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Invisible Change

By

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BA, Mount Holyoke College, 2015

Thesis

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire
in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Writing
in
Creative Nonfiction Writing

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Dedication

To Daniel, for your love and support, motivation and inspiration. I still remember years ago when we first met and you asked me if I could do anything, what that would be. I told you writing, and you encouraged me to pursue my dreams.

ABSTRACT

Invisible Change is a collection of essays that focus on my experiences outdoors and with animals, and how those experiences have shaped and taught me. I have always been drawn back to nature, to animals, to outdoor spaces for comfort and inspiration. These essays delve into how those connections began, and how they've evolved and taken on different forms as I've experienced the inevitable changes that come with growing up.

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The Empty Schoolhouse

There's a large wooden schoolhouse that now sits empty on a grassy slope in the small rural town of Canterbury, New Hampshire. Driving by, someone might not even notice it now, the wooden sign announcing the Canterbury Children's Center is no longer there. Nobody driving by would be able to really tell what it once was, they wouldn't know of the lives that were forever changed and formed within its walls. The school now lives only within the memories of those who were lucky enough to be a part of it, and I'm grateful to be able to say that I was a student there. For a fleeting three years that felt like a pause between childhood and adolescence, I experienced education through creativity, through nature, the plants and the animals and the clouds that all told their own stories. I experienced a community, teachers who cared deeply about their students, and a magic that only existed there in childhood, a magic that was lost with adulthood and with the loss of that special school.

The Canterbury Children's Center (shortened by those familiar with it to CCC), began modestly. Established in 1984 by Bill and Judy Egan, it began as a place for First and Second graders within a single room schoolhouse. They created an educational model that consisted of a unique blend of the Waldorf and Montessori teaching meth

ods, as well as some of their own ideas and philosophies surrounding education through the natural world and interactions with animals, thrown in. Both Montessori and Waldorf educational methods seek to teach young children through the development of natural interests and activities rather than the more traditional, formal teaching methods typically used in schools. Within Montessori and Waldorf education children are viewed as being naturally eager to learn and able to initiate learning when in a sufficiently supportive atmosphere. Traditional tests and grades are discouraged, and students are surrounded with the tools to teach themselves in what is considered to be a more natural environment. The Montessori and Waldorf teaching methods have been implemented in schools around the world.

With the creation of CCC, together as a husband and wife team, Bill and Judy aspired to create a place that would enrich the lives of young children through a unique educational experience, different even from that of other Montessori and Waldorf schools opened at that time and in the years to come due to its blend of teaching styles. Most alternative schools utilize one teaching method alone and stick to that, but Bill and Judy believed that if each method of teaching brought different valuable and unique qualities to the table, taking the best ideas from each they could build an educational program that would be something special.

Bill and Judy acquired the tools they needed and built their first, smaller schoolhouse with their own hands. With success they grew the school gradually over the years - they never wanted it to become *too* big and overwhelming for the two of them to handle on their own. Too big a space or too many students might have altered the calm and

spacious atmosphere of the schoolhouse, and would have taken away from the individualized teaching experience that Bill and Judy wanted to provide to each and every student.

After several years of teaching first and second grade, they began to offer third grade as well, and expanded the once very small schoolhouse to accommodate several more children (each class had under ten kids), and allow for them to spread out and experience a wider range of activities throughout the school day. A larger upstairs library was included in the remodel, along with extra open space for morning and afternoon “group” sessions. They built a barn so that students would have the opportunity to work closely with animals, planted gardens, an apple orchard, and created a greenhouse, small pond, and skiing trails that wound through the woods behind the school.

Following along with the natural wood aesthetic that was popular within Montessori and Waldorf education, CCC was not a posh place. It was rustic, cozy, like a large cabin where you met every day with teachers and friends and explored and learned. The tables and chairs were made of natural pine, the wooden walls filled with knots, the ceiling held up by criss-crossing beams. CCC was a place built modestly and gradually by two people with different ideas about what education should look like. They believed that a classroom didn’t mean sitting in a line, that kids shouldn’t be confined to desks. Bill and Judy knew that learning happened as much in the woods and gardens and orchards at recess as it did indoors at the tables, and that kids need the space to roam and explore and choose what piques their curiosity in that moment. Each part of the schoolhouse, each area of the property, was chocked full of educational opportunities that were

subtly embedded into it. The frogs in the pond, the sheep in the barn, the hut in the woods where we ‘bought’ and ‘sold’ acorns, were all part of the education. The Canterbury Children’s Center evolved into something more than a school, and perhaps something even greater than Bill and Judy Egan had hoped possible: it became an *experience*.

Every student had to apply to attend CCC, not because Bill and Judy were looking for genius six year olds, but because they knew from past experience that their teaching methods and learning environment just weren’t right for some children, and because the school was so small, if there was a student who would consistently struggle or have continuous behavioral issues, it would affect the whole group and take away from everybody’s experience. When you have two teachers and a group of twenty to thirty students, it’s understandable that they would need to look for the right students who would mesh well with their peers and the learning environment they offered. Of course this presents challenges and limits which students have the opportunity to attend a school like CCC due to that inclusivity. Prior to CCC I attended a local Montessori kindergarten school, and my friends and I were all accepted to CCC when it was time for first grade. I’m well aware though that the opportunity to attend that initial Montessori kindergarten got the ball rolling; it introduced my peers and I into that kind of an alternative learning environment at a very young age, and put us on the path to CCC. In the end, it was obviously our parents’ decisions to send us to schools like those, and the opportunities my peers

and I were given are special ones, and not accessible to every student, every type of learner, or everyone's financial circumstances. While alternative education has so many pros, this is unfortunately a con when it comes to most Montessori and Waldorf schools.

One aspect of the application process to CCC was a kind of home visit with the children. Bill and Judy wanted to personally spend time with the kids; it was the only way to get a better sense of how they would interact and learn in the school. The day that Judy came to our house to meet with me I was five years old and finishing up my time at the Montessori kindergarten I attended.

When she arrived she wanted me to take the lead, so I brought her into the small wooded area of our property. I showed her the paths and forts I had helped to build, the "buoy ball" swing and the air time you could get if you kicked off the tree in *just* the right way. We looked at plants: Lady's Slippers, buttercups, daisies. We found a mossy area in the woods, and Judy took off her shoes and showed me how it felt to stand barefoot on the moss, soft and squishy and damp. She told me not to ever pull moss out of the ground because it takes many years to form there, a lesson I've never forgotten. During that visit and during the entirety of my time at CCC, I rarely ever felt like I was being "taught" anything. Bill and Judy had a way of teaching without teaching, of letting students learn themselves.

I guess the home visit went well because I heard shortly after that I had been accepted into CCC for First Grade in the fall of 1999.

Every school year at CCC started with a hike. My class that year, the smallest of the school, consisted of only five students, and we hiked Mount Kearsarge together. Needless to say we got to know each other very quickly on that hike, and we were a close knit group for the rest of our time together. Each year you progressed in school the hikes got a little harder.

Every hike was unique, an experience meant to teach us about the natural world, the plants, the creatures, that surrounded us on those mountains. The hikes taught us how to overcome obstacles and challenges, when a boulder felt too big to climb, when you fell down and didn't want to keep going because it felt too hard. Those hikes were the first time that I remember feeling the satisfaction of persevering and completing a challenge that rose up before me in the shape of those mountains.

The traditional third grade hike was actually extra special and extra challenging. Bill and Judy drove students up into the White Mountains and climbed up to Lonesome Lake where they spent the night in cabins up there. The Lonesome Lake hike was an incredibly unique CCC tradition, a right of passage for the students, and it was highly anticipated by all.

Being so young during my time at CCC, I wasn't really aware of Bill and Judy's teaching methods, of the education that was embedded within every hike, every game, every toy and art supply and book inside of that schoolhouse. Instead I remember the experiences, moments in time when I discovered, learned through doing, created, and felt pure joy and contentment. It was the only time I've ever felt quite that way about an educational experience, particularly school. There were no grades, no homework, there

was no stress. My classmates and I weren't ranked, we weren't competing, and we didn't feel as if anyone was better or worse because those ranking systems and grades that so often separate peers from one another just didn't exist at CCC. It was a different kind of an educational world, and I don't think there was ever a day when I didn't want to be there. In hindsight, that says a lot for a young kid in school.

Every morning when I arrived at school I climbed the steps and entered the air-lock where I took off my shoes, and I would hear the music. The day always started off with music. Judy chose entirely instrumental albums that often featured clarinets and other wind instruments, their soft hums reverberating throughout the schoolhouse. I don't know what this music was or who made it, but I have never heard it since. Calm and beautiful that music created the atmosphere of each and every morning.

The school itself consisted of a very large central room with a a post and beam cathedral ceiling. Small round wooden tables tables were scattered throughout the downstairs, and each table featured various artistic and educational activities. There were tall windows that took up much of one of the walls and looked out on the field, pond, and apple orchard. During group I often found myself staring absentmindedly out those windows, watching as the birds and other wildlife flitted about outside. The school had a small kitchen and we often baked and cooked in there, the smells of cookies and breads wafting out and filling the rest of the school. Above that kitchen sat the large loft-style library which I felt was the crowning jewel of the space. The entirety of that up-

stairs was filled with what felt like endless books - anything I could imagine wanting to read seemed to be available on those shelves. Complete with a fish tank and views that looked down on the rest of the schoolhouse, the library was where I spent the majority of my time.

Every morning when I entered the warmth of the school and heard the soft music, I immediately felt at peace. As other students would continue to arrive, I would sit at the art table and paint or up in the library reading until I heard the music gradually become softer and softer until it stopped altogether - the signal that morning group was starting. This was how Bill or Judy would gently transition the morning activities, keeping the calm atmosphere that was maintained throughout the morning. There were never any loud announcements, no yelling, no chaos, to get the attention of the children at CCC. When we acted up or got too rambunctious and ignored our teachers as children often will, Bill and Judy were somehow able to use silence to get our attention. I'm not sure how, but it always worked. A certain stance and their silent gazes were all we needed to see to realize that something was amiss. Maybe it was the sense of mutual respect that existed between them and us. I never felt like they treated us as children, and as such, their subtle authority and leadership meant more. We were eager to follow their lead.

Each morning I'd make my way to the group area and, seated on the rug with my best friend Casey by my side, I would eagerly await the daily routine: going over the date and the day's birthdays, singing songs, and most of all the morning poem, always based on the changing seasons. CCC was filled with poetry, with words and creativity and meaning. I wrote my first poem there when I was in First Grade after becoming inspired

by the words of Robert Frost, Joyce Kilmer, Robert Louis Stevenson, and many others. My poem was about butterflies, and it was framed, hung up as an achievement worthy of greatness, something to be treasured. I always felt supported, taught to try anything and everything, to enjoy feeling and living and to use my experiences to create and learn.

At six years old I already knew how much I loved books. And my love only grew as I spent more time in the library at CCC. I would climb the steep carpeted steps into the loft space and feel a giddy anticipation as I thought about all of the books that awaited me there. The library was always my destination during free time. I chose carefully from the plethora of options: picture books by Barbara Clooney, Tomie dePaola, Shel Silverstein, chapter books that included *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, *Julie of the Wolves* and *Love that Dog*. I was unaware at the time that many of these books were traditionally meant for slightly older readers. I spent hours sitting at the large wooden table, it's chairs sturdy and so adult-feeling beneath me, surrounded by those books, just reading. I only stopped when I was told we were moving on to a different activity.

During my Second and Third Grade years I began reading encyclopedias. I set goals and committed myself to reading everything there was to read about Mountain Lions and all kinds of other completely random subjects. Over the years I spent in that library I was consistently drawn most to the poetry books, though. Bill and Judy stocked their library extremely carefully. There was a great variety, and many books, such as the Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost collections, you might not typically find in a chil-

dren's library. It wasn't because they were inappropriate or too adult, but simply because they were meant for older readers, books that most teachers would assume young students had no interest in or would be unable to comprehend. Bill and Judy never considered their students incapable though. My favorite poem that I discovered at CCC was Joyce Kilmer's "Trees" -

I think that I shall never see

A poem lovely as a tree.

I read that poem over and over again. I remember one day in particular, Bill sat down with me after noticing how often I sat on the floor, cross-legged, holding the large book of poetry, and spoke about the power of those poems. I don't remember his words now, but I remember the feeling of inspiration that they gave me.

I learned to write and to read because of the books that Bill and Judy made available in that library. I was never told that anything was beyond my comprehension, and I was never forced to read; I was never expected to complete anything at CCC aside from the infamous third grade Project that was required of every student (I did mine on Hawaii, and it makes me nostalgic for the days of using actual slides in a projector to present a project). I completed my work because I loved it, and that was the mentality there. That third grade project was made exciting because it was something that was built up from the moment we began first grade there. The research was fascinating, and the options endless. You could choose anything you wanted to learn about, and when presenting, you were the "adults" among your peers. The research felt important, the challenge of it exciting.

It wasn't all magical and perfect of course. Of course students struggle and threw tantrums and acted just like kids will. It wasn't like we were all a bunch of little adults running around and studying as if we were college students. I remember one day in particular. It was the one and only time out of my three years at CCC that I ever saw Bill and Judy get angry. We were acting up that day, being loud and chasing one another around the school. When Bill and Judy signaled for us to quiet down as they normally would, they were ignored. They tried again and again. I'm sure we weren't really trying to be difficult; we were being kids and momentarily forgetting that we were in school, and that our authority figures there were asking us to quiet down and come together for group. After continued failed efforts to work with us, Bill suddenly began loudly pulling the chairs from each of the tables throughout the schoolhouse and slamming them down into rows in the group area. This had never happened before and his actions, and obvious frustration, got our attention. We quieted down immediately. Once all of the chairs were in a row, with a raised and authoritative voice that we had never heard before, he told us all to sit down.

Silently, we sat and waited there. We waited and waited, nobody saying a word, for Bill to do something. We didn't know what was going on. We were then told to sit in those chairs and complete our work, the math we'd been doing, or to read a book. We sat there for quite some time, everyone silent as mice, glancing around at one another confused and unsure of what was happening. Eventually, Bill's face softened and he spoke to us like he always did. *This is how it is at most schools*, he told us. He talked about the freedom to explore and learn and work and play together that he and Judy believed we should have, and that we shouldn't take those opportunities and the easy go-

ing nature of our school for granted. He spoke with us like adults, and it was a sobering moment. Even as young as we were I think we all realized in that moment that our schooling experience was very different, special, and that perhaps that wouldn't be how it always was for us. The chairs were put away and the day continued on as usual, but there was a sadness that lingered in the air for the rest of the afternoon.

We learned outdoors whenever possible. We would talk about nature, about plants and animals in the apple orchard or on the sledding hill. We laid down and felt the soil beneath our bodies and discussed the earth. Each year there was a night time stargazing activity and leading up to that we learned about space, and then took it all in on that night, lying on our backs and staring into the blackness, studying the constellations. We had "pond days" in the spring and fall when we pulled on heavy rubber boots and trudged down the hill to the tiny pond where we would learn about the tadpoles, fully grown frogs, and other wildlife that lived beneath its depths.

We visited the neighbors' farm where we learned about their goats and the giant draft horses that roamed their fields. We learned about how they pulled carriages and tilled the field and harvested the hay each year. We visited other farms in town as well. The dairy farms smelled of cows and manure, the soil muddy and sticky beneath our boots as we meandered around the property. The farmers taught us about where our milk comes from, and all of the hard work that goes into getting that milk from the cow and into the refrigerators at our homes. We got to see the milking parlor, and watch the

ways the machines and tubing was hooked up to each cow. It was a strange experience learning that most cows are no longer milked by human hands.

Bill and Judy had a small barn at CCC as well. The barn housed Sylvester the donkey, two sheep, and a flock of chickens. I used to love to pet Sylvester, running my fingers through his coarse grey hair, his fluffy ears inquisitive, eyes kind. He was a friend to all of us, and when he passed away of old age during my time at CCC we all mourned his death, held a memorial. Prior to building a more solid structure for the chickens a coyote tore into their coop one night and killed most of them. Bill and Judy were devastated by the loss as were we, and we once again mourned for the lives lost that night.

One of the most exciting barnyard activities was the sheering of the sheep that happened every year. Bill and Judy brought in professionals who specialized in various fields such as this, and the day a local farmer showed up to teach us to shear during my first grade year I felt ecstatic despite the chilly weather that day. Even bundled in layers and boots I shivered inside the barn as the woman taught us how to shear the sheep, how to use the electric clippers in a smooth way, moving them in lines, sheering off the thick wool with every movement. We were each awarded a turn to try this out, and when it was mine I stepped up to the sheep and no longer noticed the cold, immersed in what I was doing. Luckily for the sheep they were given blankets to wear after their haircuts.

I picked up clumps of sheered wool off the ground to bring home with me and, alone in my bedroom, I would take it out and feel its softness, luxuriating in the feel of something that was totally unlike the hair on a cat or dog or other household pet. After sheering that day we gathered up all of that wool and loaded it into trash bags so that it

could be washed and dried. After it was cleaned we would sit in the schoolhouse at the small round art tables and create with it. We glued the wool onto small, sturdy art boards, creating paintings that were made three-dimensional by adding the wool onto the picture. I still have all of my artwork from CCC, and the wool pictures are by far my favorite. I glued the wool on to create puffy clouds in the sky, and glued on other puffs above the painted ground, adding arms and legs to create sheep running across a hillside. It was art come to life.

Celebrating every season was of great importance at CCC. We celebrated spring with May Day, creating our own May Pole outside in the field, flowers in our hair. We celebrated fall with the Harvest Festival. We harvested the gourds, apples, and pumpkins from the gardens at the school, and set up little booths to sell them to our families and friends. We ran the booths ourselves, set the prices, and counted the money. The most exciting seasonal event of all though was the Winter Solstice candle-lit stroll. During one of the snowiest and coldest months of the year we would parade out into the woods behind the school, lead by Bill and Judy, candles lit, singing festive winter and holiday songs all the way. We'd get to the gathering place where our families and friends were waiting for us and all stand together and sing under a starry sky.

This was a popular event for CCC alumni to attend as well because it was so memorable, so nostalgic for everyone who had ever attended. The event was never advertised, but it was open to all who knew about it. It's difficult to ascribe words to why

this experience was so special. There was a magic to it though that I haven't felt replicated since I was a part of that yearly tradition. Our words echoed throughout the silent forest, carried off into the darkness on the wind, stars shining brightly above. The Canterbury Children's Center was about community, and standing in that snow, the cold not forgotten but rather embraced by all, I'd never feel so enveloped in love. Love from not only my parents and sister who were there with me, but also love from my teachers, Bill and Judy, and love from my peers, and even the alumni who all gathered there to celebrate the existence of such a special place and the two people who had created it and cared so deeply. I knew then that I was a part of something special, something that would shape my life moving forward. The connection to nature, to the silent winter wind, to each other, has remained with me despite the eventual endings that would come, the inevitable change, and the loss of the special place that was CCC.

Over the years I've caught up with several of my CCC peers and they've all spoken with such passion about their childhood experiences there. We've reminisced about the "store" and the "neighborhoods" we created in the woods, about the gardens, the festivals, the books we read, the learning contracts that taught us math, how Casey and I memorized the poem "Water Striders" one day and then proceeded to recite it repeatedly to the class. We've talked about how different our experiences were from other kids that age in school, and my mind wanders back to the lesson Bill taught us that day, about how lucky we were to have the experience we had at CCC, how many other stu-

dents were already confined to desks at that age. Of course we all grew up and the special moments at CCC did grow farther and farther away. Learning perhaps wasn't so fun anymore, the boundaries of what was and wasn't acceptable in a classroom setting became much more rigid, and despite the way CCC would stay with us for life, the magic gradually became farther and farther away, fading away and becoming absorbed into the years that aged us all.

The Canterbury Children's Center closed in 2011, and Bill and Judy retired after thirty-three years of teaching. Sadly, I learned that Bill struggled a great deal with his health, and that was the main reason they had to close the school earlier than they would have liked. Judy tried, carrying on the school traditions and daily activities just like always, but even with accepting fewer children into the school, the combination of the work and Bill's declining health was too much for her to handle alone.

While I was in college my mom told me about how she ran into Judy at a local store and talked with her about how she and Bill were doing. Judy told her that they felt profound sadness at not being able to teach any longer, at not being involved with children the way they had been their entire lives, no longer able to do what they loved most. She said they often sat in the now empty school, everything left in its place unchanged, alone and quiet, remembering the days when it was once filled with laughter and learning.

I read recently that Bill and Judy taught two hundred and sixty one students during their thirty-three years at the Canterbury Children's Center, and did so in a revolutionary way. Bill and Judy weren't just educators teaching at a school. More than that, they passed on love, knowledge, wisdom and patience to every one of those two hundred and sixty one students.

When I think back on my experiences at CCC, that highly anticipated overnight Lonesome Lake hike with Bill and Judy in the White Mountains stands out in my memories. I remember that even at such a young age I felt a tinge of sadness mixed in with the excitement of that trip. Once I realized that CCC was different, that I would leave it behind faster than I even knew, that everything would eventually change, I'd been feeling that tinge. Time was already moving too fast.

Of course that feeling of sadness became stronger during my third grade year. Even though it was only the beginning of that year, the Lonesome Lake trip somehow still marked the end of each student's time at the Canterbury Children's Center. It was a right of passage, a sign that you were growing up. That night we spent at Lonesome Lake my classmates and I lay under a starry sky, high above the world it felt, immersed in a sort of separateness, a different place altogether from the rest of the world that we would eventually experience as older kids and as adults. We were protected, shielded at the time from all that would come, shrouded in magic and learning and experiences that

would form us, and as I gazed up at the stars in that moment, the lake water shimmering in the moonlight, the world felt limitless and I didn't want anything to ever end.

Transitions

I've never been one for change. The uneasiness of the unfamiliar has always unsettled me. Growing up, my family lived in a large log home in the small, slightly rural town of Hopkinton, New Hampshire. We had a lot of land, woods where I'd explore and build forts. We lived on a dead end road and knew all of our neighbors. There were the Cowans, the Wilkies, the Detwillers. There was Riggs, the Golden Retriever who was always running away and roaming the streets and neighbors' yards. I loved taking walks on our street, at first with my parents and then alone, to look at the tadpoles in the bog a few houses down, to walk my Bichon Frise, Pearl (much to her disliking), to ride my bike, my scooter, and when I was older, to re-enact the music videos I watched on VH1. I lay down in the middle of the road, stared up at the sky, and pretended that I was in Snow Patrol's "Chasing Cars" video:

If I lay here

If I just lay here

Would you lie with me and just forget the world?

The puffy clouds moved above me in formations and patterns, drifting behind the sun, eventually casting the road and myself in shadow. I'd empty my mind and just lay there, in the road, my self rooted in that place and time and moment. The neighborhood and street where I lived was as much a part of my life as my house. It was familiar, a sanctuary, even when it wasn't. Even when the yelling, the never-ending arguments, the heated words, were exchanged between my parents, it still remained the home I loved.

Even when the Christmas tree fell over, when our dogs died, even when my grandmother came to live with us after being diagnosed with lung cancer. Even when our family felt fractured, my sister gone away to college, my parents at odds. But it was home, and that grounded me, kept me whole and hopeful and surrounded by the familiar. All of that changed though when we sold our home and moved to my uncle's house.

The maze of financial troubles, a house that wasn't able to be built, and the economic recession, lead my family to my Uncle's house in Manchester, New Hampshire, a place that I never would have ever guessed we would end up. Home says a lot, but also only a little - it's a place, but also a mindset, a sense of peace. That mindset was altered, the rug of peace pulled out from under me when we moved to Manchester. No longer in our log home, and without the woods I'd been so comforted by, I felt lost at my uncle's house.

Uncle Gary is my dad's little brother. He's the odd one out in the family, quirky, a loner, and obviously gay despite never having officially said so. It's one of those things that everyone knows and acknowledges in some ways, but doesn't say explicitly out loud. He lives alone in a small house in the suburbs of Manchester with his cats and guinea pigs. He volunteers at an animal shelter, works at Bob's furniture where he creates the furniture displays for multiple stores around New Hampshire. He has an obsession with cleanliness, neatness, and with doing laundry. His house is filled with Victorian era

antiques and bobbles, lamps, paintings, rugs, and furniture, and even has a real coo-coo clock that goes off on the hour. He's kind but also stubborn and so set in his ways that I can say with absolute certainty he should never have let us move in with him.

His house is small and did not have internet. While we stayed there I commuted forty minutes to school in Concord every day, and none of my friends knew where I lived anymore, or that I made the commute. I counted the coo-coos and watched DVDs. I brought my own collection, complete with favorites like *Into the Wild* and *Seabiscuit*, but also dove into my uncle's collection as well, watching things like *The Day After Tomorrow* and *Save the Last Dance*. I became obsessed with new music, much darker and more depressing: Brandi Carlile's album "Give Up the Ghost," and Pearl Jam's "Black:"

...I'm spinning

Oh, I'm spinning

How quick the sun can, drop away.

I felt as if mine was, anyway. I sat in a foreign bedroom decorated with Victorian furniture and cats, and struggled to focus on anything but that feeling of my world dropping away. I contemplated and wrote in journals and bought the DVD sets for one of my favorite TV shows, contemplating the hard questions in life.

It wasn't long before our arrangement with Uncle Gary went bad. I neglected to fold a pile of sheets and that was the end of it. In an angry response to the situation I made the mistake of slamming the bedroom door, and that was *really* the end of it. My parents began to avoid him, as did I. He didn't want us there anymore, and we were in the unfortunate predicament of having nothing else lined up. He spent less time at

home, as did we. I wandered bookstores and clothing stores with nothing to do and no money to spend, eternally bored. When I woke up one morning and my mom announced that we were finally leaving, I was ecstatic. My family had found a temporary house to rent in Concord, complete with a barn for our horses, and we'd be staying there while the economy hopefully improved, and we'd then be able to finish our new home in Canterbury.

As I packed up my things, school uniforms and DVD collection, I was ecstatic to leave the antique-filled home of my uncle, a place that once felt entertaining during family visits, and now felt alien. I made my way down the stairs, happily passing by that coo-coo clock for one last time.

A Safe Haven

Traffic is backed up as I make my way down Route 33 through Greenland, New Hampshire. Windows down, the air is heavy with humidity. Just short of the tall plaza sign that announces the Target and Lowes stores that lie ahead, I reach another intersection with an unmarked road. Blinker on, I turn and am immediately submerged into suburbia. Two story houses with short paved driveways and small yards, soccer goals and bikes, line one side of the road. On the other, a golf course that lingers on the edges of the Pease Air Force Base. I spot men in white gloves, golf carts behind them, taking a swing on the well manicured lawn. As I continue down the street though, the golf course begins to fade. The grass gradually becomes longer, unmaintained - there is no abrupt end to the golf course and a beginning to the natural fields. Dilapidated wooden fences and rusted farm gates eventually entirely take the place of the colorful flags and golf tees. On the other side of the road suburban homes are replaced by farm houses, set farther off the street, and long dirt driveways that lead out of sight.

The transition from urban department stores and highways to fields of farmland and wildlife is jarring to say the least. Having lived in the area for years, and as someone who enjoys the hidden wooded areas that sit just outside of the city, I thought I'd ex-

plored all there was to offer. I don't know what I expected from the Great Bay and Newington Village, but it certainly wasn't this. Located on the seacoast of New Hampshire, just outside of the bustling cities of Portsmouth, Greenland, and Newington, no one would ever guess at the staggering change of scenery that exists only a five minute drive from the city metropolis. The rolling hills of Newington Village and Greenland stand in stark contrast to the rest of the area. There's a combination of farmlands and forest, and The Great Bay National Wildlife Refuge, where wild animals from deer to coyote, and even bald eagles, call home.

The Refuge covers more than a thousand acres of forest and wetlands in Newington and was established in 1992 on land surrounding the Air Force Base. Part of that land included in the Wildlife Refuge was, amazingly enough, once used for weapon storage at the base. When the base closed in 1991, only a year later the National Wildlife Refuge was founded. Although never confirmed by the base or the government, soldiers stationed there have reported that the storage held nuclear weapons and produced high levels of dangerous radiation. Today the storage buildings, built to be indestructible, sit empty and haunting, holding the untold stories of the past within their doors, a strange contrast to the pristine wooded land that's been preserved in the area today.

Strangely enough they also hold bats now too, as the Wildlife Refuge staff is currently experimenting with fully converting the insides of the abandoned structures into bat sanctuaries. These dark spaces will provide the local bat population with a place where they can escape the harsh winter snow and bright light. In addition to the bats, it's not uncommon to see deer and fox frolicking beneath the trees in this space as well.

The combination of the glistening open water of the bay, and the wooded areas, provide sanctuary to a multitude of different creatures, from mammals to water fowl.

The Wildlife Refuge is significant in its role as a migration and wintering habitat for the federally protected bald eagle. The bay area within the refuge also provides a prime migration habitat for the peregrine falcon and a wintering area for black ducks. Through preserving the nature surrounding the Air Force base and the weapons storage structures, a place that once housed the tools for violence has now transformed into a sanctuary for not only the animals, but the residents who reside around this small remaining vestige of undeveloped land on the Seacoast, a place whose population has continued to grow and has faced significant development over the course of the last ten years.

The fact that the beautiful woods and fields I pass through on this drive are so filled with wildlife and beauty causes me to momentarily forget about the darker past of this area. The last vestiges of the army base and the weapons storage facilities are haunting though. Like a scene from a sci-fi film, a tall and thin water tower, rusted and aged, looms within the gates to the former weapons storage facility. From a distance the structures, weathered grey and brown from the elements, look like bunkers nestled within the overgrown field ahead. These structures above ground represent a time of innovation during the Cold War as the first weapons storage structures ever to be built above ground. The consequences of them though, the health problems, the birth defects, and the deaths that resulted for those families who lived on the base, were a devastating sacrifice for that innovation.

As I continue my drive, the mix of urban and rural constantly shifts - from the depths of the woods I emerge to take in the expanse of the Air Force base, large grey military aircraft carriers standing like giants lined up in the distance on the tarmac, before I am plunged back into nature once again. Old farm fencing, rusted barbed wire and bent metal gates linger on the outskirts of the Air Force base stand out as the remnants of the past, the history of this land. I slow my car abruptly as I spot a mother deer and her fawn up ahead in the roadway, just outside of the barbed wire fencing that surrounds the base. They tentatively cross the road, the fawn teetering on spindly legs, its bright white spots and little white tail a bright contrast to its brown fur. As drive by the space where they disappeared into the woods, the trees and brush are so thick I can no longer see spot them at all. I keep driving and it's not long before I re-emerge back into suburbia once again, never able to escape it for long.

According to the most recent United States Census, New Hampshire has been the second fastest growing state in New England over the last decade. The fastest growing state is Massachusetts. As of April 1, 2021, the state's resident population was 1,377,529, a 4.6% increase since 2010. In the New Hampshire seacoast region where I live, the population growth and increase in development is obvious. Every couple of months it seems there are new condominiums being built, often in areas filled with much smaller historic structures that now exist within the shadows of these larger buildings.

There have been a number of instances over the last several years of seacoast residents speaking out regarding what is believed to be encroaching development in the areas of Newington, Portsmouth, and Greenland. As the most urban area, Portsmouth in particular has faced a slew of new developments. It appears that every spare parcel of land is being transformed, built up, and “improved.” But is that really the case? Residents are seeing an encroachment on wetlands as developers are given the green light on controversial projects such as the recent North Mill Pond development, a proposed five-story “mixed-use” structure that would include 48 residential units on the upper floors. The large structure would dwarf the small historic homes of the Islington Creek Neighborhood, and was initially approved for development despite its location falling within the wetland buffer meant to protect the local wildlife and natural habitat that exists there. The proposed development is one that has caused outcry and pushback for reconsideration by local residents.

The towns of the New Hampshire seacoast are changing fast. I’m reminded of the proximity of the country club golf course and the Target that I passed on my way into rural Newington. A mere five minute drive is all that separates the natural farmland and woods from the urban areas of Greenland and Newington that border it. As I gaze out at the rolling fields and farmland, I feel a sadness at what seems like its eventual inevitable loss.

The rural land of Newington Village is home to several farms that produce everything from beeswax to vegetables. Most of the remaining farms in the area exist in Newington and Greenland. It's a remaining agricultural hub for this area of the state, and I find myself intrigued by the sheer variety of the farms I see in this small area. I feel as if I could complete an entire shopping trip on a single drive through here if I stopped at all of them and took advantage of the products they have to offer.

Today I've come here specifically to explore Breezy Hill Creamery though, a small dairy operation that recently found a home at Great Bay Farm. Breezy Hill is not only one of New Hampshire's few remaining dairy farms, it's also recently been reopened, making it especially unique. The barns have once again been re-filled with cows after years of closure. During a time when so many local dairy farms are being forced to close their doors, stories of those doors reopening are a rare occurrence. Once farms are gone they're usually gone forever.

Erick Lafferty is one of the owners and operators of Breezy Hill Creamery alongside Al Smith, who runs the beef operation at Great Bay Farm. The farm has remained in Al's family for generations, and Al is actually the fifth generation to keep the operation going. Erick is well aware of the multitude of dairy farms that are being forced to close their doors, and he's passionate about not only keeping his farm going, but about restarting one of those very farms that had to close its doors. Erick enjoys the surprise that such a large farm operation's reopening elicits from locals, and is proud of what he's been able to accomplish thus far. Although they're just starting, he feels sure that, with the support of local consumers, the dairy farm will be a success. It's daring to say the least, to open a farm in this area, on the New Hampshire seacoast, during this time of

change, this time when so many farms are closing, so much land is being bought up, and the future of these rural areas is hazy. Although I hope for their success, I realized I needed to visit Great Bay Farm now, while I still had the chance.

The farm is less than five minutes from the metropolis of the Greenland and Newington department stores, as well as the major interstate that connects New Hampshire to Massachusetts and Maine. Surrounded by lush green fields, dirt trails and gravel driveways, Great Bay Farm is located on a small hillside. It's marked by a weathered wooden sign, red ink peeling off, and an open flag. The farm is primarily still a beef farm, and there's a small sign announcing beef for sale as well as eggs and vegetables. In the years to come the plan is to grow the dairy operation, creating two profitable businesses of equal size that exist side by side at the farm.

I pull my car up to the top of the hill and park, my tires crunching loudly across the gravel. The dust from my vehicle lingers in the air and the smell of cows is strong. The moos ring through the air and it's difficult to imagine that this dairy farm was closed just a few years ago, the cows removed from the barns and sold, with nothing but silence and dust to fill that barn in their absence. It's always difficult to imagine a piece of land, or a structure, being anything in that moment other than what it currently is.

In 2020 the Farmland Information Center released an article, *Farms Under Threat*, stating that they have new data showing that an uptick in development has resulted in about nineteen acres per day, or 7,000 acres per year, of New England Agricul-

tural land that has been lost or threatened between 2001 and 2016. Farmland is simply disappearing each year, and it's difficult to imagine how farmers must feel as they keep observe these changes taking place. And I think now about how this feeling, seeing change as it's happening, and perhaps fearing the loss of land and home, is permeating into the small cities and towns of the New Hampshire seacoast that are being so quickly developed into something entirely different. The residents who are speaking out, who are watching the destruction of historic buildings in favor of new ones, and the encroachment on local wildlife, are dealing the the reality that their homes can, and are, quickly becoming under threat of change as well.

To solve this problem of closure and development, many farms today are looking to conservation groups as a long term solution to preserving their land and ensuring that it will remain as it is, a habitat for wildlife, and a natural space for people to explore and for their farm animals. As I wander the land at Breezy Hill Creamery, I can't help but hope that the fate of this farm will fall into the hands of conservationists as well.

The farm store is tiny. Housed adjacent to the barn itself, an open flag hung above the door, the store is entirely self-service. Customers are trusted to buy what they want and leave the money in the cash drawer. The trust and quaintness of the store brings me back to my childhood, when my parents and I would stop at the small farm stores and stands in our little country town of Hopkinton, New Hampshire, another area of the state that has faced a great deal of development and changes in the last several

years. Most of those stores have closed down now, or at the very least have grown in size, becoming more commercialized, and the store at Breezy Hill gives me a nostalgia I can't quite explain.

The products - ice cream, cheeses, vegetables, and beef, line the wooden shelves, and the strong smell of cows seeps into the store through its wooden walls. While the dairy operation is only producing ice cream and cheese at the moment, Erick has stated that they have big plans to expand their dairy offerings in the future once the farm becomes established as far as profitability. Right now, their milking herd is still small.

As far as selling their products, I learn that the farm certainly doesn't rely on its little store alone. They do most of their business off-property, shipping their cheeses, milks, and creams out to distributors across the state. However, the owners feel that keeping this farm store as a base for local customers is a must. Not only does it provide extra profitability, it also allows the farm to connect more closely with their local community, which is vital. When locals stop by it's not unusual for the visits to turn into longer chats with Erick, Al, and the other employees. According to local dairy Nate Robertson, who owns and runs Contoocook Creamery in Contoocook, New Hampshire, interaction between small farms and their customers is so important to their longevity. It provides the opportunity for consumers to meet the people who farm their products first hand, and not only that, but learn about their farming practices, care of their animals, and any additional questions they might have about where their food is coming from.

As I wander through the shop and around the land outside, the air is filled with the sounds of a bustling day on the farm: the roar of a tractor starting up, the occasional

moo of a cow that rings through the air, the shouted words of farmers. My boots squish across the mud as I walk towards one of the cow barns. As I make my way over I look on as one of the farmhands gives a cow a friendly pat, quickly scratching gently behind her ears as he passes by.

I spend a few more minutes and observe the activities of the farm. It's clearly a busy day here - I'm sure every day is - and I'm aware that my presence might be distracting to their work. They've already taken enough time away to speak with me.

As I climb into my car and drive down the driveway, the dust from the dry gravel is kicked up behind me, clouding the barn from sight in my rearview mirror. I have the products I purchased, eggs, vegetables, and ice cream, in a paper bag on the car seat next to me, and it feels far more satisfying to take home products straight from the farm like this than it ever could from a grocery store errand. The fields of vegetables and corn whip by outside my open window, the smell of freshly mowed hay sweet in the air, and I find myself reluctant to return back to the city. It's not long though before I hear the roar of traffic and I'm no longer able to smell the sweet hay or the animals on the farms I left behind, as I make my way back to the evolving city I call home.

Kiwi

Last week I said goodbye to my first car, a little green Hyundai Accent hatchback that I lovingly named "Kiwi." I acquired Kiwi at the age of nineteen when my dad loaned me the car for a college trip, and then later ended up surprising me with the news that I could keep it. Due to financial troubles following the 2008 recession, my family didn't have much extra money to spend on extravagant gifts like cars. Kiwi was small and already eight years old when my dad "got a great deal on it," but Kiwi was the most special gift my parents could have given me. I cherished my car. I cherished the freedom it gave me - the freedom to escape, to travel to far away places, to essentially explore the world more easily.

Years later by the time I watched Kiwi being loaded onto a tow truck and driven away, I was twenty-six and the car held a special place in my heart. The accumulation of experiences and moments added up and that car was a space in which I'd lived my life.

Since first getting my license at the age of sixteen, driving has been an important part of my life, not only in the every day transportation sense, but also in the way that it serves as a sort escape, a private place inside something fast moving that could take me anywhere I wished to go. Usually I used Kiwi to transport me to far away fields,

mountains, and sandy shores. When I needed it most, my car was able to take me out of the city or away from my hectic college campus, and back to where I feel most at peace: in nature. So I guess my situation with Kiwi, my attachment to the car, was inevitable.

There was just always something about the road that drew me even before I started driving. It was the endless sense of possibility and the freedom and the beauty that driving alone with your music can be. It was the feeling that no destination was too far away, that the wilderness or the beaches or the fields of crops that I inevitably drove to were always at my fingertips. I had an obsession with creating playlists on my iPod specifically for these very driving adventures. The perfect playlist creates the perfect drive, I believed. It was about the mixture between depth and surface, inspiration and melancholy. The perfect playlist turned up on the stereo, and I was ready to go anywhere.

After acquiring Kiwi it didn't take long before coffee cups littered the interior, each one a symbol of a late night study session, early morning class, or trip to a local coffee shop to meet a friend or simply read a book off campus. My cup collection was made up of standard orange and yellow dining hall cups, Starbucks cups from my adventures to the town of Hadley (always complete with a trip to the pet store across the street where they sold baby hedgehogs), Black Sheep coffee shop cups, and, from the occasional splurge for more expensive lattes at the local cafe and whiskey bar, Amherst Coffee cups.

Kiwi became a popular mode of transportation for my friends who needed rides. Tired from a long day at the barn preparing for horse shows and events at the college barn, my friends would clamber into the back seat clad in dirty riding breaches, exhausted and excited for a ride back to the dining hall. Luka, Carey, Schuyler and I would blast popular dance music and sing along: Lady Gaga, Katy Perry, Milky Chance. We knew all the words, no matter how cheesy they were. As we sang and the heat blasted through the vents and onto our cold faces and fingers, these rides provided a peaceful moment of solace and conversation and friendship away from our busy college lives in dormitories, dining halls, and the quiet of the academic libraries.

My car gradually became filled with more relics of my life at the time: college books, library books, jackets, gym shoes, riding clothes and hiking boots. I used it for alone time. The solitary drives I took around the Pioneer Valley in Western Massachusetts were often my favorite moments. I spoke out loud, my troubles, worries, stories spilling from my lips and into the interior, always quiet, always listening.

I talked to my car about how lonely I felt after my best friend transferred schools and I had a falling out with my other two closest friends, how I felt confident in my riding, but also uncertain about whether I really fit in with the other girls on the intercollegiate dressage team. I drove when I heard that my parents were struggling to an even greater degree financially back home, still unable to find true stability years after the recession. I drove when I felt too closed in on my small, gothic and ivory-walled campus, when I needed an escape to the lake nearby or to Mount Holyoke. I'd take the auto road to the peak of the small mountain where I could look out at the entirety of the

Pioneer Valley, able to stand up there and feel separate but also a part of everything, all at once.

It wasn't unusual for me to take off on any one of these solitary adventures on a whim. I'd tell no one where I was going, ignore my phone, and leave my troubles behind, as if troubles were located in a physical space and I could simply drive away from them - as if they could become lost in the depths of the lakes I visited, or amongst the tall grasses of the fields I trudged through. During the moments when life felt hopeless, when problems arose and felt like it was all too much, driving away was my escape. The mountains of Vermont and the fields of rural New York, the coastline of Maine and the land reservations of Massachusetts always welcomed Kiwi and I.

When I'd reach my destination, I'd take a deep breath as I stepped out of the car, relishing in the simple fact that I was able to arrive all on my own at any type of place I wished to explore. An introvert who tended towards being quite solitary, I enjoyed being able to take a trip without the assistance or company of anyone else. I wandered through small towns, browsing bookstores with my coffee in hand. I walked the deserted beaches of Martha's Vineyard during the winter months, the ice cold ocean air whipping at my face, trudged across the sandy dunes at the Salsbury Beach conservation land beneath a bright blue sky, and stopped at every lookout while traversing the mountains of Vermont behind the wheel of my car. During my time spent at these places, any anxiety I'd had back at school would melt away and the sounds of strangers' conversations at a busy coffee shop, or of the birds and the waves at a state park, took their place.

Each year my classes would come to an end and I'd clean out my dorm room, always a solemn affair. The routine marked the end to another year of my college career, a time that had once seemed infinite and whose end was now speeding closer by the second. I loaded most of what I owned into Kiwi including my little Beta fish, Gail. With the seats folded down, my possessions took up nearly every square inch of available space inside the tiny car. It was filled to the brim with clothes, notebooks and journals, posters and lamps, even a mattress topper that I'd acquired for my dorm room beds. Most of all it was filled with books - books I'd acquired for school, books I'd read for fun, books bought at used bookstores around the Pioneer Valley, during day trips with friends, abroad at street fairs in Ireland and London, and at flea markets in cow fields under the hot summer sun in Western Massachusetts. Perhaps more than anything else it's these books that are most representative of my years in college. Each one contained a story, and how I acquired them was another story all my own.

I drove the two hours home, the college gates in my rear view mirror, my head full of uncertainty for what the future would hold. I always noticed how the letters on my car's driver side mirror read, *objects in mirror may be closer than they appear*. The sentiment applied, in my mind, just as much to my questionable future as to the other vehicles on the road. The saddest and simultaneously most hopeful of these drives was the one that I made after graduation, leaving my college behind for the last time. I opened myself up to the future by accepting the change and uncertainty that inevitably lay ahead and the fact that I wasn't entirely sure where I would end up. I blasted my favorite music, gripped the steering wheel, and let the yellow lines disappear in a blur beneath Kiwi's tires as we sped ahead, straight into that unknown.

My car experienced my words of frustration every time I was turned down for one of the many post-graduation jobs to which I applied, as well as my depression that followed those seemingly endless rejections. I spent hours driving sadly around town with no destination in mind anymore, feeling more lost than I ever had. I didn't even bother making my way to the woods or mountains or beaches that I used to. Low on gas money and motivation, I didn't seek out the spaces that I probably should have, the spaces that had always inspired me, that had given me the peace that I needed now more than ever.

When I finally accepted a job I didn't really want and moved to Boston, driving my car became my escape once again. Life in the city was a drastic change from my life in Western Massachusetts or with my parents in Concord, New Hampshire. My commutes on the subway, walks down the busy streets, and way too much time spent in my cramped apartment, left me yearning to escape into nature more than ever. I missed the fields, the mountains, the coastline. My work schedule prevented me from having the time to explore those places very often though, and whenever I found myself with the time to finally get behind the wheel again and take off to someplace different, it was a breath of fresh air.

I was lonely in the city without friends or a boyfriend, and at a dead end job as a Pharmacy Assistant at a downtown CVS. So I spent my time there driving. Over time I taught myself how to drive well in the city, and even enjoyed it. My drives across town in traffic felt like a sort of challenge to me that wasn't provided on the quiet country roads I

was used to. My favorite drive was crossing the river from Cambridge into Boston at sunset (well after the hectic traffic of rush hour). I took Storrow Drive following the water all the way through downtown Boston, the sunlight glistening off of the buildings and sailboats that floated placidly in the water. The road was always nearly empty at that time, and my car flew over the bumps and potholes that littered the pavement as I enjoyed driving fast, the wind whipping in my windows.

As I sped through the city, my summer music loud and windows down, I felt free in a way that I couldn't on the subways and other public transportation. More than that, I felt more connected to the city during those drives. Even after having lived there for a few months, the city landscape and the culture still felt alien to me; I often felt like an outsider trying to fit into a place I didn't truly belong. My drives familiarized me with the area though, and I felt immersed in the city in a way that I didn't otherwise experience. And no matter how difficult my day, or how hopeless my potential career options felt, on those drives anything still felt possible, just like it did back in the Pioneer Valley during college, and I'd arrive back at my apartment, ready to start again.

During this time in the city my car evolved along with the rest of my city life. Kiwi became more banged up after failed parallel parking attempts and an unfortunate incident of rear-ending another driver. Parking tickets began to accumulate on the seats and in the glove compartment due to my failure to move Kiwi on street cleaning days. Ceramic mugs littered the floor and seats from the many days that I took a mug of hot coffee with me for the inevitably long and tedious drive through downtown traffic to my night time job at the concert venue across town.

The seats in Kiwi during that time were always devoid of passengers. My friends no longer rode around with me; we had all returned to our family's homes or to job opportunities around the country and even abroad. I hadn't made any new friends in Boston and the emptiness in my car was palpable. For the first time since I'd gotten Kiwi my long solitary drives gradually began to leave me feeling more empty than fulfilled. Something was missing.

Following my summer in Boston I decided to make a change and took a working student position (basically a full time internship as an apprentice training horses) at an equestrian facility back in New Hampshire. Being back in a more rural town like Exeter, I felt happy once again. I'd figured out what was missing. I craved my time in nature, and it just wasn't accessible in the city. The life there had proven not for me and I had found my place once again. The night that I moved moved into my apartment on the property there at the barn, I opened my windows and just sat in the quiet night, relishing the sounds of the crickets and the smells grass and hay and horses. I took a deep breath and felt once again at peace.

While living in Exeter Kiwi became dusty with the sand and gravel that was kicked up from the dirt where she was parked in front of the barn. One night a horse got loose and even chewed on the hood, leaving long teeth scrapes across the paint. I woke up the next morning horrified by the sight and had to convince the owner to pay for a new hood. Gradually my little car, now with many more miles clocked on it, became

made of mixed parts, fixed up and repaired back together - much like all of us as we get older. Kiwi became more worn, more broken, and more lived in during this time, and I only loved her all the more for this. Inside this car was a space that felt like home, and the more worn, the more familiar, the more I felt comforted in that space. Now filled with maps and shoes, clothes and books, shells that I found at the beach, it was a small piece of home that I carried with me on every drive, every trip.

More than anything physical though it was the memories that made me attached to my car. Those drives with college friends. The drives to get breakfast after a late night out, visits to the bookstores, the flea markets where we wandered in the hot summer heat and beating sun, the vendors ripping us off, the feeling of friendship that existed between us. My late night drives to the beach. My adventures into the mountains of Vermont, the trails of Maine. My escapes to the sea, to the grassy fields filled with cows, to that peak of Mount Holyoke where I could look out at the world and feel a part of it, yet separate, all at once. Kiwi was what brought me to them all, my little car with its tiny wheels that sped across the roadway, always leaving everything behind with nothing but the wide open road ahead.

Kiwi always got me where I needed to go, though. Regardless of the repairs it needed, the weather, or the other drivers on the road, I never had a serious accident in that car. I guess you could chalk this up to good luck and good driving, but I also always liked to think that my car kept me safe. During my time in college, Kiwi's transmission

broke, and I thought that would be the end of my car. Transmissions are expensive, and a new one would cost more than what the car itself was worth at that point. During that time, despite my parents advice, I still drove to Boston (at top speeds on the highway) to meet my friend for a night out, broken transmission and all, because I just had to keep driving my car, taking those trips, and pretending as if nothing was wrong. Not long after, my family was able to find an affordable "used" transmission and I had that installed. Kiwi was once again whole.

As the years drew on though, Kiwi's repairs became more and more extensive. I once drove it for six months un-inspected because I couldn't afford all the repairs that it needed. It wasn't until this point, when the repairs felt too daunting, that I'd even considered getting a new car. I'd reached the inevitable point though when I realized that it simply wouldn't last forever. I also realized though that the memories I'd made, the places I'd gone, the road ahead, wouldn't be lost with Kiwi. I tried so hard to hold onto my car for longer than it was really worth it, and in the end I realized I was trying to hold on to a past, a time in my life, my younger self.

My car had character. It was, in my mind, part of a life lived. When I decided it was time to move on to a newer vehicle, Kiwi was fifteen years old and had been driven almost 250,000 miles.

The day that the tow truck was scheduled to come and take Kiwi away, I was wishing that perhaps I hadn't ever named it. I sat inside one last time and took pictures.

I wanted to remember the details of the car, perhaps to better remember the memories that happened inside, the feeling of taking off, the feeling of my very first car, of the experiences I will never again feel for the very first time. I turned on the radio to my favorite station (no longer able to play my own playlists as the cassette adapter had broken years earlier), and just sat. I smiled, remembering my first taste of college freedom all those years earlier in that very seat. I thought of the many drives, adventures, blasting the music that meant so much, the road ahead, but also everything that I had left behind.

When the tow truck driver pulled up, I chatted with him about my little old green car with its many miles and repairs.

These are good cars, last a long time. I used to have one, the tow truck driver said gruffly.

Yeah, I told him, smiling. *It was a very good car.*

Letting Go

“So, this is it – this is Blacktree!” My sister told me, leading the way across a grassy field atop the large grassy hill we had just climbed. I looked in the direction she was pointing and saw the giant, almost black looking tree that towered over the others. It didn’t really look like any tree I had seen before, and I couldn’t identify what kind it was. The largest tree for as far as I could see, it stood alone in the center of the field, which itself stood alone, in the center of the city of Boston it felt to me.

It was morning, but the air was already damp with humidity. It felt moist on my face and I began to sweat as we took off running across the field. I didn’t know why we were running, just that when my sister ran, I ran too; she always did this - took off ahead of me, always so cool, someone I wanted to be, and I’d follow. We ran across the grass, our feet silently padding across the earth. The morning dew still lingered on the grass and it felt nice, cool and wet against my bare legs. I didn’t understand my sister’s excitement about this tree, or why we ran towards it with such exuberance. But up there on that grassy hill, high above the city of Boston, the running made me feel free and full of reckless abandonment. Suddenly gone were the worries, the daydreams, anxiety and anticipation that seemed to constantly fill my mind these days as I prepared to graduate high school and leave for college.

When we reached the tree, we had to stoop down to climb beneath its branches. They were so low that they formed a complete circle against the ground surrounding the trunk. Once inside its cocoon, I understood why my sister loved being there so much. It was like a shelter, a secret magical place entirely separate from its surroundings. You could be inside those branches and be anywhere. It was a place where moments lasted and the world couldn't intrude. I turned my eyes upwards and stared at the dark branches that jutted outwards at every angle from this tree's thick grey trunk. They criss-crossed above and below one another, creating layers full of leaves that entirely blocked out the blue sky above. The leaves, colored a beautiful burgundy red, glistened in the summer sunlight. As I took it all in I felt at peace in this brief quiet space, shrouded from all that the future would or might hold, from the changes ahead that scared me, the uncertainty that comes with leaving home for the first time. I wanted to stay beneath this tree forever.

My sister and I took a seat on the soft earth at the base of the trunk. We sat in silence, enjoying the quietness of the moment. I observed the little world that I was now a part of, a world that only existed within the fortress of that tree. The wind suddenly blew through, rustling the branches and I watched as a single leaf snapped off from one of the branches above. That small, dark red leaf began to drift, slowing making its inevitable descent towards earth. It fell slowly, hovering at times as it floated on the wind and momentarily being diverted from its path downwards when the breeze once again picked up in strength, pulling the tiny leaf from side to side, slowing its journey downwards, My eyes continued to follow its descent. Impact was inevitable. When it finally touched down it settled softly, resting on the ground beside me.

And I began to think. I wondered idly why that leaf had left its rightful place on the tree? The already hot, humid air reminded me that it was summer - not the right time of year for falling leaves. With the melting of snow and the first warm air of spring, that leaf had begun its life as a tiny bud on the same branch from which it had just departed. With the passing of time the bud had unfurled, revealing a soft new leaf, new life. Spring turned to summer, and the leaf stood strong in its rightful place on that branch, until today, when, with the caress of a single breeze, it plummeted to earth.

I thought back over what I knew about the cycle of trees and how they lost their leaves. I had always assumed that in the autumn, when leaves became dry and fragile, the wind simply swept them off their branches. I was surprised when, in high school, I learned that this actually isn't the case. Prior to that process trees take their own action in preparation for losing their leaves. The trees actually "throw" their leaves from the branches themselves. During the fall, when the days grow shorter and the temperature drops, a hormone is triggered in trees that lose their leaves. That hormone sends a chemical message to every leaf that essentially tells them it's time to go. When the leaves receive the message, small cells appear on the leaf stem where it connects to the branch. These cells are nicknamed "scissors" because they're designed to cut the leaf away. Over the next days and weeks the cells within each leaf gradually push it away from the tree's branches. Eventually the leaves develop a thin enough connection to those branches that when a breeze comes, they are easily blown away. This truth is the opposite of the popular conception that the external force of the wind pulls the leaves from the trees all

on its own. In actuality, it's the trees themselves that push their own leaves away.¹

Leaves are like memories, moments, days of our lives. They are like experiences, each one separate and unique, but coming together to create a whole entity: who we are. Just as multitudes of new buds unfurl each year, creating leafy branches that give shape and substance to the trees, each year we experience new things, new people, and new places. We create new moments and new memories that shape and alter who we are. And every year, although we always carry it deep within ourselves, we all must shed the immediate past from the forefront of our minds – let it go so that we are free to start fresh and create new experiences. Just like the leaves, though, our past doesn't always leave us easily. We cling to it, realizing that we shaped ourselves around it. We idealize the past, and doubt that with time, new and possibly even better memories will be created. This endless cycle of letting go of the old and welcoming the new – it's something we all must deal with, over and over again, and something I have always struggled with. No matter how many times we let go, it never gets an easier. As time passes and things change, memories fade, and it feels as if that past we cling to is being yanked away against our will. In the end, though, no one but ourselves can release us from the past; *we* are the ones who must slowly snip it away, freeing ourselves from its hold so that we can, once again, look forwards to what comes next.

¹Information provided by Peter Raven, President of the Missouri Botanical Garden

As a high school senior I had faced hurdles to get to where I did. I changed schools three times throughout my four years of high school. My family's financial struggles following the 2008 recession had lead us to stay with family and move around multiple times. My commutes to school were long, my days were long, and it was all hard. But it was familiar. Now, having been accepted to the college of my dreams, I was faced with an uncertain future and I didn't know what to expect. Huddled beneath Black Tree with my sister though, pondering the ways that nature itself pushes away the old and welcomes the new, I felt safe, and more ready to let go of than I ever had before, scared, but ready to push off towards that unknown.

Oblivious to my quiet pondering, my sister began taking pictures of the tree. Of its leaves, its branches, its trunk. "Stay next to the trunk, I'll take one of you!" She smiled and turned the camera on me, pulling me back to the present moment. I posed for the picture and then sighed. I wished we could stay there all day. There was something magical about that place, and I didn't want to leave. My sister lingered under the tree for another moment as well, and I could tell she didn't want to return to leave either, to return to the hustle and bustle of the city streets, to the end of our visit together when I'd return home to our parents and she'd return to her tiny apartment, when we'd both return to reality.

Reluctantly, we ducked our heads and crawled out from beneath the branches and once out of the tree's protective shelter, the now hot summer sun beat down on us.

No longer running, we walked much less enthusiastically back down the grassy slope and across the field towards our car. The car's interior was hot and we opened the windows, drove slowly back down the winding road, blasting our music, a summer song on the radio. I turned around in my seat to look back at the park and get one last glimpse of Black Tree, but by the time I looked, it was too late, it was already out of sight.

Pathways

The icy snow pelted at my face relentlessly as I dug the shovel into the deep, wet snow. The wind howled and I stopped again to glance up at the trees that tilted at what appeared to be a dangerous angle. Despite wearing a hat and a hood, both were soaked through, along with my down jacket and my gloves. I felt damp and cold and sweaty all at the same time. Digging my shovel into the icy snow once again, I just imagined the hot coffee and shower and cozy bed that awaited me back at my apartment. When I eventually finished shoveling the work wasn't even done yet, but I returned to my co-workers in the barn, exhausted and damp, and felt a certain exhilaration at the feeling of being outside in the storm, and working so hard yet continuing on.

This wasn't an unusual workday situation for me during the winter of 2017. My days were spent as a working student at Five Stars Farm in Brentwood, New Hampshire, and that sort of a day was exactly what I signed up for. I loved it and hated it all at once, and now, four years later, I can't stop thinking about the experience I had there. I sit at my office or in my home and I stare out the window at the changing seasons, and remember the way I experienced them, experienced each day outside, pursuing a passion with everything I had, and I yearn for it all back again.

I started planning my path to the Olympics when I was twelve years old. I'd started riding horses a couple of years earlier and I'd recently competed in my first competition. After that I was hooked. Competitive by nature, and always in pursuit of a challenge, I enjoyed having a goal to work towards. Each horse show, first aboard Jitter Bug, the Quarter Horse I took my first lessons with, and then aboard my horse Black Stallion-esque Morgan Buddy, filled me with excitement. I spent months in preparation, improving my riding, working closely with my horse every day. And as time went on, I only became more invested. That's when my Olympic dream became solidified.

I adorned my bedroom walls in posters of equestrian Olympians: Lars Peterson, Debbie McDonald, Courtney King. Every day at the barn, every competition, felt to me like a step in that direction. So when my sixth grade teacher asked us to make an art piece that depicted where we saw ourselves as adults, I didn't think twice about drawing the Olympic rings.

I didn't know you were going to go to the Olympics! My classmate Leah exclaimed when we showed each other our art pieces. I felt one hundred percent confident when I told yes, I definitely would be.

As the years drew on and I started high school, I discovered a new discipline of riding: dressage, and it took hold of me completely. I fell in love with it during my very first lesson. Dressage is an Olympic sport and can be described for those who don't know it as ballet on horseback. There's an artistry, a subtlety, a strong connection between horse and rider. Dressage is level based, with the earliest levels being Introductory and Training Level, and the highest being Grand Prix, the Olympic level. Horses and

riders work together in harmony, the horse responding to subtle queues passed from rider to horse through the hands, legs, and seat. Dressage tests are set patterns that must be performed at competitions, and test the foundation of the training at that particular level, including harmony between horse and rider, elasticity of the horse, obedience, and effectiveness of the rider's aides.

In my riding I had grown bored of the basic trot and canter-around-the-ring flat-work that I did every day. And I had also discovered that showjumping just wasn't for me. The uncertainty of coming up to a fence, knowing that my horse could decide to refuse and fling me off over his head, was too much for me and took away the enjoyment. When I moved Buddy to a dressage barn and began taking lessons, I knew I'd discovered my new passion, as well as a new path to my Olympic dream.

I continued to ride and progress in dressage throughout high school. I earned many achievements and completed many goals as a young rider in dressage before even starting college. And when I did begin college, I chose to attend Mount Holyoke College mostly because of their incredible equestrian center and Intercollegiate Dressage Team. My goal was always to attend college, get my degree, and then become a working student. Being a working student was the most likely way to achieve success when you don't have the money to purchase expensive horses and pay for expensive lessons. I kept magazines in my bedroom filled with stories that detailed how my favorite Olympic dressage athletes had succeeded and achieved their dreams through working student positions. I fully intended to do the same.

Seated at a cheap wooden Ikea desk, I took a deep breath and typed in Yard and Groom. I was at my temporary home: a three bedroom apartment in Somerville, Massachusetts, where I was subletting a bedroom from a Harvard Law School student. It had been a year since I graduated from college and I felt aimless. My riding dreams were on hold, and I hadn't even ridden since finishing school. The working student position was still a dream, but pressures to get a paying job and have post-academic accomplishments that would impress the general public took hold of me during my senior year of college. In reality though, I was doing no such thing. After ultimately being turned down for job after job, I decided to become a Pharmacy Technician and move to Boston, hoping that once there, the abounding opportunities of the city would become apparent and I would find something else that I was actually passionate about. After a few months though I was still at the pharmacy, didn't have any money, and I found that I was miserable. It just so happened that it was 2016 was the year of the summer of Olympics, and when I watched the dressage competition I became inspired once again for the first time in a long time. I knew then that it was time to pursue the working student position I'd always said I would.

Clicking through the yard and groom ads, my air conditioner humming in the background and my plate of chicken next to me on the desk, I couldn't find one that quite fit. I didn't want to share a two bedroom apartment with four people. I didn't want

to work six and half days a week. And I did want to at least earn a stipend along with my housing - not making any money wasn't an option for me. I continued my aimless scrolling, and when I found the ad for Five Stars Farm, I knew immediately it was the right place for me.

Mary Howard offers what many trainers don't offer their working students: board for a horse, their own one bedroom apartment, a monthly stipend, and two full days off a week. When I contacted her and submitted my application for the position, I was thrilled when she got back to me with interest. When I got in my car and left the city to visit the farm and meet Mary in person, I wound my way along the Charles River, the morning sun glinting off the water, and felt free. When I arrived at the farm, I was indescribably happy to be out of the city, to smell the horses, the fields, the flowers. I felt at home. I was focused, in pursuit of my dreams once again, and I didn't care anymore if I was at a "traditional" job, if my accomplishments sounded impressive to the general population, if I had a Fulbright scholarship or an internship at Random House.

My interview with Mary wasn't so much an interview as it was just a clarifying of the details of the position. Impressed by my riding and my achievements in dressage, I was already hired before we even met. Standing in the tack room with Mary's massive Bernese Mountain Dog, Keeper, excitedly jumping around me in circles, she laid out the position, the opportunities I'd have, and how many of her prior working students had made it professionally in the sport if they so wished to.

Do you have a boyfriend? She asked me in the abrupt and brusque manner that I would learn was just how she talks. I told her no, I didn't. A boyfriend was another thing I'd been searching for during my time in Boston and had failed to find. *Good. It's better*

that way, less distraction. And that's the way I wanted it. No distractions, nothing to deter me from where I wanted to go. I had an idea in that moment of what this working student position would entail, the experience I'd have there, and where it would ultimately lead me. It turns out I was wrong about all of it. And yet I'd still do it all again.

I began my working student position in September of 2016. I packed all of my belongings into my tiny car and fled the streets of Boston for Brentwood, New Hampshire. When I arrived I was later than I'd said I would be, having run into traffic. I stepped out of my car and into the quiet barn, filled with only the sounds of horses shuffling and snorting. I breathed in deeply, relishing the smell that I'd missed for so long since I'd stopped riding.

The other two working students, who would be my co-workers and who I would come to know better even than most of my closest friends, were sweeping the aisle when they stopped and looked up.

You finally made it.

We're so happy to have you here.

I was happy to be there, if somewhat overwhelmed.

I was shown around my apartment and immediately loved it. Despite the lack of a kitchen (I would be doing all of my cooking using a toaster oven and a hot plate), the rest of the apartment was spacious, and so much more than I had expected from any working student position. It was good enough that I was able to overlook that kitchen, if

it could even be called that. With its large living room, bedroom, comfortable furniture, and natural wood siding, the apartment felt like a cabin. Mary showed me around the place, explained the details of the heat (I was only allowed to use the space heaters in the winter so that she could save money - something that would turn out to be much less awful than I had originally thought), the recycling, the trash in the garage - details that, although mundane, made me happy. Because in reality this was my first one bedroom apartment, the first time I'd been fully on my own, the first time I really had a space larger than a bedroom or dorm room that I could call my own. I felt in some odd sense that I had made it.

I hadn't ridden in nearly two years at the time that I started the position. I was out of shape, both when it came to riding as well as just in general for the work I'd be doing. As it turned out, that September was one of the hottest on record, with temperatures reaching the upper 80s and into the 90s nearly every day for the first couple of weeks. The combination of the intensive labor, the riding, and the heat, nearly caused me to quit. If it hadn't been for the fact that I lived there, that I'd just moved all of my belongings into that apartment, I would have. That first month was just the first of many instances when I'd want to quit. But I never did. I was more determined than ever to succeed, to be strong, and to reach my dreams. The Olympics still lingered at the back of my mind.

The heat that first month was a harsh introduction to the life outdoors that I'd be living for the next year. I'd always loved being in nature. I felt connected to the natural world and my time in nature had often proven as an escape, a place where I could feel peace. This position was something different altogether though. I had never worked outside as my job. I'd never weathered the elements day after day, experienced every changing season, every type of weather as it came. When I started the position, and struggled to make it through each day in heat and rain and eventually the cold and snow, I didn't realize that being able to truly experience the seasons was the thing I'd miss most when I no longer worked at the barn. There's something special about waking up early every morning and immediately stepping out into the ice cold air, your breath visible, seeing the sun as it rises higher in the sky, and feeling the rain, the snow, the sun, on your face every single day.

Davy was my project horse at the farm. Privately owned and boarded there, he was in training with Mary and had been ridden by a prior working student until she left. He had great potential, was a lot of fun, and as someone that Mary believed in and appreciated for my experience and skill, he was given to me when I started there. I was thrilled.

Getting to know Davy, his quirks, and how to ride him well, was definitely an experience all its own. From the moment I climbed aboard, I knew I loved him. Short in stature, Davy was smaller than most of the other Warmblood horses at the farm, and yet

his stockiness made him look and feel larger. He was sweet, kind, very safe (unlike some of the unpredictable, rather crazy horses who were in training at that time), and when it came to riding, he was above all, lazy.

Send him forward! Send him forward! Was a mantra I'd hear from Mary during my daily rides with Davy from my first to my last. Despite his potential, Davy's laziness would ultimately prevent him from going much farther up the dressage ladder of levels. That was okay, though. His kindness and the connection I formed with him were what I cared about most. The moment when I realized this it was the beginning of my gradual shift in thinking. I was moving away from what I'd idealized all of those years ago, the training of lots of horses, the success, climbing up the levels and making it in international competition, a path that would eventually lead to the Olympics. Instead, I began to realize that a real connection with a horse, a bond, and working hard in our own way to get somewhere was what I had always truly cared about more than anything else.

I also appreciated the challenge that Davy presented. I trotted around the ring, my arms feeling as if they were going to fall off from the weight of carrying the weight of his head around at the end of the reins because he was just too lazy to carry it himself. He tilted his nose in strange ways too, and had problems when it came to training movements like flying changes, during which a horse changes from one lead in the canter to the other. In dressage, the goal is to perform multiple changes in a row, one after another, called "tempi changes." Davy and I were eventually able to successfully perform those tempi changes, an accomplishment that I was very proud of.

Right hand slightly lifted, legs closed in a consistent tap, tap, tapping, I sent Davy forward and then would half halt him back, lifting him up with my legs and seat, raising his head, making him lighter in the bridle. Hands apart when he'd raise his head too much, sticking his nose out like a mule, and I'd send him forward again. Every stride marked a small change in my seat, my hands, my leg, as I constantly corrected him. The cold air of so many winter rides would hit my face, causing my eyes to water, and I'd have to take one hand off the reins and wipe my eyes so that it wouldn't look like I was crying. Davy was complex, and my rides with him took me out of the moment, into a different head space, one that I'd been used to achieving through mountain hikes and visits to the beach over the past year before returning to riding. I relished in the experience of riding Davy every day now, having replaced the hikes with my rides, my daily work at the barn. My mind was busy, the cold air on my face was exhilarating, and as I pounded around the ring aboard Davy and his big-strided canter, I felt truly alive.

Mucking stalls gave me too much time to think. By early spring of 2017 I found myself gazing out the barred windows of the stalls while I worked, the dust from the shavings visible in the rays of morning sunlight. I no longer felt as if I was on a path that was taking me where I wanted to go. *Maybe*, I mused to myself, *I'm just not being patient enough*. It takes time to for a working student position to turn into something more, to make the connections that lead somewhere. I didn't want to give up too early. In the back of my mind though I wondered if my path had actually changed. Maybe the

path to training horses for International competition, and making it to the Olympics, just wasn't for me after all.

The daily activities and labor at the barn never ceased, and the repetitiveness of it all was both therapeutic and at the same time, boring. I was overthinking my place at the barn, why I'd even started there in the first place, whether Mary believed in me as my trainer. Opportunities were given to other students, who eventually became my competition and ended any hope of a friendship between us. I lived every day fighting, it felt, to make sure that the opportunities in my grasp, like Davy, didn't slip away from me. I was the best I'd ever been when it came to riding, and in the best shape of my life. I had perfected my job, and I felt like a real equestrian professional at that point. It troubled me that I'd never felt more beaten down.

I was beginning to fall apart it seemed, an inevitability for working students due to the demands of the labor and riding and the dangers of handling so many horses every day. The repetitive motion of scooping, lifting, and dumping the pitchfork for hours every day eventually gave me carpal tunnel. The beginnings of some back problems that I'd gone into the position with due to riding were also only exacerbated by the work and the strain of riding multiple horses every day. Already skinny, I'd become stick thin to the point that it was unhealthy. I wasn't just thin, I was bony, and no amount of carbs, calories, sweets, or even weight gain supplements could make me gain back the weight I'd lost. I had to buy an entirely new wardrobe, as the clothes I had now hung too loosely.

I became concerned about myself. Hands numb, feet numb, bundled in six layers, two hats, three pairs of pants, both mittens and gloves, and wool socks with toe warm-

ers, I lifted, scooped, dumped, lifted, scooped, dumped. The icy water from the hose poured into the water buckets as I filled them each morning, splashing my gloves and my faces as it hit the plastic, and I closed my eyes to it all. *What am I doing?* I began to question. Sliding my boots tentatively across the icy driveway I'd carry bucket after bucket to the snowy paddocks, digging each gate out of the crusted snow with a shovel before heaving the bucket inside. And then back to the barn to do it all again. And again.

I didn't hate the work, and I didn't hate the job. But as the winter came to a close and the warmer springtime days began, I knew I had to make a decision. My breath visible in the chilly morning air, I trudged up and down the hill to the paddocks, turning one horse out after another, all the while considering my options. In the end my decision was inevitable, and once I made it I relaxed, knowing it was the right one. I began to enjoy my work again, and relished in my time spent outdoors, once again enjoying the warm sun on my face, the feeling of returning to my warm apartment after a long day in the cold rain, persevering through it all. There was something rewarding about working so hard all day. I felt strong.

I decided that I would leave the barn in the late fall of 2017, having stayed there for more than a year at that point. I knew I didn't want to do another winter, and my position there just didn't feel like it was taking me where I wanted to go anymore. I began to doubt my place there, whether I fit in when it came to the things that made me most happy surrounding riding and horses. But I felt more secure in myself at that point, and in what I wanted, and I settled into each day, the work, and my rides, knowing that I was leaving and at peace with it.

Words can't really describe a bond between horse and rider. That connection, that love and power and strength is unlike anything else. I've felt it with a few different horses, from my own horse Buddy, to Snickers O'Mara, the little Connemara pony I'd made all of my dressage achievements with during high school, and I felt it with Davy. He trusted me and I trusted him and we worked together. He wasn't mine but I feel as if he was. When I think back on my seventeen years of riding, it's not the competitions, the medals and achievements that stand out. It's not the lessons, the trainers, the clinics, the barns I rode at. It's those special horses that I connected with, bonded with in ways I didn't even know were possible.

During my time at Five Stars Farm I learned that the Olympics wasn't the path of my dreams at all. Or maybe it could be, if I find that special horse, create that bond, and we go there together. But in reality, my dreams have always been to find that bond with another horse, while practicing the beautiful and elegant sport of dressage that I love so much. The days of cleaning, of intense rides, the detachment of training a bunch of horses systematically every day, the numbness and the exhaustion, the tears I cried in the tack room when nobody was looking, were a part of the journey it took for me to realize what I was truly after. And I just wasn't achieving that through my working student position. When I inevitably left, all on good terms with Mary and my co-workers who were also moving on themselves, I found that the most difficult part was saying goodbye to Davy.

It's taken me a long time to realize that dreams often remain dreams, and that that's okay. It doesn't mean I failed. Sometimes the reality of the situation, that the pathway to achieving those dreams, is the most rewarding part of all. My working student position taught me a lot about riding and equine care, but it actually taught me more about the things that aren't related to horses. It taught me about myself, about what makes me happy, and that sometimes although dreams might not come true, perhaps a different dream that means far more, will.

When I left my position at Five Stars Farm, I thought I'd look back on it and think about the riding, the training, the opportunities I had the privilege of experiencing, and all that I'd learned. But in reality I look back and I think about my time spent outdoors, experiencing the changing seasons, the sunrises and sunsets, how I basically worked for myself, with limited guidance from Mary. I didn't sit at a desk, I didn't have a boss watching over my shoulder, I didn't spend my time staring sadly out the window from a cubicle. I was miserable in the harsh cold, wet, and hot weather, and yet I loved it too. I think about my time with Davy, the bond we formed, and how he was the highlight of every day. It wasn't about what we achieved at competitions that one summer I showed him, or how far we were able to get with his training. Just being with him was an honor, seeing him every morning when I showed up at his stall to feed him breakfast, was the reason I worked so hard every day.

Now, four years later, I often sit inside at my desk and stare out the window at the rain and the wind and the snow and I think about the working students who are out

there in it - and anybody else who farms or works outside for their profession for that matter. And I feel in that moment as if maybe I'm no longer really experiencing the world to its fullest, the way I was able to during that year as a working student.

Fragments

My family built our log home on a dead end road in a rural New Hampshire town not long before I was born. It was built atop a small hill surrounded by trees and wooded paths, a lush green lawn, gardens, and split rail fences; a dream home for anyone who craved the idyllic countryside. It was there that I took my first steps, learned to ride a bike and played with my first friends. It was there that I watched my sister leave for college, the U-Haul truck disappearing down the long drive along with an integral piece of our family. It was there that I learned to read and to love books, to explore, to run away from home and to run back again. It was there that I shucked corn on the covered porch steps with my grandmother and camped in the yard with my dad.

When I turned sixteen my family made the decision to sell the house. We had been boarding our our horses at a local equestrian center, and my parents no longer wanted the expense of paying for monthly board. Using the money from the sale of our house, they planned to build a new home complete with a barn - an exciting idea. They couldn't have known that selling our house in 2007 would only lead into the recession that occurred the following year, that we wouldn't be able to afford any of of that plan. We also couldn't have known that, shortly following the sale of our home, one of the new owners would kill herself with a gun in what used to be my sister's bedroom.

It's been fourteen years since my family sold our house, and it's been twelve years since we heard the news of the suicide. We're still haunted by it. This place that my parents built for our family, a place of sanctuary, of memories, of dreams and love is now filled instead by tragedy and death. There's something about building a home from the ground up that creates an even greater attachment. This is *yours*, something dreamt up and created from nothing. The land is precious too. The woods we preserved, the gardens we cared for, could all be altered if we weren't there. Selling the house and land was difficult enough, knowing nothing yet of what would happen to it in the future - of the land I loved that would be transformed by pavement and larger structures, my favorite trees cut down, the gardens removed, and of course, of the suicide that would happen inside of the house. The night that my parents eventually told me we'd be moving away, I was seated at the dinner table. Despite my understanding that it was time for a change, I still sobbed for hours.

The following months were filled with car rides while our house was shown to the strangers who would buy it. The house needed to be empty, so our family would repeatedly load up our pets and bored, count the minutes until we could return home. After the house officially sold, the packing felt infinite. We didn't have movers, or moving trucks (my dad didn't think it was necessary), and the process of packing up an entire family's home, entire lives, into tiny pickup trucks and boxes that couldn't hold the weight of memories, was tedious and exhausting. The last thing I packed was the tall strip of paper with my height marked on it in marker at various ages. The paper had

been on the corner of my bedroom wall since I was a toddler, and when I tried to delicately peel it from its place there, it only tore more. Eventually the day came when we were finally finished packing, and my feet felt heavy as I made my way to the car. I looked around at the woods, at the home where I'd formed so many memories, I listened to the screen door make its familiar slam behind us one last time before getting in the car.

Six years after moving from our Hopkinton home, I took a class trip to the Quabbin Reservoir in Western Massachusetts during my junior year of college. I was surprised by the memories of my beloved childhood home that resurfaced during that trip.

The Quabbin Reservoir is one of the largest unfiltered water supplies in the United States. Built in the 1930s, the reservoir provides water to millions of people in Massachusetts and covers 181 miles of shoreline. This was not a preexisting body of water. The creation of the Quabbin meant destroying and flooding four small towns: Enfield, Dana, Greenwich, and Prescott. The thousands of people who resided in those towns received this news by mail.

Perhaps they stood in their driveways or their kitchens as they opened letters that told them they had no choice but to sell their homes to the state. Perhaps they questioned what would happen to their financial stability, their families, their beloved land. Perhaps they cried and felt numb the way that I did when my family told me we were leaving our home. Maybe they contemplated the ways that their home might be

destroyed, their land forever transformed, not even realizing the extent of that transformation from land to water, just as I didn't realize the extent of the changes that would happen at my former home: the trees that would be chopped down, the driveway that would be paved, split rail fences removed. The violence that would happen there.

While some of the residents in those four Massachusetts towns were able to take their homes with them, placing them on another piece of land in a nearby town, this was not the case for most. It turns out that the state doesn't pay to move memories. When you visit the Quabbin today there are large wooded areas surrounding the shoreline and that's where you can find the remains of the homes and towns that are still visible. Those remnants are now nothing more than rubble, shards of the past. There are wide wooded paths that wind through a forest that used to consist not of trees but of roads. Small breaks in the trees that were driveways remain visible, as do empty spaces and misplaced statues; the elements of a town center. The eeriest location within the reservoir that I happened upon during my visit was a wide grassy path that lead straight into the water, disappearing beneath the blue surface. I was told by staff at the reservoir that this was once Main Street, and that if followed it would lead to what used to be the center of town, now submerged deep below. Of the many houses that once stood there are now only blocks of stone, evidence of a foundation, or a section of brick chimney. Nature has taken over the space where buildings once stood, crept in and overwhelmed what used to be. Each of those homes still holds a story though, a past that is unknown

to today's visitors like me. There's a stillness in these woods, a sense of peace, but also a feeling of emptiness and loss.

When you pull up to the visitor's center at the Quabbin, the beautiful blue water stretches out massively before you. There are small islands, hills that emerge from its depths. Inside the large and modern visitor's center there are archives that detail the towns. Before they were destroyed, photographs were taken of every house. These pictures each contain a small map that shows the placement of the house within its town. The pictures and their maps are all carefully cataloged, and it's difficult to comprehend the story that exists behind every black and white image in the collection. Within each picture lies a history that was once known but now will never truly be known again. We only recognize the land of the reservoir for what it is today, and so we cannot ever truly understand what it *was* and the evolution that has taken place there.

I once read a local news story about a woman named Sally Norcross, who grew up in the town of Dana before she and her family were forced to move when their home and town were destroyed for the Quabbin. In the article, she is interviewed about what it was like for her family and the other residents there to leave the town 76 years ago. The town of Dana is the only one left that has not been submerged beneath the water, and Sally visits the remains of her childhood home occasionally. She recounts memories: the games she played in her yard, her grandfather's home nearby, the graves she saw being displaced when her family was forced out, the brush fires burning. Sally Norcross's

family was the very last to leave the town of Dana, which was nothing more than desolate and ghostly the day that they walked out of their home for the last time.

Local historian J.R. Greene describes the "Farewell Ball" that was held on April 27, 1938 in the town of Enfield as a final goodbye to their town. Nearly 3,000 residents attended the ball, most of whom were unable even to fit inside of the building. Greene writes that, according to one reporter, at midnight the band at the ball played *Auld Lang Syne* to a silent crowd. "Muffled sounds of sobbing" from the residents echoed throughout the silent hall following the performance.

The places where we live our lives, where we experience and grow and change, create memories and spend our years, hold meaning. These places become somehow a part of us, inextricably woven into our identities. We live and leave, live and leave. The majority of people don't spend their lives in one home, in one town or city. We're meant to move around and experience change, but It's difficult to accept the things that will inevitably happen to the places we love. Trees are cut down, houses are destroyed, roads are paved, tragedy happens, and entire towns become flooded, submerged beneath 90 feet of water. Change is inevitable, and it's always tinged with melancholy.

The World of Dairy

I was twelve years old the first time I remember seeing a glass bottle filled with local New Hampshire milk at the grocery store. The year was 2006. I was visiting a small local market, Colonial Village, located in Contoocook, New Hampshire, when I spotted the glass bottle of creamy milk. I knew immediately that I wanted to buy it so much more than I wanted to buy any of the larger plastic bottles that I saw for sale en mass at every supermarket. The name of the farm printed on the bottle was Contoocook Creamery.

Nearly fifteen years after buying that first bottle, Contoocook Creamery is still selling its milk at local grocery stores and I'm still buying it. During my childhood growing up in rural New Hampshire, I had the opportunity to visit local farms and learn about their cows and chickens and pigs. Having had the opportunity to explore and experience farms firsthand at such a young age, it's made me curious to learn more, to truly understand the farming practices at the local farms I support. Dairy farming in particular has always intrigued me, and that's why I reached out to that first local dairy farm I ever bought milk from: Contoocook Creamery. What I'd learn though wouldn't be exactly what I'd thought, or what I really wanted to know.

As one of the larger farms in the area, and one that has transitioned entirely from the wholesale market to selling directly to their consumers, Contoocook Creamery stands out among the dairy farms of New Hampshire. Not only are they succeeding in new ways, they are also very open to talking about what they do and how they do it with their customers and locals. Their farm is open every day to visitors, and owners Nate and Si Robinson are happy to educate the public on their farming practices and the dairy industry as a whole. They even publicly publish their milking schedule so that consumers and their kids can come out to the farm and watch. There don't seem to be any secrets at Contoocook Creamery. That's why when I reached out to Nate and Si Robertson, I wasn't all that surprised when I received an immediate response of "Sure, we'd love to talk with you!" After having attempted to learn about farms and speak with the owners in the past, and not able to succeed in doing so, Si and Nate's enthusiasm was a breath of fresh air.

The Contoocook Creamery website elaborates on this topic further, stating how important they feel it is to talk with the people in their community. They welcome visits from anyone who wants to stop by - all day every day, the farm is open to all, a vastly different way of doing things compared with the other much more closed off dairy farms I've encountered in the past. Contoocook Creamery especially welcomes visits from school children. On their website and social media, Si and Nate state that they enjoy talking with kids, educating them about the work they do, and letting them meet the observe the cows. We need more farmers like them, who want to educate, and who can put a face and a voice to the milk that's produced by an industry that is, for many citizens, a mystery.

Bohanan Farm is currently run by the fifth generation of the Bohanan family. The farm was purchased in 1907 by Lester Bohanan. Situated on the banks of the Contoocook River, the same land that was purchased in 1907 is still being farmed generations later. Like all farms though, transitions and changes have occurred across those years, and Bohanan Farm continues to evolve today. From the implementation of new technology, to the construction of new structures, the farm has only grown. It now consists of more than 440 acres of land and 200 dairy cows, and 23,000 eight ounce servings of milk are produced on the farm daily.

Transitions are a part of farming, but they are especially essential in to the dairy farming trade, an industry that has become more competitive and less profitable for farmers over the past decade. It's an industry that is quickly getting left behind, and hundreds of dairy farms are closing every year. The Bohanan family was determined not to let that happen to them.

When the wholesale milk market crashed in 2009, the family knew they were in trouble. Unwilling to become just another statistic, the family made the decision to create Contoocook Creamery, a small business that would allow the Bohanans to market their products directly to the public themselves instead of entirely wholesaling their milk to larger companies. The Creamery began on a small scale and grew. Incorporating more than just milk, Contoocook Creamery appeals to a larger customer base with their creation of cheeses and butter as well.

The Bohanan Family is proud of the business they've created. Despite being a smaller operation, they've stuck to their values with regard to modern dairy farming and producing high quality milk: their farm is clean, their milk is high quality, and according to their website and marketing efforts, their cows are happy and well cared for. The farm's transparency sets it apart from other more private operations, and that transparency only further appeals to consumers who choose to buy their milk over the many other brands that are available on grocery store shelves.

The growth of the Contoocook Creamery brand was gradual. The family continued to sell their milk to their wholesale distributors while slowly growing the creamery business on the side. Initially Contoocook Creamery milk was only carried at their small farm store and in local markets like the one where I first found it. Today, Contoocook Creamery's products are available at Hannaford Supermarkets across the state of New Hampshire, as well as smaller local grocery stores, farmers markets, and farm stores. They currently distribute to 108 total stores across the state. Contoocook Creamery also delivers to a number of schools across the state, where their milk is used and sold in cafeterias. With the great success of their new business, in March of 2021 the Bohanan family realized it was time to make a decision. They left their wholesale business behind altogether and chose to focus entirely on their Contoocook Creamery business, growing the brand further, and managing all aspects of their sales themselves.

My interview with Nate was over the phone. When we began our conversation, his friendliness and willingness to speak with me was obvious from his tone and from the way he immediately carried the conversation. I described how much my visits to local farms as a child had impacted my life, and how knowing a little bit more about where my food comes from affected what I buy. He wholeheartedly agreed, stating that it's a real issue that kids these days don't understand where their food comes from, and have often never visited a farm.

Nate was easy to talk to. He was genial and more open than I would have expected he would be. He went on a five minute rant about the Hood brand and how they make "the cheapest product possible." We discussed a lot of numbers - the eighteen dollar price cut that happened in 2009, how their farm transitioned from 800 to 1200 animals and then, ultimately, down to their current herd of 120 due to needing to dump too much milk before. The pay caps and number of gallons dumped each year before they downsized their herd.

When it came to Nate's opinion of the "Buy New Hampshire's Own" Dairy Premium Program, I was surprised. "I don't think it's going to work," he told me matter of factly. Touted by the state as a program aimed to assist New Hampshire's struggling dairy farmers, the Buy NH's Own program encourages consumers to buy local dairy for just fifty cents more, money that will go directly back into the pockets of the local farmers. The goal of the program is to combat falling milk prices. However, Nate spoke about the issue that commingling of milk from different farms would most likely prove to be, especially with Hood involved. Without any money there for the large company, the program wouldn't ever get off the ground he believes. When asked about state programs

that he feels *do* work, Nate pointed to Maine's state program which is also aimed to assist local farmers as a success. They operate a sort of tier system that's subsidized by the state, and ultimately succeeds in getting money back into the pockets of farmers.

My talk with Nate was enlightening. Seated on my couch I looked out the window at the bustling traffic of Portsmouth, and understood how easy it could be, when you live in a more urban area, to forget the plights of farmers, the process it takes to get food from farm to grocery store shelf, and the importance of supporting local farms. I empathized with Nate and understood his frustration. I shifted my weight on the couch and switched my phone to my other hand. Now it was time for the questions I'd been avoiding, the ones closest to my heart. As a life-long lover of animals, I was well aware that farming practices, even at local farms, aren't always ethical when it comes to animal welfare, and as I'd delved into dairy as an industry, I'd learned a little bit about the horrors that take place at both large and small facilities, as well as more about the practice of dairy farming in general. I was already beginning to question my consumption of dairy when I spoke with Nate. I was interested to hear what he'd say though, especially given that Contoocook Creamery is known for their transparency, and Nate certainly seemed open during our phone conversation.

"Can you describe the care of your cows?" I asked to begin the conversation. Nate discussed the milking parlors, the feed schedules, their diets, and the daily general care that's give to all of their cows. Everything is computerized now, as is the case at most larger-scale dairy farms today. The cows' health is monitored closely, as well as the amount of milk they produce. Any problems that may arise with the cows are caught faster this way he says. Then Nate pauses. "There are difficult conversations that need to

be had.” He goes on to discuss the vaccines their cows receive - he and his family strongly believe in vaccinating their animals. They also give antibiotics to their cows when they’re sick, separating their milk from the rest while they’re on the medication. Many smaller farms advertise that they don’t use antibiotics, that it’s better for the animals and people alike. Nate and his family feel very differently.

I was surprised as he began to talk about the unfortunate topic of calves - calves that are put down due to lack of space or sale or due to illness, and calves that are sold at auction for meat. “The bull calves always go to auction,” he says. I shifted uncomfortably in my seat but kept on with the interview, determined not to let my feelings show through. Nate believes it’s important to be upfront and honest in these conversations, particularly with kids, who are often shielded from such things. As adults I know we tend to shy away as well. I certainly do. And facing these realities is difficult to say the least.

As Nate went on to discuss the times when they’ve tried to raise calves for veal meat on the farm, his voice became once again matter of fact, and I was shocked. I’d never thought that a little farm, wholesome at first glance with its cows, all named, all well cared for, transparent with the public, would do such a thing. But that’s how the industry works. It turns out these are the harsh realities of dairy farming, harsh realities that I just wasn’t expecting from the call. The conversation stalled after that, maybe because I just couldn’t hide my discomfort, or maybe we’d run out of things to talk about. When I hung up the phone I felt uneasy.

The grocery store aisles are cold and I shiver involuntarily as I make my way past the rows and rows of fluorescent lit refrigerators filled with food. When I reach the dairy section, I pause and remember my talk with Nate. It's been a few weeks since we spoke, and I've struggled to take in what he told me. There's a lingering of that uneasiness as I question all that I thought I knew. In the grocery store, I scan the rows of dairy products - milk, cheese, yogurt - and as I reach out my hand for the small plastic jug of Contoocook Creamery milk, I pause. Contoocook Creamery seems like a wonderful local business, one that's transparent, even when it comes to those uncomfortable topics that most people don't like to acknowledge or can't discuss. I think their honesty should be rewarded. However, my love of animals leaves me stunned at the realization that there are calves going to slaughter at every dairy farm, calves that are raised for veal, that they're separated from their mothers at such a young age, all so that we can consume the milk that was ultimately meant for them. I pull my hand back and decide I don't need to buy any milk today, before continuing my way down the brightly lit aisle, past more endless rows of food, and realize that I probably don't fully understand the origins of any of it.

Rooftops

Seated in colorful beach chairs, we passed beers back and forth on the rooftop above the small Portland neighborhood. Our voices sometimes became too loud in the quiet night air as we laughed and joke, occasionally causing someone strolling on the street below to stop, gazing upwards at us, a confused look on their face. Even in a city it was nice to find ways to get away. My boyfriend Daniel and I were there in Portland visiting our friends, Sam and Bethany, at their apartment. Our laughs and conversation rang loudly through the crisp fall air as we reminisced and caught up with one another, reveling in the break from hectic work days and studying.

This is their new pale ale Daniel told me, handing me the colorful craft beer can. I cracked open the can with a satisfying click and sat back in my chair, legs outstretched. It was a little cold, but not bad - one of those late fall evenings when the the poignant chill of fall is present, but the faint whispers of warmer times still linger. This tradition of beers on the roof had begun several months earlier, when our friends had suggested the idea after moving into their new apartment. We had wanted to meet up, but at this point, in the fall of 2020, Covid-19 was very much a concern. Outdoors felt safer. So when they moved in and told us about how their new apartment “came with a roof,” it sounded perfect. It turns out, with or without Covid-19, this return to the outdoors, to time spent on that rooftop with friends, to solitary walks on the Bach, and bike rides through town, was exactly what I needed most in my life.

It wasn't until the Covid-19 pandemic that I realized how little time I'd spent outdoors in the few years prior to the pandemic. After leaving my job as a working student, where I spent fifty hours a week working outdoors, experiencing every season to its fullest, I was ready to stay inside for a while. However, one month turned into two, which turned into six and then eight. Before I knew it, I'd begun to spend all of my time in cramped offices, apartments, stores and bars, and even though I'd been content, I'd felt like something was missing, a part of me that I'd held close since childhood.

I'd always romanticized rooftops. As a kid I thought of spending time on a roof as not only cool, but somehow inspiring. Outdoors even in a city, separate from it all and yet a part of that place as well, closer to the stars. A roof hangout was something I'd dreamt of doing since my big sister, Kelly, moved to Boston for college, and talked to me about her time spent on rooftops. It was a romantic notion to me, to be on a roof at night.

When I was young I even listened to James Taylor's song *Up on the Roof* on repeat, in love with the idea of spending time on roofs. It didn't matter if you were in a city or the countryside, both had their unique atmospheric qualities, both connected you, I felt with the world, the outdoors, brought you outside the confining walls of an apartment building. A rooftop added extra living space to apartments and gave a vantage point you may not have had before. Maybe you'd look down on the houses of others, on their lives below, on the bustling city streets, the tops of cabs and trains, of passersby,

both human and animal alike. Sitting on my baby blue beanbag chair I thought about what I'd do on a rooftop, how my friends and I would laugh, how the city lights would look as I gazed out at a distant skyline. As a kid a rooftop seemed like the place to relax and get outside, but I didn't realize then that in the future it would become my escape, as so many outdoor spaces would be over the years, a place where I could forget about the world, and for a moment, feel at peace.

Together in the living room of our childhood home, my sister would speak to me about her time with friends on rooftops when she'd return home from the city. I'd listened intently, eager for every detail, so that I too could try and replicate it in my own life. She and her friends went to the roof instead of to bars or other popular college student hangouts. Their rooftop spot seemed a part of an identity, a coolness for them. Kelly and her friends set themselves apart from others by being on the roof, isolated, together, as they gazed out on the expanse of the city, at the treetops and stars, rather than cooped up indoors down below.

She told me about the Boston fireworks they watched from a rooftop one year. She didn't go into detail about it, other than to say that it had been amazing to see the fireworks from that vantage point, away from the large, stifling crowds. I imagined that they had clambered up a fire escape, pulling each other hand in hand until they could see the sky and the brilliant explosions that splashed across it. I imagined the way the rooftop would still be warm to the touch exposure to the hot sun all day, how the warm

breeze that didn't touch the alleyways below would blow freely up there. I watched the Boston fireworks as well that year, at home, on the television, dressed in my pajamas. Seated on my sister's old bed, I imagined her up there on that roof, seeing clearly what I was only seeing secondhand through a camera screen, muted and unimpressive.

While living in Boston my sister had a tumultuous on-again-off-again relationship with a boy named Joey. As a kid, my glimpses into their relationship were brief, and I learned it ultimately failed due to infidelity on his part. Prior to that though they were briefly, wonderfully, happy. At least that's how it seemed to me at probably twelve years old then. Kelly used to talk about one night in particular on the Boston rooftop with Joey. She told me the story again and again, not even aware I think that she was doing so.

She and Joey climbed to the roof one night under a clear sky, stars somewhat visible despite the city light pollution. They played their favorite song and slow danced under those murky stars, the city lights bright below them, the sounds of traffic and bustling streets not able to reach them up there and intrude on their moment. It was quiet, and they were together, slow dancing on the rooftop, and that was enough, even through the bad times. Even when they struggled, Kelly returned to that story over and over again it seemed to me, possibly attempting to hold on to that moment, the brief perfection and magic with him, that happened up on the roof that night.

Kelly is much older than me by nine years, and lives in Colorado now. She has kids, and doesn't spend time on rooftops anymore. Maybe because she can't, or maybe because she doesn't want to. I've realized that as we age there isn't always time for stars and roofs. In some ways, now in my late twenties, I've taken up her old activities. Up

there on the roof with my friends in Portland, I thought about this as I held my beer, comfortable in my beach chair, and wondered if this was how it was for her all those years ago.

How is it? Daniel's voice broke through my pondering and pulled me out of my thoughts.

It's good! I like it a lot more than the brown ale. We should go to this brewery sometime. Where is it?

Scarborough. Hey, you guys up for a trip over there this week?

The conversation between Daniel and Bethany and Sam ebbed and flowed around me as they discussed the new tavern that had opened down the street, the clothing store they'd ordered their sweatshirts from, the new kombuchary that was opening. Bethany and I spoke about our new job prospects, and the problems of distance and commuting and moving farther away. I didn't want to leave, and neither did she.

I looked up at the night sky and wasn't able to easily see any constellations. I was distracted by the moon though, it's brightness drawing my gaze away from my friends. It was nearly full at that point, and like a guiding light, I looked to it for inspiration, for direction. Maybe I'd had too much beer, or maybe I just realized it had been too long since I'd really looked up at the night sky, taken it in and acknowledged how small I really was in the world. Maybe I hadn't looked up in so long because I was too busy with work, too tired by the end of the day, or maybe it was because it made me sad the way that the

stars were always outshined and swallowed by bright city lights. The moon at that time was so bright though that I felt that we appeared illuminated up on that rooftop, as if under a spotlight. A couple on the street passed by and heard us laughing, and looked up curiously in our direction.

Damn! Sam exclaimed. I hope they don't care that we're up here.

It turned out that Sam and Bethany had never exactly gotten permission from their landlord to use the fire escape and roof for their hangouts. In a way it made it even more fun though. There was an element of risk, a feeling that we were breaking rules, separated from others, determined to be on our own, to be different.

During junior year of college I studied abroad in Ireland, and although we weren't able to access our rooftop there, my friends and I replaced it with our balcony. Our apartment building, made of a yellow stucco, was located between a hostel called The Sleep Zone, and the ugliest parking garage that I'd ever seen, yellow and with bars on the sides that made it look like a prison. Our balcony was right between those two buildings, and looked out on a dilapidated courtyard, complete with a fire pit and shopping carts. I didn't know where the shopping carts had come from, only that we had watched as a group of drunk Irish boys pushed them around one night, slamming them into walls, laughing and yelling all the while.

Despite the awkward location, the view of the city was amazing, and was my favorite part of being on the balcony. The Galway City Centre spread out in an expanse of

chimneys and rooftops of all shapes and sizes, including the Galway Cathedral, which stood out among them all. Our balcony was an escape from the damp insides of the small apartment, from my awful roommate Adam, who never stopped playing the ukulele, and from the piles of my unfinished schoolwork that easily remained forgotten as long as I didn't look at it. Despite being in the middle of the city, it was a chance for me to get outdoors, breathe in the fresh air, and reset.

Seated on the hard cement, our backs against the wrought iron railing, the balcony was where we discussed our relationships, or lack thereof. We reminisced about the cute boy with the freckles who gave us his number at the pub, the girls from Romania who wanted to travel with us. We talked about the times before we got there and who we were then, and who we wanted to be. We talked about the importance of standing still in these moments, when everything stopped moving, and there was nothing left but the city lights and the dark sky and the words of friends. And maybe that's when I first truly realized that, to me, balconies and rooftops represent a stillness, a space away from it all. I had created scenarios in my head as a kid when my sister would tell me about her time on rooftops, about how they were in that cool space together, but I never really understood. On the balcony everything seemed to still, and words and relationships took on a greater meaning. And in that moment I realized that maybe that was why Candace held on so tightly to that rooftop moment with Joey, unwilling to let that emotion, that feeling of depth and love, slip from her grasp.

On my last night in Ireland, my friends were gone. Most had flown home already, and some were out for one last drink, one last night with the cute boy they'd met two months earlier. Alone in my room, I grabbed my bottle of whiskey and opened the glass

door out to the balcony. It was December and cold enough to see my breath in the cool night air. Taking a sip of the whiskey, I looked out across the rooftops, enveloped in that stillness, and breathed deeply, taking in the smells, the damp air, the cigarette smoke that wafted over from a nearby balcony. Despite the cold, I laid down on the cement floor and stretched out, staring upwards at the starless sky. I don't remember how long I stayed there, but I know I didn't want to get up and leave.

We have to go soon, I have to be at work at nine tomorrow. Daniel's voice caught me off guard again and I emerged once again from my thoughts.

Yeah, of course. I pulled my phone from my pocket and turned it on, the numbers illuminating that it was ten o'clock. Where did the time go? I hadn't even realized that it had gotten so late already.

Let's stay just a little longer? I asked Daniel, smiling. He knew I didn't want to leave.

Sure, why not. Just another hour. Then I really have to get home and get to sleep though.

I hoped that Bethany and Sam's landlord wouldn't find out we had been up on the roof. I was worried a neighbor might eventually complain, and we would have to abandon our spot. It didn't help that Daniel and I didn't have a rooftop of our own. We actually would have had one too, if it wasn't for the accident.

We had moved in to our apartment building in downtown Portsmouth about a year earlier, and talked about the possibility of spending time on the roof after seeing the space. We began to imagine it as the perfect spot to sit on nice summer evenings. I thought to myself that maybe we could even to play music up there and slow dance beneath the stars. That roof seemed like a cool perk of the apartment. There was a clearly marked staircase, so no sketchy fire escapes would need to be climbed. And the roof was a large, flat expanse of space, with a view of downtown. We were surprised though when we moved in and our lease stated explicitly, over and over in fact, that we were “NOT ALLOWED ON THE ROOF.” Ever.

I wonder why? I’d mused to Daniel. I assumed it was for liability reasons, maybe something had changed with their insurance policy or something. But still - most landlords didn’t seem to stipulate those rules in such strict terms, let alone multiple times on the lease. It wasn’t until months later that we learn about the accident that had happened not long before we moved in.

A local bartender told us the story. A man had just moved into one of the top floor apartments a few months earlier and was partying. He had made the unwise decision to take a trip up to the roof. Sadly, he had slipped, or tripped maybe, lost his balance, and fell off the roof and died. It was ruled an accident, not suicide, but we were told that there were no witnesses. There was nobody there who saw what really happened. I couldn’t shake the disturbing story after hearing it.

Was that man happy? Was he scared? What was the last thing he saw as he fell? Maybe it was that irresistible view of the sky that I always so enjoyed seeing from the

roof. Horrified at the knowledge of this accident, I understood why the owners were so nervous about allowing anyone up there. Strangely enough, his apartment had never been rented out again, either. The FOR RENT sign still sat out front of the apartment building, and would for years to come.

Strange. I wonder if it's haunted now... Daniel had mused, smiling slyly.

Yeah right. I laughed it off.

It was incredibly sad though, that was undeniable. And now I felt a sadness, a darkness, about the rooftops I'd always romanticized. That man was one of many who have lost their lives falling off of roofs. I wondered now about the rooftops my sister used to frequent, the hangouts she had up there with her friends, and whether or not they were always safe. I probably should have thought about all of this sooner, but my idealization of rooftops had started when I was a kid, and I had always been lost, swept up in the romanticism, the idea of it all.

I've since learned that many landlords stipulate in their tenants leases that nobody is allowed on the roof except for during emergencies. This should have been obvious information, and perhaps my sister really was always breaking the rules. I just hadn't realized.

Everybody is moving on Bethany said, commenting on something I'd missed earlier in the conversation. *It's like nobody is willing to stay in one place for very long. They all want to leave.*

Yeah dude, it's unfortunate. Nobody sticks around long enough to form a friendship anymore, Sam added, shaking his head.

Maybe they're all determined to keep searching. It's hard to settle, or to feel like you are anyway.

I shivered in the cool breeze, and took another sip of my cold beer, my hand numb from holding the can. I shuffled my feet, smudging black tar from the rooftop onto the whites of my Vans sneakers. *Why does everyone leave?* I wondered to myself. It didn't used to be like this. It's like even two or three years is too long, but in my mind it wasn't long enough.

I'm not sure if Kelly continued to spend time on rooftops after her relationship with Joey ended. Maybe she did, but I feel like I never heard about it anymore. Maybe it was just that the novelty of it all had worn off. Or maybe it was that the end of their relationship, and the bitter associations that probably came with that rooftop in particular, was what brought an end to it all. She told me that one by one her friends had begun to move away from the city, and it seemed that maybe she felt lost without them there. The welcoming city she'd loved and felt a part of, while not being a part of it in just the right ways, probably felt alien. She moved too, ending up in Vermont, and then Colorado, where there were only stars and not many rooftops fit for chairs, or for slow dancing.

The Irish girls who took over the lease on our Galway apartment were thrilled to get the place. When they came to look at it they said it was one of the best around. I

wasn't sure about that, but I would miss it all the same. The girls were especially excited about the balcony, how it jutted off from from the bedroom and offered the best views around. I wonder if they spent nights out there like we did, words melting into the night-time air, lost in the stillness. I wonder sometimes if there's someone out there right now, looking at the way the sunlight hits the cathedral's roof, perhaps with a cup of hot tea in their hands, the steam swirling out of the cup and into the cool morning air. Sometimes it's difficult to comprehend how places continue to live on.

That night on the rooftop in Portland, Daniel said again that it was time for us to leave. It was after eleven now. Despite the cold, and the eventual discomfort that comes with hours spent in a beach chair, I was reluctant. We said goodbye to our friends and gathered up our chairs, and descended the long flight of stairs down to the street.

See you next time! we shouted over our shoulders as we made our way down the street to the car, beach chairs slung over our shoulders.

Once inside the car we turned on the heat, and as the warm air began to blast from the vents, I relaxed back into my seat. Shifting into drive, I pulled out and began to drive the winding path home, through the neighborhood streets of Portland, and eventually pulled out onto the bridge that crosses high above the water, connecting the neighborhoods to the highway. I felt content, happy, and didn't know then that Bethany would be contacted by their landlord the next day, told that neighbors complained about us up on the roof, that we wouldn't be allowed up there anymore. The

white and yellow lines disappeared beneath our tires as we continued our drive home, heat blasting, now warm. The lights on the bridge flashed rhythmically orange and red, and as we crossed it, I glanced in my rearview mirror at the city lights behind us, and then upwards at the bright moon above, and vowed to keep returning to the outdoors, no matter what form that might take in the years to come.

Beautiful Place by the Sea

The silence and unexpected awkwardness that lingered inside of my sister's small car took me off guard. It's always been a little bit of a struggle to keep in touch with Kelly. As her little sister by a wide nine year margin, I look up to her, and as we drove down the highway in her car I reveled so thoroughly in her presence as we sat side by side in her cramped two-door Hyundai hatchback. However, the uneasiness was not something I had expected. We were headed for a weekend away by the sea, part professional photography work trip, part miniature sisterly vacation. I had been looking forward to the trip, ecstatic to simply enjoy her company again after being apart for so long, to become enveloped in our conversations, moments together, to bask in the mature "coolness" that I'd perceived ever since I was a little girl. Now though I questioned if our current relationship, once the envy of sisters everywhere, had been swallowed whole by the bright bright city lights of Boston where she now lived. This feeling of uneasiness, the halting conversations, the awkwardness, scared me. If I couldn't talk to my sister normally, who *could* I talk to.

In an attempt to cover up this awkwardness, we blasted indie rock music through the car's bad speakers, the notes coming out with a sort of tin sound, filling the car with *something*, even when our words and smiles didn't. We played the band Washed Out, as well as Alt-J and Bon Iver. I fidgeted in my seat, playing with my long brown hair. She tapped her fingers on the steering wheel in time to the music.

Our arrival at the seaside inn, named The Cliff House, where we would stay for the next two nights brought some much welcome relief after the long car ride. We climbed stiffly out of the car and the sea air seemed to offer a fresh start. The inn was fancy, a treat Kelly said she would write off as a “work expense” so that we could spend the next two days in luxury. Duffel bags thrown over our shoulders, we made our way down the small dirt path towards the inn’s front office that bordered the rocky cliffs. Our feet shuffled across the loose gravel as we ooped and awed at the ocean views. The expanse of blue waves stretched out for as far as the eye could see. The waves crashed, bright blue and white under the hot summer sun, against the rocks, sea spray flung into the air with each rhythmic motion.

After checking in to the inn, Kelly and I decided to peruse the shops downtown. Back in the car we settled into our seats and restarted the Washed Out album that we’d been playing earlier. It sounded like beach music, and Kelly told me she’d been listening to it while driving around in New England, all the while she was pretending she was back at the cliffs of the California coast where she had just visited. I guess we all spend time pretending to be somewhere else, yearning for a different landscape.

The familiarity began to return to our conversations as we wandered in and out of touristy t-shirt shops, candy stores, and ate chowder at a cramped wooden table in a place called the Lobster Shack. More than anything, we both enjoyed returning to the places we’d visited during countless family vacations to Ogunquit while growing up. There was something about the act of returning to a place, of holding on to that familiarity, of coming back when we’re older and changed and being in that space again, all the while reminiscing about the moments of the past, that I think we both enjoyed.

I just want to take off, you know? Go to Hawaii and spend an entire year there just surfing and nothing else. Her words inspired me immediately. Maybe I could actually do that, I mused to myself. Seated under an awning at a small pizza joint on the corner of Main Street, a block from the beach, as surf vans drove past us through the busy intersection, we talked about what we were doing in life, and what we wished we were doing instead.

I agreed wholeheartedly with this Hawaii surf idea, and maybe I did so because everything Kelly suggested always sounded cool to me, or maybe it was just our proximity to the beaches, and the way my lungs were constantly filled the salty air. Or maybe it was my desire to become entirely immersed in a seemingly limitless world, in a moment of magic where such an idea was a real possibility. I wanted to believe in anything, especially there, in that place by the sea, a town that held so much family history for my parents and my sister and I, from our countless family trips there before we all grew older. Although I didn't want to admit it to myself, it was now a place that felt small and limited in ways it never had as a child. Perhaps everything loses its grandness as we get older, I mused to myself. It's easy to talk about the good memories.

Remember when we stayed at the cottages and you became obsessed with playing shuffle board? What nine year old likes shuffle board?!

And when we walked across the tidal river at low tide, and you got that shell fragment stuck in your foot...

And it was completely worth it for the adventure.

We faded in and out of our conversations, our memories, our past and present selves.

That night at the inn we decided to go down to the bar for a cocktail. It was the first time I was old enough to drink with her, and the idea filled me with a sense of maturity. I could be more of an equal, the adult that I was slowly becoming but wasn't sure I would ever truly be, at least maybe not in the way that I had always imagined.

We made our way downstairs and entered the brightly lit bar. It was filled with the sounds of people in conversation, jazz music, and the clink of glasses. But when we inquired with the hostess, she told us the bar was closed for a private event. I was disappointed about the bar, but Audrey didn't feel like driving to another, so instead we took a walk. I lead the way across the lawn to the rocky cliffs and small beach behind the inn. We clambered down the steep cement steps to the tiny beach, and the bright floodlights that shone from the inn illuminated the shore, giving it a surreal feeling. We took photos of the brightly lit rocks with our phones, and laughed at how alien everything looked in this strange light.

Even though I'd become more accustomed to spending my time in bars, at that point I still felt out of place there. I was glad that we'd returned to the sea, to the cliffs where we climbed and photographed and breathed in the salty air. It was during these times, outside with Kelly, when things once again felt normal, natural, like no time at passed since last seeing each other. In that moment I felt almost as if the sea had successfully brought us back together again, strengthened our bond as sisters, and I knew we'd leave Ogunquit closer than we'd been in quite some time. That night my ears would

be filled with the crash and roar of the waves well into the night as the sounds drifted in through our open hotel room windows.

The next day was the work day, and I assisted Kelly with her wedding photographer duties. I held her cameras while she wrangled groomsmen and bridesmaids for pre-wedding photos and then searched for the perfect angles and moments throughout the ceremony. I followed along behind her while she captured the joy and memories of strangers on film. I watched her in awe, always having been intrigued and inspired by the art of photography. I envied her talent and experience and wished that I too could capture time, hold it in my hands the way that she did.

The wedding festivities lasted late into the night, and I awoke to the next day to the bright sunlight that filtered through the blinds of our hotel room and felt tired. Bags packed, we spent the morning taking a final walk through the narrow streets of Perkins Cove. As we walked, our steps gradually becoming realigned, we both finally acknowledged that the cove was seemingly shrunken from how it had lived for the many years since childhood inside of our memories. We bought coffees and wandered the shops for souvenirs before making our way back to the car.

Windows down, the shops and boats grew smaller in my rearview window. We plugged in Kelly's phone and played Washed Out again. The music no longer covered up any silence though, as we talked over it. We drove along the winding roads past harbors and beaches and I noticed the sky had transformed to a brilliant orange sunset. Audrey

screeched the car to a halt on the side of the road and grabbed her camera from the backseat, ready to capture the sky with her hands. We threw the car doors open and jumped out, running across the grass, arms in the air, laughing, lost in a moment of pure spontaneity. As I ran after Audrey, my footsteps padding noiselessly across the grass, she reached back and grabbed my hand, pulling me along so that we were running side by side.

Differences in Dairy

I shop at local farmers markets as much as possible. Having grown up in rural New Hampshire, I feel a connection and an understanding of farms from my experiences. As someone who looks at the ingredients that go into the products I purchase at the grocery store, buying something that's as natural as possible, with as few ingredients as possible, is important. After I began to talk with local dairy farmers about the benefits of raw milk, I became curious, and wondered if raw might really be the way to go, if the health benefits actually outweighed the risks.

Raw milk is one of the most controversial dairy topics out there. With both proponents and opponents holding equally passionate viewpoints on the subject, nobody is able to really come to a consensus. The fact is though that despite the risks that come with raw milk, its popularity has been only rising in recent years, with dairy farms getting more and more demand for raw dairy products. Despite the laws that still exist against the sale of raw dairy in about half the states in the US, the question that's being raised now, is whether raw dairy might be an avenue to saving America's small dairy farms?

Farms that sell raw milk advertise its increased health benefits. According to proponents for raw milk, the pasteurization process, while killing harmful pathogens, also removes naturally occurring probiotic microorganisms and enzymes that are very beneficial to our health. They argue that it's just not how milk is meant to be drunk. Some farms state as well that those who are lactose sensitive may be able to drink raw milk when they otherwise would be affected by pasteurized milk. Studies on that remain inconclusive though. Raw milk drinkers argue that raw milk is pure, straight from the cow - the way it should be. However, according to the US Food and Drug Administration, the risks of raw milk outweigh the potential benefits.

It's a fact that unpasteurized milk has the potential to harbor microorganisms that can be hazardous to your health. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, between 1993 to 2012 there were 127 outbreaks linked to raw dairy products. Those outbreaks resulted in 1,909 illnesses and 144 hospitalizations.² Raw milk has the potential to carry several dangerous bacterias, including Salmonella, E. coli, Listeria, and Campylobacter, among others. And those bacterias provide an even greater risk to those who have compromised immune systems, children, older adults, and women who are pregnant. Those in favor of raw milk, or "real milk" as many refer to it, are okay with the risks that come with it, believing them to be fairly minimal, with benefits that far outweigh them.

² <https://www.fda.gov/food/buy-store-serve-safe-food/dangers-raw-milk-unpasteurized-milk-can-pose-serious-health-risk>

Raw milk began to rise in popularity during the 1990s. At that time, raw milk campaigns were founded in support of the raw dairy products that, at the time, few farms produced. RealMilk.com, the Weston A. Price Foundation campaign for raw milk, was founded in 2000 and remains an online hub for raw milk enthusiasts. The website states that the idea behind it began at that time when raw milk was difficult to find, and the site served as a way for everyone to find out where raw dairy products were sold in their area. Today, it still serves that same purpose, with maps of raw dairy producers, as well as an education section that seeks to tell people about the benefits of consuming raw dairy products.

RealMilk.com states that, “Most milk today—including most organic milk—is ultra-pasteurized, meaning that it is flash heated to 230 degrees F, above the boiling point. No goodness can be left in milk that is processed in this way.” It also states that pasteurization is “the greatest waste in history.” While maybe exaggerated, it’s undeniable that pasteurization does kill nutrients in dairy. However, it might quite simply be necessary in order to avoid a much greater risk to public health.

Local farms who sell raw milk in the states that allow it, must be inspected regularly. New Hampshire is one of those states. And one could argue that the ability to sell raw milk in the state has only been helpful for small dairy farms, giving them an avenue to greater sales through the increased demand for raw products. New Hampshire has actually been ahead of most states for years now in allowing the sale of raw dairy products. The state used to be one of only ten the country to allow the retail sale of unpasteurized dairy products.

Despite the positives for small farms that are fighting to survive, the sale of raw products haven't always been a positive for New Hampshire though. Illness outbreaks due to the consumption of raw milk have occurred repeatedly over the years, perhaps hindering those small farms involved with the outbreaks more than it ultimately helped them.

Most recently in February of 2021, Brandmoore Farm, located in Rollinsford, New Hampshire, became the source of an outbreak due to their raw milk. With coverage from local news stations and the involvement of the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services, Brandmoore Farm recalled all of their recently sold raw milk. It was at that time that they stopped producing dairy on the farm altogether, stating on their website that they "transitioned out of dairy...to focus on other farm ventures." It can't help but look like this change came as a direct result of their raw milk outbreak, which, as such a small farm, effectively shut down their dairy operation altogether as the hinderance to sales after that just would have been too great to overcome.

In New Hampshire, hundreds of farms are currently selling raw dairy products. This avenue of sales is especially accessible for small farms, saving them the time and cost of pasteurization. With low dairy prices and milk sales, dairy farms are being forced to innovate and look to other product options. Those who didn't sell raw products before are beginning to do so now. The demand for raw milk products in NH has been steadily increasing, and according to local farms, that demand has gone up substantially more

during the Covid-19 pandemic. Julie Davenson, the executive director of Stonewall Farm in Keene, New Hampshire, says they were already planning to begin selling raw milk prior to the pandemic, and actually made the transition early because there was such a heightened demand for it after the spring of 2020.

In March of 2021, a new bill, HB95, was proposed in the New Hampshire House of Representatives. The bill would allow for additional raw dairy products to be sold by small farms in the state. Currently, small producers, defined as those who make less than twenty gallons of raw milk or product per day, can sell raw dairy products including yogurts and cheeses, from their farms, farm stands, farmers markets, and select retailers. The HB95 bill would additionally allow for the sale of frozen yogurt and ice cream made from raw milk, as long as it's packaged in six ounce containers and within a thirty day expiration from its manufactured date.

For many farms, HB95 would be helpful. Smaller farms are absolutely relying on the sale of processed products such as milk, yogurt and ice cream in addition to their milk sales. Julie Davenson of Stonewall Farm says that for small farms it's very necessary. "I think it's helpful. Dairy farmers have been feeling the squeeze. It would be impossible if they didn't have the option to do any of these things. We have 30 cows, and if we were simply selling milk, we could not make ends meet."

As the dairy industry has declined in recent years, it's just not possible for most farms, particularly the very small ones, to make a living only selling milk. Having a diverse selection of products is key, and being able to add raw ice cream that selection would be a positive addition. Unfortunately for small farms, it becomes a game of wait and see. The passage of bills and laws takes time, and can very positively or very nega-

tively affect our local dairy farms, who often don't get the support they need in order to survive.

For those who consume and produce raw milk, it isn't only about the health of humans - it's also about the health of the cows. Raw milk is produced by entirely grass-fed pasture cows. The production of raw milk on dairy farms means a different kind of life for the cows, and a benefit to the land as well. It's a more natural way to raise cows, and the positives of that are significant. Cows are meant to live their lives outside and steadily graze all day. Many farms attempt to replicate that with their cows that spend a majority of their time indoors by allowing them to wander freely within the barns, and consistently graze on hay. It's never going to be quite the same, though.

And grass-feeding is better for the soil and the environment. According to large-scale dairy producer and cooperative Organic Valley, grass pastures prevent erosion and increases the soil's ability to store carbon, which keeps it out of the atmosphere. The process of trucking in feed from elsewhere is eliminated entirely, and cows use their own energy to harvest their meals. Grass-fed farming also increases biodiversity, fostering a healthy community of pollinating insects. Pasture feeding also lessens the amount of methane and greenhouse gases that affect the atmosphere because cows naturally distribute their manure through the fields, where it breaks down quickly and naturally, while fertilizing the soil.

Not only are the cows happier, they're also often healthier, and as healthier cows they produce higher quality, better tasting milk. Studies have shown that milk from grass-fed cows is much higher in some nutrients, including Omega-3 fatty acids, conjugated linoleic acid (CLA), and vitamins A and E.³ Milk from entirely grass-fed cows has been on the rise regardless of whether it's pasteurized or not, and as I browse the supermarket shelves, I'm seeing an increased variety in dairy options from both large-scale and small farms.

Raw dairy sales have been a positive addition to many dairy farms. Consumers heed the risks presented by agencies and healthcare providers, and believe in the benefits of raw dairy anyway. Many of the farms that sell raw dairy are simply passionate about doing so. At a time when many consumers are turning to local products, and attempting to better understand where their food comes from, the timing is right for local farms to begin to introduce more and more new products, further diversifying the options available to the public. While there are always risks to selling raw products, most farms do so without issue, maintaining a level of cleanliness and quality dairy storage that nearly entirely eliminates the risks involved. The rewards from sales are simply worth the risk, and dairy farmers are willing to do anything it takes to keep their farms alive.

³ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/fsn3.610>

I still haven't tried raw milk. While the farmers market advertisements, the promises by farms that the milk is not only beneficial to me, but beneficial to the cows who produce it due to the care they receive. I know many people who consume raw dairy regularly without any problems. The news stories about bacteria, the dangers of raw dairy, and the resulting illnesses that result, darken my view and I feel afraid. My fears cloud the part of me that wants to consume what's most natural, and what results in a most natural life for the animals who bring us these products.

Snickers O'Mara

I was 15 when I was told about once in a lifetime horses - horses so special, you're lucky to find one. Once in a lifetime horses are so incredibly unique in every way, unlike any other horse you'll come across. I've spoken to many devoted horse people about this idea of the once in a lifetime horse. We all agree that we're lucky to meet and ride countless outstanding, loving creatures, however there's something about the rare horse who comes along and changes not only your riding, and your time at the barn, but your life. They change you. They inspire you to ride better, to train better, to reach for goals and dreams that may have once seemed unreachable, both at the barn as well as in other areas. A once in a lifetime horse can make *more* feel possible, can give you a reason to get up in the morning, to go on, and keep trying, even when life feels too difficult. I was lucky enough to find my once in a lifetime horse at the young age of 13 when I began to ride at a quaint dressage stable in the foothills of western New Hampshire. I like to think that I chose Snickers O'Mara, but I think the truth is that she chose me.

Twin Ridge Farm is a small competitive dressage stable nestled in the scenic town of Warner, New Hampshire. Lead by owner and trainer Jeri Nieder, alongside her husband and elderly parents, it's a family operated facility. On a chilly autumn evening,

I arrived there after a tiring day of school. I was in sixth grade, and attending Sant Bani School, a small private school with a focus on creativity, service, and individuality. All the way up in Sanbornton, New Hampshire, my commute to and from school each day was almost an hour, making for especially long days. No matter how tired though, I was always happy to be able to ride in the evenings. As I slid open the heavy wooden doors into the barn aisle, I breathed in the scent of horses and hay, and the indescribable smell that was always present in this particular stable. It was a smell that I loved, and I felt at peace as soon as I breathed in.

Dressage is a specific discipline of horseback riding often described as "ballet on horseback." Dressage is the French word for "training," and that training builds strength, obedience, flexibility and balance. Originally used for military purposes, it has become a modern day sport in the equestrian world and holds a place on the Olympic stage. Dressage is a sort of art form. It's a dance between horse and rider, using commands passed from rider to horse so subtly that if done well, they shouldn't be seen.

As a 13 year old, all of this seemed extremely dull to me at first. I wanted the thrills and excitement that I felt only came with jumping horses over very large objects. When I moved to Twin Ridge Farm, though, it only took a few dressage lessons for that to begin to change. I became more and more intrigued by the sport, and fell in love with the farm. I was in awe of the way that the upper level riders could communicate so well with their horses, completing complex lateral movements, extensions of stride, and creating a lofty suspension of the horse's gaits. One rider in particular, Amanda, who trained some of the horses at the farm, stood out to me. I was immediately inspired by her and by her horse, Barron. They appeared to dance through every ride together in

harmony. My determination to learn this sport, to master it, and to ride as well as the mentors that I was quickly looking towards for inspiration, grew. I began to take regular weekly dressage lessons, and I looked forward to them, dreaming through my classes, my mind more focused on dressage than anything else.

That evening I made my way down the red brick aisle, the horses snorting, their warm breath visible in the cold air. I found my trainer, Jeri, teaching a lesson in the indoor arena, and confirmed with her that I would be riding Charlie Brown, the lower level dressage horse with the stocky legs and poofy mane, upon whom I'd been gradually learning the sport. She turned to me, and in her gruff New England accent asked instead,

"Would you be up for a challenge tonight?" I hesitantly replied that sure, I would be. "How about we try you on Snickers then." It wasn't a question. I was thrilled. I was also nervous. I'd come to learn about Snickers not long after I arrived as a new rider at the farm. Snickers was somewhat legendary for two reasons: The first being her incredible, often surprising talent for dressage. The second was the level of skill that it took to ride her well. I went into the experience determined, yet not expecting much either. I was a beginner dressage rider, and I'd seen more people than not fail to succeed on Snickers.

She wasn't a dangerous horse to ride. She was smart, though, and tried to get away with dictating the ride. Snickers took complete advantage of the less experienced riders. When they'd use a leg aid to ask for slightly more forward movement, or for a lateral movement such as a leg yield or half pass, Snickers used it as an excuse to run. I'd seen Jeri standing in the middle of the ring literally pulling her own hair out with

anxiety that something would happen to Snickers during these rides. She always inevitably pulled the rider off and called it a day. Those riders weren't ever allowed another try on Snickers.

Snickers O'Mara, "Snickers" for short, wasn't what most horse people would think of when they imagine a "typical" dressage horse. Her breed was Connemara Pony, and although she wasn't actually a pony, she was a very small horse. Seal brown with very few markings, save the gray hair that appeared on her face due to her older age, at first glance she was unremarkable, especially in the dressage world - a world dominated by much larger, flashier horses. With her stocky legs and small stature, she looked more like a child's pony than a competitive dressage horse. When I arrived at the farm and heard about Snickers, there was a unanimous fondness and love for the horse among everybody there. I got the sense that she was special.

As I tacked her up for my ride that night, nervous energy rushed through me. My boot heels clicked along with the clopping of her hooves on the brick barn aisle. I opened the double doors into the brightly lit indoor arena, and we stepped inside. There was only darkness outside the rows of large glass windows that lined the walls, contrasting starkly with the brightness inside. I adjusted my stirrups, climbed the three wooden steps of the block, placed my foot in the stirrup and got on.

Maybe it's only in hindsight that I can say this, but something immediately clicked. We began to walk around the arena and it felt *right*. Sometimes when I rode unfamiliar horses I became nervous, and this wasn't the case with Snickers, despite knowing her reputation at the barn. I felt comfortable and confident. It was almost a sense of belonging: it felt as if this was the horse that I was meant to ride. Her small

fluffy brown ears swiveled inquisitively, and we mosed comfortably around the arena. As we continued with the lesson, it went surprisingly well. I rode her strategically, giving small half halts (the dressage word for asking the horse to slow down slightly) when needed, and gave her soft but still confident aids. Gradually, over the course of the lesson, we worked on more challenging movements and exercises. After leaving the barn that nigh, my mom told me that Jeri was absolutely astounded.

I had ridden Snickers better than anyone she had ever seen, especially during a first ride. It was only a couple of weeks later that I was asked if I would like to be Snickers' new rider.

As winter turned to spring that year, I was an eighth grader on top of the world. Dressage had become my passion, and by this time I'd been working with Snickers for the winter. Not only had I come to love dressage, but even more so I'd grown to love Snickers. She wasn't mine, but I loved her as if she was. And I think she liked me a lot, too. Maybe I only imagined it, but she always seemed happy to see me. Perking her ears and letting out a small nicker when I'd approach her. Often she'd come right over to me in her paddock outside, eager to come in with me and work. She was well behaved (for the most part!) during our rides. There was a mutual respect between us, and it was obvious in our progression together as a team.

I came to learn that there was something fun and extremely impressive about Snickers' small size and unassuming appearance as well. The way that she transformed from pasture pony to world class dressage athlete was fascinating. She even had her own

passport, very similar to a human passport. Her talent and work ethic exceeded that of the much larger, more expensive Warmblood breeds of horses who mostly excelled in the sport. I got a kind of smug satisfaction out of running circles around the older, more experienced adult riders on their large, often expensive horses at the barn. I liked it because of the unlikeliness. The stereotype, the expectation, was that a young teenager on a Connemara Pony shouldn't be able to do what these adults who spent years of their lives, and large sums of money, attempting to accomplish. We were an unlikely success: a kid on a little old horse. Snickers defied all odds.

In June of 2007, the University of New Hampshire Dressage on the Seacoast competition was our first. We loaded up the horses and the endless amounts of equipment and supplies that we'd need, and were on our way to Durham. The day of my first test was hot. My show jacket was made of black wool, and I quickly became exhausted and overheated before we even entered the ring, a common struggle for riders during competitions. As Snickers and I began our warm up, Jeri spoke in a quiet, but stern voice from the edge of the sand arena. Nervous energy rushed through me. I had shown dressage only once before, and although it went very well, this was a different situation: a new horse and a much more difficult test. When we entered the ring to compete, my heart was beating fast and I know Snickers felt my anxiety.

The test felt endless. We pulled it off, though, and finished without any major mistakes. It was a thrill to not only place and score well as it turned out, but to

accomplish a goal that I had set for myself. It was even more special because I was able to accomplish that goal aboard Snickers. The show continued, and I fell in love with the atmosphere. I was a kid in a world of adults. It was a two day show, so Snickers was stabled in the temporary stabling set up at the UNH barns. I cared for her every day as if she were my own. Each evening I'd take her out for walks at sunset, the UNH stadium in the distance a silhouette against a beautiful pink and orange sky. These quiet moments were my favorite. The hectic hustle and bustle of the show had died down, and most riders were at dinner.

The show grounds were quiet, and there was a sense of peace. It was just Snickers and I. As I stopped to let her graze, I patted her neck and looked over my shoulder, back towards the show grounds. It was odd, but this gesture became a routine at every show. During the warm, quiet evenings on show grounds from New Hampshire to Vermont, and eventually New York, I'd take Snickers out for a walk, and savor that moment. I'd give her a pat and look back at the competition rings, reflecting not only on our rides that day, or on that show in particular, but perhaps also on how far we'd come and how content I felt.

Unfortunately, during that summer with Snickers there were hard truths of reality going on at home. My grandmother had recently received the devastating diagnosis of lung cancer, and had moved from her house in Tampa, Florida, to live with us in New Hampshire while undergoing chemotherapy treatment. My entire family was

filled with sadness by her diagnosis. My family's financial situation was beginning to decline, and we had no idea of the hardship that was in store for us with the coming recession. I had also recently learned that, with the start of high school, all of my friends were transferring from Sant Bani School, which had small classes through 12th grade, to other public high schools in the area. I, on the other hand, would be staying at Sant Bani, and was already dreading the start of a new school year entirely alone. Still, the shows that summer and the time spent at the barn with Snickers were a sanctuary from everything. I distracted myself. I followed my dreams. If I pretended as if nothing was happening, then maybe nothing would.

After the UNH competition, our other shows went well. I was competing and I was inspired. This is what I want to *do* with my life, I'd think to myself every day. We earned scores towards multiple Year End awards, and qualified for the New England Dressage Association Regional Championships in New York. Most importantly of all though, we earned scores towards my United State Dressage Federation Bronze Medal.

The USDF Bronze, Silver, and Gold medals hold tremendous importance in the dressage world. Each medal signifies what skills you have as a dressage rider. Earning your medals is a huge accomplishment in the sport. Many riders spend their lives at the lower levels, continually chasing that elusive Bronze Medal. To achieve it is a special accomplishment, and after our first summer showing together, I decided that more than

anything, I wanted to achieve that goal with Snickers. It became a dream, and dreams often have a way of staying dreams I soon found.

After a post-show season break that fall, we did begin the winter months by working towards the Bronze Medal goal - the dream.

Until it all came crashing down.

Snickers foundered that December. I brought her in from her paddock one day and she was limping badly. A vet was called immediately, and the diagnosis was quickly made. When a horse goes through what's called "foundering," also called "Laminitis," it's extremely serious and painful. Horses founder when there's a lack of blood flow in the laminae, the front part of the hoof, which produces swelling and inflammation in the hoof. If a horse founders repeatedly, or very severely, the damage done can be so severe that the pedal bone is no longer supported in the hoof the way that it should be, and it rotates toward and sometimes through the sole of the hoof. When this happens, it's deadly.

Snickers, it turns out, had health problems. She was diagnosed as being borderline for Cushing's disease years before. This is a problem that many older horses in particular face. Cushing's is a disorder of the pituitary gland that results in hormonal imbalances. There are a number of symptoms and risks that come along with Cushing's, and one of the risks is recurrent Laminitis. Snickers had foundered before.

After Snickers was taken away to the New England Equine Medical Center, the decision was made to move her away from Twin Ridge Farm to a different facility closer to home, where Snickers would rest. I wasn't there the day that she left. I cried for hours that night, tears soaking through the linen of my pillowcase. I felt helpless, and as if I was losing everything. Snickers didn't deserve this, just as my grandmother didn't deserve her cancer. Then again, most don't deserve these things. Snickers was the last vestige of normalcy, and of inspiration, in my world at that time. When Snickers left, so did the dreams and the hopeful positivity that I'd been holding on to.

As an angsty teenager in the middle of my 10th Grade year of school, I wasn't very happy. I was transitioning between schools yet again, due to the closure of the charter school I'd started at the previous fall, when I had eventually succeeded at convincing my parents to let me leave Sant Bani School. As a general contractor, my dad wasn't able to find work due to the recession, and my family was going through a much greater financial hardship now. My grandmother's health had continued to decline as the chemotherapy gave her only slightly longer to live, while making her sick and turning that time into misery. Throughout all of this, I was trying to get back into riding. I hadn't ridden in several months, and I was no longer at Twin Ridge Farm. Snickers' departure coincided my family's financial problems, and my parents could no longer afford to pay for lessons with Jeri. Everything was falling apart. Snickers had left almost a year ago,

and it wasn't just the riding that I missed, it was her. She had come to mean more to me than I'd ever imagined a horse could.

It was with that mindset that I got into contact again with her owner and set up a time to visit Snickers. When we arrived, I barely recognized her. It wasn't that she was unhealthy. It was her outward appearance that broke my heart. Her once glistening coat was dull and caked with dried mud. She'd lost the muscle of a competitive dressage horse, and now her age showed more so than before in the way that her backbone was visible, and the newly sprouted gray hairs that covered more of her face. Most of all though, it was her eyes that bothered me. Her eyes were dull. They weren't the bright, excited eyes of the creature I'd come to know so well before. She had a sadness to her, and I was devastated. She was a shell of the horse I'd known before. She reminded me of past, better days, and how everything in my life and in hers had changed, had become a dull version of what it had once been.

The day that I found out Snickers was back, I couldn't contain my excitement. She had returned to the farm a couple of months prior. My family happened to have the funds for some lessons by this time, and we set one up right away. When I arrived at the barn I eagerly slid open the stall door and saw Snickers again. She was bright eyed and staring back at me from the shadows. She was, once again, the little horse that I remembered, and I couldn't wait to get back on. Every moment with her felt precious. I began to realize the truth in the fact that every moment passes, no matter

how much you might wish otherwise. I began to cherish those moments. I was nervous about the ride. I took my time grooming her, just happy to spend those moments with her. I placed the saddle on her back with care, and when I went to put her bridle on as well, I was happy to see her put the bit in her own mouth like always. Eager to go to work.

The sense that these things were the same, that I could almost go back to a different time; a time when my grandmother was still alive, when she hadn't suffered. To when my family had more money, to when my friends were a part of my life. I felt at peace in that moment. And as soon as I settled back into the saddle with Snickers, everything felt okay again. She felt even better than ever - feisty and wanting to run, she was more full of it than she'd ever been with me, and I enjoyed the spark in her step. All it took was a single ride and I felt comforted, like everything was falling into place once again, like it would all be okay.

Months passed in a blur of weekly lessons, and Snickers and I felt like a team again, even if only that one day a week. She was feisty, full of it, and clearly feeling great. When Jeri ended my lesson and brought up the possibility of showing Snickers again, of riding her more often, of going after that Bronze Medal, I was stunned. I truly never believed that I would see Snickers again, let alone ride her. There was too much against us, too many obstacles. The Bronze Medal had become what felt like an impossible feat. Now, against all odds, I couldn't believe that it was in reach.

We registered for a show in late August, in order to give plenty of time for schooling. When I got off Snickers I proudly lead her back to the barn, and I wrapped my arms around her in a hug. It wasn't the riding, or the showing or the possibility of the Bronze Medal that I cared about most - it was Snickers, her comeback, just the fact that I was the one who was allowed to ride her. That night I wrote in my journal and stated, "THIS IS AMAZING." Life was coming together again. It was during a lesson not long after that when I was told about once in a lifetime horses, and how Snickers was mine. They told me I was lucky. I looked down and smiled, knowing full well just how lucky I was.

It was July, only a month after registering for the show, and I was learning once again that dreams often remain dreams. Snickers foundered again, and I was left hoping and praying with clenched fists and closed eyes that she'd be okay - that she'd recover. Regardless the show was called off. Her dressage career was presumably over, and as I found this out, on my cell phone in an empty hallway next to a soda machine, it's hum somehow comforting, I broke down and sobbed.

In a whirlwind of college applications, another new high school, and riding a new horse, years passed in a blur. Now 18 years old and looking ahead to the future, I still never forgot about Snickers. Still riding at Twin Ridge Farm, I saw her frequently. She

meant more to me than any other horse, and I couldn't leave the barn after a ride without seeing her. She was doing mostly lower level work, healthy and being ridden by different riders. Occasionally I'd be nearby when I'd see a lesson going particularly bad, and Jeri would pull the rider off like always. Except now she'd call me over to the ring to demonstrate how properly to ride the horse, and let me finish the ride off on my own. I cherished those rides.

It's difficult to describe the emotion that I felt when springtime rolled around and I began riding Snickers more often again. It was a sense of déjà vu, nostalgia, and excitement all rolled into one. When I was asked if I'd want to try, one more time, for Third Level I said yes. There were people who suggested that maybe Snickers should retire. Perhaps we were asking too much, pushing her too far. The truth of it was, though, that those people didn't know Snickers. They didn't know about the lengthy discussions with the vet, who stated the work would not increase her risk of foundering or lameness. They didn't know how she felt to ride; that she was feisty and acting like a young horse again, clearly a sign that she was comfortable and in good health. We watched her every step, and never pushed her. She gave us all that she had, and we never even asked for it.

With the promise of college ahead, and this one last shot with Snickers, came an end to what felt to me to be an almost cinematic story. It wasn't about the level or the medal. It was about the fact that I knew that this was it - this was the end of my time with Snickers. The last time things would be as there were, the last time with this little horse. And it correlated with the last time that, as an adolescent, I'd be living with my parents, the last summer of being who I was then. It was an ending and a beginning

rolled into one. And Snickers was at the center of it. I'd grown up with this horse. I felt ecstatically happy all summer long, but also sad. I was always aware that this was temporary, it wouldn't last, no matter how much I wished it would, just as we all know that childhood is temporary, that adulthood is inevitable, and that no matter how much we may wish otherwise, time doesn't ever stop.

It was a hot July day and the sun beat down on the show grounds at the University of New Hampshire. I asked Snickers for movement after movement, all too aware that it would most likely be the last time, and reveling in every moment of the ride. We'd already achieved a Bronze Medal score the day before. At this show we had signed up for just two tests, only two opportunities to get the two scores we needed - an incredibly challenging feat. Snickers floated across the ring in the final moments of the test, a stocky little Connemara pony, elderly now, taking on the competition from horses more than half her age and twice her size, with exuberance. We ended with a last salute, and I took a deep breath. We'd done all that we could do. This had been a goal for more than five years, often seemingly unattainable. We left the ring to cheers.

My family and friends waited on pins and needles during the next couple of hours that it took to get the results. We didn't know they had already been posted on the scoreboard when they were announced over the loud speaker, so we had no idea what they were. They listed off the placings. It was a fairly good sized class, and not everyone would place. Fourth place, third place, second place. When they got to first I waited with

my breath held. We won. There was an eruption of cheers from our group. Cries of joy and hugs. I couldn't believe it. When I got back to the stables I went into the stall with the ribbon. I don't know if Snickers knew what was happening. Horses keenly sense every emotion that we feel in their presence, so I'm sure she felt the same things, even if she didn't know why. I still hope though that she did know - that she realized she did things in the ring that she hadn't done in over fifteen years, the last time she'd competed at that level, and that she knew she'd achieved something. I wrapped my arms around her and I cried tears of joy.

I had started writing in journals a lot, especially prior to leaving for college with all of the changes that were happening. On August 26th I wrote, "Had a really nice ride with Snickers today. It was hard to say goodbye."

In February of 2013 I was leaving a college horse show in a car full of friends, the mood celebratory (we had won), when I found out that Snickers had died. There was a message on my phone, from a friend who wanted me to know the news. My stomach dropped. Tears filled my eyes and I was filled with sadness for the loss that I'd hoped against reality would never actually happen. I quickly muttered something to my friends about needing to go back to my dorm room, and I barely made it out of the car and into

the dorm before I started sobbing. I found out more. She had foundered again. This time her coffin bone had rotated completely, and there was no recovery. It was a painful death, and she didn't deserve it. There was nothing that could be done. My once in a lifetime horse was gone.

It wasn't just that Snickers meant the world to me, though. Snickers mattered to *so many* people. My friend posted a photo of her and Snickers together on facebook and spoke of her and how she had recently passed away. A family member commented on it and said something about how lucky Snickers was to have had her in her life. My friend commented back to the contrary. She replied,

"That was what was so special about Snickers, though. She touched the lives of so *many* people."

I certainly know she touched mine. It wasn't just that I grew in dressage alongside Snickers; I grew up alongside her as well. My life was irrevocably changed by her presence. Dreams often have a way of staying dreams. Sometimes, if you're lucky and find that once in a lifetime horse like I did, though, they actually come true.

A Snowy Walk

The sky is a soft grey and snow is falling. It's been falling all day. After spending the day inside, huddled under blankets, warm coffee in hand, I've decided to venture outside, to escape the confines of my apartment, the aimless television shows I'd been viewing, my escape from the realities of life these days - the global pandemic, Covid-19, the isolation.

The narrow neighborhood streets are still bare, but the sidewalks are coated in fresh white powder. The world feels silent, still, even in the midst of the small seaside city where I live. That silence is occasionally broken only by the large salting trucks that roar past me. When they're gone silence settles once again. I make my way down the sidewalk and pass by a man in a blue coat who is shoveling his driveway. *Why is he shoveling?* I wonder to myself. It's going to keep snowing into the night. The orange plastic shovel scrapes the ground with each swipe. A few houses down, the smell of smoke fills my nostrils and I catch a glimpse into a backyard where a small group of men and women are gathered around a bonfire. The flames flicker, low and orange against the white of the ground. The smell of the smoke and flames fill my nose and I breathe in deeply, relishing it.

The Mobile gas station on the main street is bustling with people refilling their cars. Four of the six pumps are in use. The cars there consist of a range of makes and models, from a newer looking BMW to a new Jeep Wrangler, an old white Subaru, and a

Ford pickup truck that's "lifted," its large tires bringing it to a height far above the other vehicles at the station. A man with work boots emerges, climbing his way out of the cab and down to the pump to begin filling his truck. Meanwhile a couple stands next to a silver Honda, both in masks, chatting. For the moment I'd briefly forgotten about masks. The global pandemic that started last year was, for once, far from my mind. I'd found that walks could do that. I watch as one gas station customer leaves, while another enters the store. Another customer takes out his card and begins to pay at the pump. The smell of smoke has been replaced entirely by the smells of exhaust and gasoline, and I'm saddened by the change.

I want to buy a coffee, but the shop, a local Turkish place, appears busy, and I'm unsure about entering due to Covid-19. A group of men, the same group as always, stands outside of the shop, cigarettes dangling from their fingers, chatting. It occurs to me in then, how we see people, almost know them, their routines, and they become familiar to us. These people become a part of our every day worlds, on the fringes. The men stand in a semi-circle and gesture with their hands as they talk. One man, the owner of the shop I know from previous visits, is older than the others. His grey hair is long and tied back into a pony tail. He pats one of the other men on the back in a congenial way. I decide to continue on my walk, and to try stopping at the cafe on my home.

Farther down the street the houses become condos, new and towering over the neighborhoods of single family homes that fill the West End of Portsmouth. The condos have large signs out front: "ONLY 5 UNITES LEFT! SNATCH THEM UP NOW" *Sure, for two thousand a month for a one bedroom*, I think to myself. The reality of the changes that are taking place in Portsmouth are impossible to ignore when faced with

the sight of these monoliths of buildings that seem to tower into the sky, despite being four or five stories. Next to the historic homes of the area, they do tower, and they don't fit.

The gentrification of Portsmouth has been taking place for many years now. Once a fishing town it's been transformed, particularly the downtown, into a posh tourist destination. Now, residents are saddened to see that transformation taking place in the outlying areas of the North and West Ends as well. Developers have target the area during the past five years in particular, and development has increased exponentially. From the "West End Yards" condos, the condos that exist literally in the middle of the Hannaford parking lot, the towering North End developments that overshadow local spaces such as 3S Artspace, and the recently announced North Mill Pond development that's received outcry from local residents due to its proposed location within the wetland buffer, the development is rampant in the city.

I can't help but long for the days when I first moved there, just five years ago, when the landscape looked entirely different, when the West End wasn't being taken over by expensive condos, when it was just a place for young people, families, and those who were pushed out of downtown already. When I hear from people who don't live here, that they couldn't imagine wanting to be in such a posh place, surrounded by Lamborghinis and overpriced stores, I often become frustrated. *You don't know what's really* there, I want to tell them. Just driving through Market Square doesn't, as is the case with most cities, really give you an idea of the city and its identity. It doesn't tell you about everyone lives there, doesn't give away the favorite locally owned businesses, the art scene, the summer arts and music festival, the pubs with the free music where the

community gathers and reminisces about the city they love. I often feel misunderstood by the people who hear about where I live, when they assume I must live with my parents because how else would a twenty-something-year-old be able to afford Portsmouth. As I stare up at the condos the snow flakes become larger, hitting my face, and I close my eyes.

I continue my walk down the streets that border North Mill Pond in the Islington Creek Neighborhood. I hear the screams of children in the front yard of a two-story home, the paint a dark blue that stands out amongst the other off-white and pale colored homes on the street. The children, dressed in brightly colored snow pants and winter jackets, play in the snow. One boy throws a snow ball while the others attempt to hide. Their shrieks are high-pitched and cut sharply through the cold air. And I imagine a time when these homes might overshadowed by larger development, or worse, destroyed to make room for that development.

The snowflakes have become puffs that filter softly down and coat everything in sight. The seagulls fly overhead, white against the grey sky. They criss-cross back and forth, occasionally calling out. The lines of electrical wires cut across the sky as well, unmoving. Again, the roar of a salt truck or plow passes through. In a few minutes I'm back at the Turkish coffee shop. The men who were chatting outside are gone now, and even the smell of their cigarettes has dissipated. The cafe's sign, a large pink and yellow coffee cup, sways gently in the breeze above the shop's entrance. It appears empty in-

side, and as I pull open the door, a small bell rings and I am enveloped by the warmth of the shop.

Knotted Pine

The morning sunlight always touched the knotted pine wall above the wood stove. Depending on how late in the morning, the light was either higher or lower, fading in or out. The wood, a bright light yellow color speckled by knots, grew darker, more worn, weathered and aged, as the years drew on. The light that cascaded across the boards never changed, though. Conversations did change. People themselves changed, grew up, and moved on, passed on. I used to sit on the leather sofa with my grandmother and talk about that light, its reliability, the way it just looked *nice*. How it changed positions on the wall as the morning drew on. It wasn't many years later that my grandmother passed away. Those walls though, the light, and the couch remained, as did the myself, there in that log house.

As the years drew on, the tall post and beam structure of the home, held together by black iron brackets, gradually became filled with cobwebs. The cobwebs and dust seemed to pile up faster and faster as time sped on. At first the family rented scaffolding, which was set up inside the house, once in a while in order to clean those beams. Then it seemed that every couple of years the scaffolding was needed again. Those cobwebs always returned.

The hardwood floors, made of pine, became outdated. It was the same for the dark green kitchen countertops and the dark wood grained cabinets. Times change, the objects we're supposed enjoy, what looks "right" for the time, is constantly evolving. How is a house ever supposed to keep up? How are we?

The pictures, hung with care on the knotted boards during the early 1990s, never changed. They didn't fade, weren't re-arranged, weren't interchanged. The people and moments portrayed in them are not interchangeable: the father-daughter photo on the apple tree, the mother-daughter photo in the lighthouse, the vacation pictures from San Diego. They remained there, a reliable reminder of days gone by, a reminder of what matters most. They haunted those walls.

The addition was built nearly fifteen years after the house. A sunroom with a loft area, a spiral staircase leading upstairs, and a gas fireplace for warmth. With plaster walls, the room had a different feel than the rest of the house. It felt more modern in a way, but the cool grey and blue colors, the soft furniture and fireplace, created a place of peace. The upstairs loft on the other hand was a place for fun and planning, for dreaming. For me it felt like it could be made into anything - a music room, a place for hammocks, a place for dancing. It was all of those things, and yet most of my ideas never came to fruition before my family sold the house. Now, with new owners, it could be anything, but most likely it is none of those things it was built to be, that I dreamt it to be.

The downstairs bedrooms were small, simple, square, and housed my sister and I. We used to knock coded messages into the walls at night. The bedrooms were originally carpeted, but after several years the floors were transformed to faux-wood. My big sister's floor wasn't even visible it was so littered with clothing, blankets, CDs, and sketchbooks. She blasted her music too loudly, and I tried to do the same, attempting the same level of coolness, much to the dismay of my parents. The sister's bedroom window exited to the front porch, perfect for escaping unnoticed to parties in high school,

while my windows looked out at the woods - perfect for watching the chipmunks and birds.

My sister's room would eventually become my parent's new bedroom after she left for college. When we moved away it would then become vacant for a time, before becoming a place of tragedy. That room was for growing up, for escaping and coming home, for moments and music and tapping coded messages through the wall. It was never meant to be a place of darkness. I still cringe when I think about how it was the place where one of the new homeowners would shoot a gun, taking their own life, one day shortly after we moved away. I try not to think about it.

Fog

The car ride to Acadia National Park took about four hours. My tiny hatchback was beginning to feel cramped and stuffy. I rolled down the window, happy to have a break from driving now that my boyfriend Daniel had taken over at the wheel. I took a sip from my Starbucks coffee cup and relaxed, the green outside my window an endless blur. I knew the car ride to get up there would be more than worth it. Acadia was a place I'd dreamt of exploring for many years, but the drive, the cost to stay for at least a night up there (I'm just not into camping), and trying to coordinate schedules with friends or family who would be willing to make that drive, had proven impossible in the years prior. Now, in September of 2021 this trip was special not only because I'd finally get to visit Acadia, but because it was my first trip since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Since Covid-19 had begun to alter the world, my family and I have been diligent in taking extra precautions to protect ourselves. Due to a respiratory disorder that I was born with, Covid-19 poses an extra risk to me. 2020 became a year of isolation for Daniel and I at our Portsmouth, New Hampshire apartment. Even once others began to venture out, to return to the restaurants, bars, stores, and hotels, we remained at home. It wasn't until we both received the vaccine that we began to gradually venture out more. At some point during the summer we realized that a trip away was exactly what we needed after that long year or separation from the world.

In actuality though, it was a year of separation from other people. I felt closer to the world, to the outdoors, to nature and the weather and the hanging seasons than I had in a long time. I escaped outside often for walks, even in the rain and the snow. It brought me back to my days as a working student, when I spent all day every day outside in the elements, and to my childhood, when a little cold or snow didn't cause me to shy away from running around outside, building a fort, or exploring the woods. I was glad this trip to Acadia, a place of outdoor beauty, would be our first. I was craving the feeling that I'd had during those days I'd spent outdoors, the sense of peace I'd felt during that time, even with the fears and horrors that came with the pandemic.

In reality, lately I'd been much less peaceful lately. Since returning to work, to school and to social obligations and outings, I'd been feeling awkward, and even lost. I've always struggled with change. The change that happened at the start of the pandemic, the isolation, was jarring, but I eventually settled into it, and found my happiness in nature, in my daily walks and bike rides, my time with horses and my time spent at the beach. Now though, the transition back to time spent indoors at my office, at bars with friends, family outings, felt jarring. I was struggling to assimilate back into society it almost felt like. I hoped this trip to Acadia would clear my head and give me a break from the stress and aimlessness that had begun to shape my days lately.

I think we passed it. Tired of driving, I was frustrated when we didn't find our cottage right away. It had been raining off and on and the fog was beginning to settle as

we arrived in Bar Harbor. Our cottage was just a few minutes out of downtown, and we seemed to keep driving past it. *Can you look at the directions again?* The rain became heavier and began to pitter-patter loudly on the windshield as I turned on the wipers. *There! There it is!* I finally spotted, enveloped in fog, the sign announcing the cottages, their small white shapes barely visible across the green grass.

The gravel crunched loudly beneath the tires as we pulled into the driveway, and I noticed a group of people, mugs in hand, seated on the porch of an old farmhouse. We climbed stiffly out of the car, threw our bags over our backs, and slowly made our way towards the house, uncertain.

Hello! An older woman yelled in a friendly voice! *Hi...* meekly I waved back. Hair a mess, clothes wrinkled, I really didn't want to see anyone. The woman directed us to our cottage, #4, and we made our way over. The rain had stopped, and the mist on my face felt refreshing. In the distance the clear blue water of the bay was barely visible, tiny waves lapping at a sandy shore.

'O'Leary's Irish Pub is "the closest Irish pub to Ireland in the United States." This thrilled me. My time studying abroad in Ireland in 2014 felt like so long ago now, and yet it was an experience I held close to my heart. My love of Ireland - the people, the cities, even the weather, had stayed with me. However, Ireland represented something else as well - it was a time when I left my comfort zone, something I've found I'm more and more reluctant to do as I get older. It was a time when I took risks. I flew to another

country alone, never having left the United States. I learned by doing; how to navigate airports, subway systems, bus lines. I solved my problems independently, got myself out of jams, and came out at the other side of those four months feeling like I'd transitioned to a true independent adult. That feeling of fearlessness, of confidence in the face of discomfort, was something I'd been lacking for some time now, particularly once I began to stay home during Covid-19. I needed to remember that feeling, to take a risk again.

Should we go here? Daniel asked, breaking into my thoughts. *Yes!* I didn't need to think twice. Of course I wanted to go to the closest Irish pub to Ireland in the United States. We entered the building and it really did look like an authentic Irish pub. Dark wood walls, advertisements for Irish beer on the walls, a sports game on the television, Irish whiskeys lining the shelves. It was exciting to feel like I was back there, in that moment, in a pub in Ireland. It was exciting to be in Bar Harbor too though, to finally get away and become immersed in a new place, and explore a park that combines my two favorite things: the woods and the sea.

The next day we ate breakfast, eggs on English muffins, on our little screened in porch with a distant view of the bay. Despite raining off and on, the temperature was warm, and I was confident that our time in Acadia wouldn't be wasted, despite the less than ideal weather. The rain dripped in droplets off the roof of our little porch, and the steam from my mug of hot coffee swirled upwards into the air as I sipped.

Dressed in my L.L. Bean duck boots and raincoat, my feet sloshed as I made my way across the drenched lawn to the car. It was off to Acadia, and I tapped my fingers on the steering wheel excitedly as we pulled the car out of the driveway and onto the main road. Centrally located near both downtown Bar Harbor and Acadia, it was only a ten minute drive to the gate. It turned out it we happened to be there on Free National Parks Day, a day of free admission to the park. This day happens annually, as a way to open the National Parks up to the public at large, regardless of anyone's ability to pay the cost of admission.

Once in the parking lot I was immediately transported back to my time spent traveling in Europe. The lot was filled with cars whose plates displayed states from New York to Michigan and even Oregon. As we climbed the wooden steps, set into hillside that lead up to the lodge, I overheard conversations in other languages. Travelers from around the world came to Acadia to explore and experience all of the beauty that the park has to offer. I felt comfortable amongst the crowds of people at the lodge, happy to enjoy this experience of traveling once again. It had been way too long. My struggles with direction and socializing and careers at home were forgotten.

Bubble Rock... huh. I wonder if that's like a bubbling spring or something. We were winding our way along the roads of the park, immersed in the forest and gasping at the incredible views of the mountains, the water and the islands. It was even more beautiful than I had imagined it would be. On a whim I decided to pull into the lot.

Let's hike up and find out. The mist wouldn't stop us. We didn't think to look up what exactly we were hiking towards.

The rain was coming down off and on, mostly only misting, and the humidity made the air feel heavy. Dressed in too many layers I quickly began to sweat underneath my jackets, and as we traversed the muddier areas of the trail, I began to worry about whether it might be washed out at any point from all the rain. And as the rain started up again, I felt like I wanted to turn back, to re-evaluate the hike, even though we were nearly half way there already. At just a few miles it wasn't a long hike. I was experiencing the same feeling of wanting to give up, to hide, this time in my car, from the world that I'd experienced at times in the months leading up to our trip. Too embarrassed to vocalize my desire to stop though, I remained silent and hiked on.

The steps began to get steeper, the slopes rockier and muddier. The canopy of tree branches above blocked out the sky and kept us mostly dry though. My hands became slippery with sweat and rainwater as I grasped onto branches and tree trunks, pulling myself closer and closer to the summit. I was hot and damp and yet it was refreshing and fun and I began to enjoy being up there, focused on the task at hand, so immersed in the nature of this beautiful place.

I was so excited to reach the summit. *The view is going to be incredible.*
I can't wait to see what bubble rock is like! The conversation between Daniel and I flowed effortlessly as we continued our climb. The steps began again, and as I pulled myself up and pulled myself up, I could see an opening, light that suggested we'd reached our destination.

There was no view that we could see on that rainy day. The fog, having settled in more heavily over the past hour, now obscured everything. That incredible view that I'd been anticipating was nothing but grayness, and gave the illusion that we weren't high up on the cliff's edge overlooking a vast expanse. I didn't know what was out there.

Bubble Rock, it turned out, wasn't a spring of any kind after all. It's just a rock - a large one, shaped like a bubble, that teeters on the edge of the cliff. After looking at photographs following our hike I've seen the way that, if you look at it from the right angle, it appears to be precariously balanced up there. We only looked at it from the back though, that view far less intriguing, and although geologically I knew the rock is quite cool, at that time it seemed so much less so than what I had been unrealistically expecting.

Other hikers appeared disappointed when they reached the summit only to find that giant rock and no view. I didn't feel disappointed, though. Daniel and I laughed it off, thrilled to be up there. It didn't matter to me that I couldn't see the view, or that the rock was less than I expected. And maybe that's what it's like to accept that some things, whether it be a job or a career path, or even what it means to be an adult, aren't what you might have accepted.

At twenty-nine years old I feel as if time is moving faster than ever before, and the year of isolation during the global pandemic felt like pressing pause on that speeding time. It became a time for me re-evaluate the kinds of jobs and career I want to pursue, as well as a time to begin to sit with myself again; to read again, to write in a journal, to take a walk outside, and to re-connect with nature. When the Covid case numbers im-

proved and the vaccines became available, time sped up again, and life, it felt started up too too fast.

Suddenly the moments for reading, listening to music, and taking a stroll by the sea, felt limited. They began to slip away again as I became re-immersed in the fast-paced life that's so often expected these days, between working and graduate school, social obligations and family time. I began to dread even ordering a drink at a bar, or going to the bank, exhausted from not having spoken to people in the general public for so long. Some days it was tempting to hide beneath my covers in the morning, refusing to get out of bed and pursue the day.

As I stood up on the rocky cliffs of Acadia National Park, looking out at everything and nothing all at the same time, I felt my perspective shift. I took a deep breath, ready to start again, to pursue the things that scared me, just as I did when I lived in Ireland, and to take in the moments, even when there isn't anything to see. As I stared out at the grey expanse of fog high up in the cliffs of Acadia, I felt the rain as it pelted my face, and I didn't mind.

Invisible Change

Erosion: noun

- A: The action or process of eroding
- b: The state of being eroded
- B: An instance or product of erosion

Erode: transitive verb

- A: to diminish or destroy by degrees:
- B: to eat into or away by slow destruction of substance
- C: to wear away by the action of water, wind, or glacial ice
- D: to cause to deteriorate or disappear as if by eating or wearing away

When I reflect on my very first memories of the ocean, I remember my fear more than anything else. When faced with the almighty power and breadth of the sea, my younger self shrank back from it. My first visit to the beach was on a chilly October day. I was probably four years old. I was a shy, introverted young person on the verge of discovering the world outside of my parents' home, outside of my hometown and my best friend. I stood there on that sandy, deserted Maine shoreline while the sharp New England winds whipped at my face and my ears filled with the constant roar of crashing waves, on the precipice of a change, a shift to adolescence, that I didn't know in that moment was coming. Staring out at the sea I felt as if some almighty beast hidden within the depths of the waves themselves was ready to let loose onto the shore and swallow

me whole. Despite my fears though, there was a small sliver of awe that I felt as well. I was captivated, feet glued to the sand like anchors, refusing to budge even in the face of those most powerful forces of nature that I had never experienced before.

Looking back on this first ocean visit, I think I felt then, for the first time in my young life, the same things I still feel on every visit to the beach as an adult: that I was in the presence of something much larger and more important than myself. I sank into that feeling, relished the surprising sense of freedom and awe that I felt in the face of such power, knowing that at any moment it could swallow me whole. I was at a loss for control, at the mercy of nature.

As an adult I am still pulled, almost magnetically it seems, to the ocean today. Over the course of my twenty-eight years of life it's been a place of comfort, of wonder and infinite space and possibilities. I once believed that the beaches I loved remained steadfast, the same as they were that day when I first visited at four years old. I thought they were locked in time, a constant in a world that constantly shifts and evolves. During college I quickly learned that's not true though. I took an introductory oceanography course and learned that in addition to everything that's happening unseen far at sea, there are accelerating changes far more extensive than I'd have ever thought, happening *on shore*, visible to the eyes of everyone, seen and yet not seen.

The beaches I love, these places that I'm pulled back to over and over again, are shifting and disappearing right before my very eyes. The effects of global warming and the over-development of coastal areas is leading to a predicted eventual demise of beaches and coastal towns and cities. According to a new study that was published by the Joint Research Center of the European Commission, nearly fifty percent of beaches

in the United States will no longer exist one hundred years from now.⁴ That number is staggering, and for those who were once unaware, brings forth the reality of the significant change and loss that's occurring.

The very beaches and shorelines that I had assumed remained unchanged throughout my life, have been changing in ways imperceptible to my eyes, much like all of us as we grow and age and change in ways that we don't even realize. Our lives evolve and shift and parts often erode away. We become new, subtly altered versions of ourselves with every morning that we open our eyes, these quiet changes only perceptible to those who see us every day, who truly know us. The lost pieces of who we are become replaced by new ones. New people, places, experiences and moments take hold and shape our lives. This is where we differ from shorelines, though.

That is, until 2020, when the Coronavirus pandemic changed life as we know it, eroding away the solid parts we once thought were permanent, and all that we took for granted. Like the erosion of the beaches, the global Coronavirus pandemic changed the shape and breadth of every day for all of us in seen and unseen ways. It's filled us all with fear as we've watched what we knew to be everyday life slip away.

The percentages of people affected by Covid-19 have increased to numbers that most could once never have predicted when the pandemic first began its global spread in March of 2020. These numbers are something we can see, we can grasp the data.

⁴ <https://washingtonspectator.org/beach-erosion-valentino/>

Meanwhile, the virus itself remains unseen, spreading illness and death, an invisible villain. With ever-rising case numbers and death tolls every day, staring at those concrete numbers on our television and computer screens can become dizzying. One life taken is always too many, and watching the numbers only climb is devastating.

I am lucky enough to be able to say that I have remained healthy throughout this pandemic, and that my loved ones have remained safe and healthy as well. To say that life hasn't changed though would be a lie. Work days look vastly different, whether remote, or spent behind plexiglass dividers. Faces covered, we grocery shop quickly and avoid those around us. Families have become distanced, divided, isolated. The lack of human contact, of human connection, has been one of the most substantial alterations to our daily lives and our well-being during this pandemic.

We have all experienced this loss of connection to society, the loss of daily interactions with those around us. However as someone who is high-risk due to a rare respiratory disorder that I've lived with since birth, Covid-19 is especially dangerous for me, and the precautions I take to stay safe are extensive. I am isolated from friends and family, and spend my time only with my partner at our home. It's just too risky to interact with my friends and family, and without work, time spent at university, or my usual activities and hobbies, I have often felt lost and aimless, lacking inspiration and motivation.

To fill up the day, I take a lot of walks. Every day I walk, and the beach is my favorite destination. During those walks I've contemplated the ways that Covid-19 has actually brought me closer to the sea than ever before, and marvel at my ability to now notice the changes that have occurred on the beaches of my youth: the implementation of

sea walls, the piles of sand brought in and distributed in the springtime, the way the waves now lap at the the very edges of the houses at high tide - all of these measures taken as ways to slow the erosion. Perhaps this time during the pandemic has given me the space to further contemplate my old college course materials on erosion, or perhaps this contemplation is due to the fact that my very life has eroded from what it once was over the course of this past year. Maybe it's sharpened my ability to see the erosion in other things during this pandemic as well: relationships, landscapes, dreams. And beaches.

What will life look like on the other side of this pandemic? When I think about my dreams, my hope to begin to ride horses again, the jobs I hope to hold, I wonder if they will even exist. Time away from friends and family has also left me wondering, what will those relationships look like when we reunite? Will there be a subtle shift, a change in the way we talk to one another. Or will it be like no time has passed at all, as if this year is just a nightmare we're all waking up from? Quietly seated at home on my couch, the open window blowing in a warm breeze and the sounds of the traffic outside, I contemplate those questions, obsess about their outcomes. When I become too enveloped in my thoughts I know it's time to get out - it's time to go to the beach.

My love of the sea was at the heart of my decision to move to Portsmouth, New Hampshire four years ago. I visit the beaches and the wooded coastal parks that line the Maine and New Hampshire seacoast every week. Since moving I've observed several

storms and their effects on the coastal areas where I spend my time. Mostly I've noticed the destruction of the roads, the homes flooded, the damaged seawalls. I can remember a few different times over the past four years, following strong storms that often raged through during the winter months, when the coastal road that winds its way from Portsmouth to Salisbury, Massachusetts, Route 1A, would be closed altogether due to extensive damage. The roads, the outhouses, the steps leading to every beach, every tourist lookout point, were always quickly rebuilt. Covid-19 does not stop storms the way it halts our daily lives, and this past year there have been more big ones. Like always, the storms damaged the seacoast roads and infrastructure, and I found myself venturing to the beaches shortly afterwards, curious to see what remained and the damage that had been inflicted.

When I arrived at the beaches the absurdity of the damage to the parking lots, sea walls, the structures, left me in awe. I stopped at my favorite spot, Jenness Beach, a popular place for local surfers, only to find that the large square structure that housed the beach toilets and usually sat next to the parking lot had been washed out onto the beach, dilapidated and unrecognizable, stuck in the sand. The pavement of the parking lot appeared shattered, cracked, with chunks missing altogether, presumably washed away by the storm, just like the rest of the coastline as it too continually erodes.

That day on the beach photographers abounded. Cameras in hand they clamored up onto the jutting rocks to get better photos of the remaining towering waves, the dilapidated washed out toilets, and the shallow flooding that had overtaken the low-lying areas around the streets and homes. The wreckage and harsh conditions didn't deter the surfers either, who dove fearlessly into the depths of the remaining storminess of it

all. I trudged down the beach, taken by the entire scene, at peace there despite all of the destruction.

These storms will continue, and the coast will be re-built again and again, but there's an awareness that it's only temporary. And it's the roads that will be replaced, the homes, the ice cream shops - not the beaches themselves. Even what is built and patched will once again be destroyed, built and destroyed, in a cycle that will most likely end with a concession to the sea, almighty in its power to overtake us all. The love that people like myself have for the sea has already devastated the coastline due to overdevelopment, a need to be closer, and even closer, to the water. Our pursuit of its power and beauty is relentless.

But should we be trying to build and live so close to the sea at all? During my pandemic drives, I found myself repeatedly musing over that question. Maybe it's because of my awareness that Covid-19 is eroding our society, economy, our daily lives. The erosion that is happening on the beaches is not the same as the sudden, unexpected erasure of the daily life that I once knew as a result of Covid-19 though. Rather, this coastal erosion has been so gradual that most haven't even noticed it all. Even those who live life, love life, surrounded by beaches and the open sea, aren't stopping long enough to notice what is really going on. Business, long work days, and too many commitments, take over our days, and they blur together. We take our vacations, our day trips, enjoy the beauty of the sea, and leave. It's not until our lives halt altogether that we're forced to really stop, breathe, and see all of the changes and details often missed.

The coastal population is only increasing, even with the rising seas and beach erosion. I once watched a television show that profiled some of the most uniquely built homes around the world and why owners decided to build that type of a home in a particular location. One episode stood out: a husband and wife decided to build a unique glass house along a European coastline that was already significantly eroding, to the extent that they were advised by geologists, hydrologists, and building inspectors alike that it was not a safe or stable place to build. They were told that the land where they wanted to build their home would likely not exist twenty or thirty years down the line. The incredible beauty of the land and the sea drew them to the extent though that they were adamant about their decision to build in the face of the erosion. And not only did they build an expensive home, but they built one that was more akin to a work of art. Their response to all who advised against it: that art is often temporary. They didn't mind if their house was eventually taken by the sea. Perhaps their acceptance of the inevitable will have to be the mindset of more people down the line who choose to build and spend their lives so close to the sea in the face of rising sea levels. Or maybe that's too resigned a perspective.

In a world that is has been altered so much in the past year though, all due to unforeseen forces, an invisible virus that has transformed the landscape of our very lives, I've begun to realize the fragility in all the things, and the inevitable changes that will occur regardless of whether we're ready. Erosion happens even when we don't see it, or don't want to see it. When it's profound enough though it becomes visible to all, and that's when real change happens. The erosion of the life we knew before 2020 has oc-

curred because of Covid-19, and it's made a lot of people, myself included, slow down and take in the world, the change that is happening, or maybe isn't.

As nice as a hot summer day at the beach can be, my favorite times spent on coastal drives and beach walks often happen in the fall, winter, and early springtime. Throughout this pandemic, the sea has been my refuge; an escape from the monotony of neighborhood walks and the four walls of my apartment. Time slows down in the best way possible when I'm at the beach. I walk on the sandy shores, wind my way through the wooded paths and rocky coastlines that border the harbors, and explore the jutting cliffs. Searching for life, I find crabs and snails, determined to survive despite the lack of water and the threat of the seagulls that circle overhead.

The sea has kept me alive this year. It's filled me with the inspiration to keep writing, planning, to hope for better times ahead. Just as when I was a child, I stand at the foaming surf and raging waves and feel a sense of wonder and life. I also still feel the same fear though. When I stand at the water's edge I'm transported back to that day when I was four years old, my first visit to the sea, and even as an adult I feel small again. The waves always remind me that I am a mere speck on the shoreline, a tiny particle in a much larger, thriving world. There's a beauty to that sensation, to realizing my smallness on this planet, and I revel in that feeling.

I enjoy every season at the beach. My breath visible in the icy air, I step from the snowy parking lot and onto the sand, splotted with snow not yet washed away by the

waves. The white snow contrasts with the blue grey of the water, blending seasons together into one. When I take a walk on a rainy autumn day I enjoy the feel of the salty mist hitting my face, the quiet emptiness of the beach, with only the gulls and Piping Plovers there as company. It's peaceful and mighty all at once. The way the ocean changes colors, becomes grey-green with a storm, crashing waves deafeningly loud. On clear sunny days the blue of the sky and the water blend together. The muted, soft blue-grey that comes with fog and rain is my favorite though. The colors mix together, sea and earth and sky becoming art. Every time I drive to the beach I crest a hill in the road before the ocean comes into view, and I wait in anticipation; I never know what I'll see. The colors, the waves, the wildlife, it changes every day. Unlike the rest of my world at home during the pandemic, no two visits to the sea are ever the same. In his book *All the Light We Cannot See*, Anthony Doerr writes about the sea. He says, "It seems big enough to contain everything anyone could ever feel."

During one of the last warm fall evenings this past fall, I took a drive to my favorite beach, Jenness Beach, located not far from Portsmouth in the town of Rye, New Hampshire. It's a popular surfer's beach and I love to watch the way the surfers become one with the ocean, molding themselves into the curls of the waves, often crashing into the salty surf only to re-emerge and try again, not to be defeated. On this particular day I arrived and immediately took off my shoes, feeling the soft sand squish between my toes, and made my way down to the water.

Now past tourist season, the beach wasn't crowded. At low tide the wet sand stretched out wide and open, glistening in the light of the setting sun, and the atmosphere felt almost magical in the soft pink and orange tones of the sky. I felt that same sense of peace and wonder that I always feel near the sea, combined with a tinge of sadness when I thought about the fact that, like everything, this expanse is not permanent. For so many years leading up to this moment I had fallen into the trap of not noticing, of missing the unseen, of believing in a stability that doesn't exist. It doesn't exist on the beach and it doesn't exist in our day to day lives. During this global pandemic, society as a whole has perhaps lost that sense of stability more than at any other time. It's as if we're all standing on that sandy shore as it disappears beneath our very feet. That doesn't mean though that we can't try to slow it down, that we can't stop and regain our footing, that changes can't be made in order to slow the erosion of the beaches. None of it means we have to stop, that we should give up. And there's hope in that.

Standing on the beach in that moment I couldn't help but feel that hope and a sense of joy, and as I looked around I saw what appeared to be that same feeling on the faces of others as well. I love to watch the interactions of others as they experience the beach and the sea, the enchantment that is evident to all. It's the only place where I rarely see anyone on their phones, trapped inside of a screen as is so often the case.

As I made my way down the beach I watched as a couple laughed and smiled at one another before diving into the waves, hand in hand, carefree and fearless. Children dashed in and out of the waves, screaming when their toes would touch the icy cold water. It was an elderly man who caught my attention though. He stood in the shallow waves facing out to sea, unmoving, arms held slightly out from his sides. There's a feel-

ing of strength, a sense of power, of emotion, to standing in the face of something much larger and stronger than yourself. You really are just a speck. It's that same feeling I first experienced as a child on that cold deserted beach in Maine. In that moment, the magnificence of the sea puts the world into perspective. Although the earth may erode, our surroundings may change, and our days shift in the shapes they take, the sea persists, and there will always remain visible brilliance and beauty. I turn away from the man in the waves, continue on my walk, and I think about what Anthony Doerr wrote, and how maybe he's right, that the sea really does contain all that we could ever feel.