I sought out the water every chance I could get, whether it was the thundering surf of Reid State Park or the quiet, brackish Sheepscot River, which I could reach by crashing through the woods behind the farm property. Brendan noticed, and it prompted, like many things, a bit of a crisis.

“Jesus, when was the last time I even *saw* the ocean?” he asked himself as he watched me stuff a towel and a book into my backpack on a Saturday afternoon. “I mean, I live in this place, and I don't take advantage of it *at all*.” Perhaps not in the sense of recreating, but there is a strong connection between coastal farmers and the ocean. We soaked the roots of seedling with

fish emulsion, mulched a flower bed with seaweed, and once, while digging new potatoes, I unearthed a lobster claw, bleached white but perfectly intact. I showed it to Brendan and he said it must be from five years ago, when they spread crushed shells on that field to add calcium and boost the pH.

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The apprentices each had a shack in the woods, no more than a free-standing bedroom with a woodstove. Like all things Brendan built, the concept was elegant and the execution shoddy. One side of the steeply pitched roof was corrugated metal, the other plastic. The cabin was uninsulated and so full of holes as to be mostly a *suggestion* of a cabin, defined by its negative space. All summer, I slept under a mosquito net. On the worst nights, I had to wear ear plugs to escape their sickly, tinny whine. The roof kept me dry, but otherwise I might as well have been sleeping outside. The night woods are a busy place. I came to know the slow, belly-dragging trundle of porcupines, the slinky boing of mustelids, the crisp trot of foxes. On a few occasions, I could even hear the barking of seals who had ventured upriver. After the pigs had been sent to the butcher in the fall, their feeder was left for several weeks and the metal doors clanged all night as dexterous raccoons and perhaps, I imagined, even bears gorged themselves on the leftover grain. One morning, I awoke to find a small tree near my cabin shredded—apparently the bears were not just in my imagination. Another morning, a haunted-looking Ashley reported that she had heard something peeing for a long time and from what sounded like a great height right outside her cabin. “Honestly, it sounded like a man.”

There was an outdoor shower, but I rarely used it. It was nigh impossible to summon the will to clean myself when I knew I’d start getting dirty again a mere 12 hours later. I’d stretch out on the forest floor to read, steal a brief moment of rest in a tractor wheel-track. Soon, the dirt

was not so much *on* my skin as *in* it, and I derived no small pleasure from letting myself stratify, waiting for my own personal A and B horizons to form. Each night before bed I'd pause to take stock of the day's injuries— a hogwire gash on my thumb; a plum-colored bruise ripening on my knee; poison ivy blisters that had popped and filled with dirt, soon to scar.

2016 was a dry year all over. The last significant snowfall at the farm was on April 26<sup>th</sup> and then the skies became mercilessly blue. We ran the well dry regularly that summer. The apprentices cycled through different responsibilities over the course of the season. I was in charge of irrigation in June and would spend my evenings reading by the graywater tank, waiting to shut off the pump when the water level got too low. Brady and Brendan leased a field in the town of Starks where we grew winter squash, melons, and some other crops that didn't need much tending. It was on a river and Brendan would drive up by himself in the evenings with a generator and a pump to run sprinkler irrigation once the heat of the day had passed. We stopped planting spinach and had a succession of lettuce bolt but, compared to some other farms, we were lucky. The local newspaper ran dire stories about farmers taking a quarter, a third of their land out of production, of ending their seasons early because they didn't have money to pay their crews. I heard on NPR that farmers in California were drilling deeper and deeper wells, irrigating their fields with water that fell as rain 20,000 years ago, going deeper and deeper into a debt that they had no chance of paying off. There were a few nights when I'd wake to the sound of raindrops hitting the aluminum shield around the stovepipe in my cabin, but it never lasted long and the soil was always dry by the time I rose.

At apprentice workshops, I learned about conservation tillage and carbon sequestration. Brendan, however, had other ideas about how to deal with an uncertain future. In his more apocalyptic moods, he would talk about fortifying the farm, the steps we could take to keep

ourselves safe from marauders from Portland or, God forbid, Boston, should the shit seriously hit the fan.

“We could dynamite the Wiscasset bridge,” he said. “That’d keep ‘em at bay.” He would mention, repeatedly, his plan to start stockpiling open-pollinated seeds. “Not that those’ll do us any good once all the pollinators disappear.”

One evening as I sat in the kitchen reading, Brendan came rushing in, grabbed a beer, and collapsed his massive body into the chair next to me.

“Siobhan, I need to tell you what I’ve done.” He’d just come across a porcupine munching on a bed of salad greens and, with no subtler weapons at his disposal, had stoned it to death. He was shaken. “I need to buy a gun,” he said. “What kind of candy-ass farmer doesn’t own a gun?”

Weeks passed and a new critter started eating the salad greens, so Brendan bought a Have-A-Heart trap, caught a skunk, and was so scared of getting sprayed that he let the poor animal sit for five days before I learned what was going on and let it out. “What happened to getting a gun?” I asked. He heaved a sigh.

“Man, I can’t even keep track of a coffee cup for more than 15 minutes. I shouldn’t get a gun because I’ll just leave it lying around somewhere.”

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One night in mid-October, Brendan entered the barn on the phone. “But this is the truth that I’m not supposed to talk about,” he was saying. “It’s fucking *boring*. Those days when I go up to Starks alone, if I didn’t have my phone, I’d be *scared*. Because, what it comes down to is, this just isn’t engaging work.” His voice was haggard. “But I’m 35 years old and this is all I know how to do. This is all I can do.”

I don't know if he knew I was there, but I don't think it would have mattered. The season was drawing to a close, and I was thinking about the future. Had I actually loved farming, or had I just loved being hungry when it was time to eat and tired when it was time to sleep? Really, was there any meaningful difference? Over the course of the apprenticeship, Brendan had spent countless hours talking farming practice with Ashley and Annie. Cover cropping regimens, tomato varieties, SARE grants, marketing. My conversations with him had been about Frank Ocean, Zizek, the existential burden of the Anthropocene. Once, he had even given me a copy of *The Good Life*, Scott and Helen Nearing's back-to-the-land bible, and then rolled his eyes like it was all joke. And he was right; I hadn't read it. I'd read a book about Putin's ascendancy in Russia and *Love in the Time of Cholera*. I'd read a half dozen largely forgettable titles picked off the new acquisitions shelf at the library, *The Idiot*, *21 Love Poems* and *a Song of Despair*. During Brady's lessons on QuickBooks and cash flow, I had daydreamed and doodled while Annie and Ashley took notes. I didn't have the right brain to be a farmer, and I think Brendan knew this because he didn't either.

A few days later, I found myself at the grocery store with him. He was buying beer; I was loitering by the magazine rack. The cashier was new, a pale, stick-thin woman with dramatic eye makeup who was being trained on the register. She asked the fatal question, "How are you?" and Brendan began responding, as always, with shocking honesty. I heard him mention Brady's pregnancy, the impending birth. "And some people say that they wouldn't want to bring a kid into this world, but doesn't that just mean that they don't find the world worth living in? I'm not sure people realize what a profoundly pessimistic statement they're making when they say that." I tuned it out and flipped some pages but was promptly drawn back into the conversation by

Brendan shouting my name across the checkout area. “Hey, Siobhan! Who was it who said that the only philosophical question that really matters is whether or not to commit suicide?”

I opened my mouth, closed it again. “I don’t know,” I said, meeting the cashier’s unfailingly polite but alarmed gaze.

“Hmm,” Brendan grunted and picked up the six pack.

“Have a nice night!” chirped the cashier.

Back at the farm, it came to me: he had been misquoting the first line of *The Myth of Sisyphus* by Camus.

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I spent the winter floundering. Everything felt equally possible, or impossible, the vast expanse of time once again yawning before me. I ended up staying in Maine, out of paralysis more than anything else, and I worked the next season on a different farm in the area. *This is how it happens*, I thought. *You do what you know, and the years keep passing*. This farm was larger, paid all its staff hourly, handed out thick binders with exhaustive information and harvest standards for each crop, and was run by the most unfailingly sunny man I had ever met. Again, I enjoyed it—wake up early, work hard all day, come home, drink a beer, read—though a coworker once confessed to me that she had found herself literally crying from boredom one morning as she made bunch after bunch after bunch of parsley.

One day, in late October of 2017—just a couple months away from leaving Maine, though I didn’t know it at the time—I drove to Morning Dew to pick up the half of a pig I’d ordered for my chest freezer. It was early evening, getting dark fast, raining. I entered the barn to find Brendan standing behind a long array of tables laden with coolers. Baby Everett, a few days shy of his first birthday, was cradled in one burly arm.



“Hey, Siobhan,” he said, eyes quickly drifting over my face then settling, as they always did, on a patch of air somewhere above my head. “Are you living your best life?” He enunciated the question carefully, as if repeating a newly learned phrase in a foreign language. The question shocked me into laughter. We talked about the last month’s uncanny warmth, the new *Blade Runner* movie, his plan to expand wintertime micro-greens production. Other customers shuffled through, filling their coolers and freezer bags.

“Have you heard of Emil Cioran?” Brendan asked. I said I hadn’t.

“Oh, dude. You need to check him out. He was Romanian or Hungarian or something. He literally wrote a book called *The Trouble with Being Born* and he says all this amazing shit like, ‘I endure myself’ and ‘the problem with suicide is that it’s always too late.’”

From the crook of Brendan’s arm, Everett looked at me, one knuckle in his mouth. An older woman rummaged through a cooler of ham steaks, a disbelieving look on her face. *Remember this*, I told myself. *Remember everything about this*. I hefted my cooler and awkwardly shouldered an auxiliary bag.

“Anyway,” Brendan said, “it was good to see you. Be well.” Then I turned and went out into the night.

## Theorema Egregium *or* Do No Harm

This is an uncharitable thought, but I had it recently: I don't want to be reminded of the existence of other people unless I specifically choose to be. Not all my thoughts are so clearly verbal, but this one was. I could see it written out as a sentence in my head. It wasn't just uncharitable, but selfish, solipsistic, and grossly privileged. I was sitting at my kitchen table. My downstairs neighbor was playing music—song after song with baselines that shook the tea in my mug and all sounded exactly the same—children were shrieking and throwing snowballs outside my window, and a pack of dogs was barking. None of these things was, in any truthful accounting, much of a burden, and I knew that it was hard to justify this feeling of claustrophobia here in Montana, one of the emptiest states. But in that moment, buffeted by an avalanche of stimuli, all I could think was, *I want to be far from here. I want to be in the radar dome.*

The radar dome has taken on grail-like significance for me over the past weeks. It is located on the North Lubec Peninsula, on a nine-acre parcel just down the road from my parents' seven acres. Viewed from the water, it looms above the trees like a strange, alien monolith. Inside, it is hung with Salvador Dalí posters, and climbing plants grow on wrought-iron trellises in its cavernous gloom. I have never seen it with my own eyes; I only know these things from viewing the listing for it on Realtor.com. The dome exploded into my consciousness and has gripped me with a feverish desire to possess it stronger than anything I've felt before. It was taken from the U.S. Airforce General Surveillance Radar Station in the town of Bucks Harbor—I do not know when, how, or by whom—and reassembled on the back edge of this property, which

also contains a 900-square-foot house and several smaller outbuildings. The whole place is for sale for \$200,000, and it is where I want to die.

I would happily die anywhere in Lubec, let me make that clear. Beggars can't be choosers. But the radar dome property, with its gravel beach on the cold, blue-green water of Cobscook Bay and its thick forest of balsam fir and yellow birch, is particularly beautiful. And it obviously has a long history of strangeness. I want to let that strangeness settle over me like plaster dust and harden me into one of the flinty, reclusive characters that populate the Maine coast.

Characters like these, though plentiful, can be hard to find. I came to know a few one winter when I was working at a bakery in the small town of Wiscasset in the Midcoast area. During the summer months, the village is overrun with tourists and there is nary a character to be seen, but starting in late October, after the foliage has faded and fallen, they come out of the woodwork. Rudy was 73, tall and strong with a handlebar mustache, and made most of his money nude modeling for college art classes. He had fought in Vietnam and spent a decade "licking every sheet of blotting paper" he could find. He lived alone in a house in the woods with only a pellet stove for heat, and when he came swanning into the store at closing time, often breathlessly excited to tell me some new fact he'd just learned about cephalopods, I would give him a cup of coffee and as many sandwiches as he could carry for free. Robert, in his 50s, was scruffy and standoffish and always dressed in motheaten wool. He made cutting boards and foraged for mushrooms and delighted in bringing me boxes of mildewy books on Sextus Empiricus and the philosophy of science that he had purchased at the Goodwill. They would never dare come into the bakery during the crush of summer and early fall. Winter—quiet, dark, empty, when they could talk or not talk to people as they chose— was their time.

The far Downeast region, where Lubec is located, is an easier habitat for the crowd-shy. Even during the height of summer, it is relatively tourist-free, and the 30,000 year-round residents are spread out over a land area significantly larger than Delaware. The people there tend to fill almost mythological roles: the jester, the sage, the outlaw. All three of these can be found on the North Lubec Road. Uncle Clam, with his yard full of junk metal and his hand-painted nonsense signs, is the modern-day holy fool. Larry Handzlik, with his long gray beard and deep well of local knowledge, is the wiseman. And an unnamed fellow who occasionally roars up and down the road in his truck, mowing down deer from the window with an automatic rifle, is the outlaw. His identity is known to residents and law enforcement alike, but he is a force of chaos too powerful to be reckoned with, says Larry, so they mostly let him be.

In a place so stark and thinly populated, it is easy to see the scaffolding around which human society takes shape. In the sun rising over an open ocean, one sees a creation myth. In news of a boat being wrecked in the whirlpool, one hears a tale of hubris punished. In the quiet lives of a few old men, one feels the power of ancient archetypes. If I had the radar dome, I could become one of them, some strange oracle of the woods and rocks, spoken about in hushed whispers. *What is she doing in that dome?*

In his book *Vacationland* (no relation to the essay in this collection), John Hodgman expounds his theory that life in Maine is set up to facilitate the least amount of interaction possible. When he and his wife want some trees cut down on their summer home property, he calls a man named Jerry and leaves a message. Jerry never calls back; rather, he just shows up one day, surveys the scene, says, “Ayuh,” and cuts the trees down. No further words are exchanged. But the barest minimum of neighborly instinct—the urge to help in a tangible, practical way, even if you’re not happy about it—is strong. When one boatbuilder neighbor of

John Hodgman's asks another boatbuilder neighbor if he has any white oak to sell, the latter replies that he is not in the business of selling fucking lumber, and the former leaves. The very next day though, the second boatbuilder arrives at the first's workshop, dumps a load of white oak, and yells, "there's your goddamned wood!" And there you have it. A successful interaction in which everyone's needs are met.

My parents' experience bears this out. Since buying their property, they have received from the neighbors offers of logging and haying services and the use of a draft team, but not one invitation to dinner. No one came by with cookies or the suggestion to get together for coffee on the porch. My dad has helped Larry chip an entire fallen tree into mulch, but as soon as the work was done, they retreated back to their own properties without so much as a celebratory beer. My parents get Christmas cards every year from an old couple named Vic and Ellie who live down the road, and they can speak knowledgeably about everyone who lives within a mile radius of their property without, as far as I can tell, ever having had a single interaction with any of them that was intentionally social. Mainers do not ask, Hodgman writes. They *glean*.

All of which means that the state was well-suited to weather a global pandemic. Maine was a driveway culture long before driveway culture became, out of epidemiological necessity, de rigueur. Many people were already used to getting their daily dose of socializing from nodding hello and having a curt exchange about the coming nor'easter with their neighbor as they both checked their mailboxes. What the pandemic has revealed, and what I suspected before, is that I can do just fine without group interaction. I have not lost much under the restrictions of the past year. I am 28 years old and have never once in my adult life voluntarily joined something. No clubs, no teams, no committees. I delight in saying no to invitations, and the delight is only increasing as I get older. This is arguably bad citizenship, but it feels like one

of the truest, most illuminating things I can share about myself. *Hello, my name is Siobhan, and I would rather be left alone.*

John Hodgman's vacation home is in the town where another, more famous writer also lived decades ago. While Hodgman only ever refers to him as "the famous writer" out of respect for the deep sense of privacy that led this man to seclude himself in Maine in the first place, I will not extend this courtesy and will say that it was E.B. White. When E.B. White was asked by journalists or fans where he lived, he would answer "in a coastal town somewhere between Nova Scotia and Cuba," with, I imagine, *now fuck right off* heavily implied. For a decade, White traded letters with Edmund Ware Smith, another (less famous) writer who lived in the town of Damariscotta, two hours down the coast from White's anonymous village. They shared complaints about their health and thoughts about writing, plans for building henhouses and recipes for cocktails. During this whole time, as far as I can piece together by reading their recently published correspondence, they visited each other in person precisely once, in early June of 1958. The Smiths drove up for an afternoon. They ate lunch on the porch. Then the Whites' cow went into labor, and the Smiths went home.

The world demands more of us now than it did then, or so we tell ourselves. Wanting nothing more than the peace and privacy that nine acres and a radar dome guarantees no longer feels virtuous, but rather like an abdication of some vague constellation of responsibilities—to *work, to fight, to make the world a better place*—that I have inherited simply by dint of existing as who I am, where I am, when I am.

In a college ethics class, I learned the difference between the duty of nonmaleficence and the duty of beneficence. Per a famous thought experiment, a man stands to inherit a great fortune if his young cousin dies. In scenario A, the man waits until his cousin is in the bath, then sneaks

in and drowns the boy. In scenario B, the man walks into the bathroom with the same intent, only to discover that the boy has slipped and hit his head and is now face down in the water. The boy is unconscious but still alive; the man could easily save him. But he doesn't. He quietly closes the door and tiptoes away. I was surprised to learn that, according to arbiters of questions both moral and legal, the second scenario was less bad, although the outcome and intent were the same. We have a greater duty to not actively cause harm than we do to prevent or mitigate it. I find myself using this as a moral bargaining chip when I think about my future. *I will do no harm, I promise (to whom, exactly, I do not know). I may not go out of my way to make things better, but just let me have my plot of land, and I will be the most nonmaleficent force that the North Lubec Road has ever seen.*

How well would I have to steward my woodlot be released from some more obviously moral obligations? How happy would my flock of chickens need to be in order to balance the scales with my lack of civic and social activity? How many gallons of jet fuel would I have to not burn before I was absolved of the sin of skipping friends' weddings? As ultimately meaningless as this calculus is, I like to think that there is still a place for extreme provincialism of this sort: shrinking one's world down, treading lightly. This may just be another way to rationalize my antisocial tendencies, but I fear that, just as we rely on technology to solve the problems that technology has wrought, so we to strive to cure the ills caused by striving, a never-ending spiral of cause and effect, effect and side effect. Our species is masterful at *doing shit*, but, as Marina Tsvetaeva wrote in a nameless poem that has haunted me for a decade now, "It may be that the greater art / is with the hand of Bach to leave the organ undisturbed."

There is no art at which my hand is Bach-like in its talent, but I do have ideas about how to use the well of reclusiveness I feel growing deeper inside me. I want to do nothing in a way

that's deserving of nine acres and a radar dome: plant a garden for the pollinators, grow a kelp forest to sequester carbon, read book after book in the all-encompassing silence. I want to mulch my garden with seaweed and scythe my grass like Levin and lie in bed at night listening to the peninsula's resident coyotes howl and keen. In the dome's air of ambient weirdness, I would read about non-Euclidian mathematics, learn the *theorema egregium* that governed the curve above my head. This urge to the odder edges of geometry comes upon me just looking at the property listing online. When I left my home and ventured into town in my finest going-out clothes of stained canvas and holey wool, I would talk about Gauss to whatever young cashier should be unfortunate enough to catch my eye.

The clarity of my desire is something terrible—I can smell the slick, salty rockweed at the wrack line on *my* beach; I can taste the cool, musty air upon entering *my* radar dome on a day in spring—but its object remains stubbornly out of reach. The one thing I can say, grudgingly, in favor of striving is that it *can*, though it by no means always *does*, leave one with the resources needed to buy and maintain a fortress of solitude around which one can putter as weirdly as one likes. My parents, who have stated their intention to never again leave the state of Maine unless under duress, keep telling me that it is not my turn, that I haven't yet earned the right to reclusiveness. This is probably true. But even if I can't obtain the specific object of my desire, I can go back to a state that feels like home, where every curmudgeonly cell in my body seems to exhale and relax. I can live in some inferior but still nice spot, nod at my neighbors and send letters to my friends. I can even try to do good in Maine, to build my credit of beneficence so that I can eventually give myself over to the small and the strange, to the mushrooms and the cephalopods, with a conscience as clean as they come these days. Perhaps I can even track down another decommissioned radar dome, buy it off Uncle Sam, and move it to whatever scrap of



land I call my own. It might attract attention at first, but when my suspicious neighbors try to glean what I'm doing in there, they will find that the answer is *she's doing no harm*.