Summer 2002

SALT, Summer 2002

Salt Institute for Documentary Studies

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Salt

Summer 2002

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Kyle Glover was in his senior year at the University of Chicago when he decided to take a semester at Salt. An anthropology major and a native of Louisiana, Kyle plans on combining his love of photography with his interest in other cultures after he graduates.

Andres Gonzalez hails from California and is a graduate of Pomona College with a degree in creative writing and English. He came to Salt to explore his other passion, photography. It paid off: this fall Andres heads off to Ohio University to obtain his masters degree in Visual Communications.

Lisa Gotwals earned a BA in Anthropology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Since graduating from Salt, she has been completing her certificate in documentary studies at Duke.

Joanna Johnson is a graduate of Appalachian State University with a degree in sociology. After Salt, she moved back to North Carolina where she is teaching photography and working on independent photo projects.

Krista Mahr is spending the summer in Reykjavik, Iceland studying Icelandic. Krista holds a BA in Creative Writing from the University of California, Santa Cruz.

New Hampshire native Sean McGann had been living in New Mexico working in fine art photography when he decided to return to New England to explore documentary photography. Since Salt, Sean has had an exhibit of his work and is spending the summer travelling through Eastern Europe with his Salt partner, Adrienne Schatz.

Jessi Misslin took a semester away from the Minneapolis College of Art and Design to study writing at Salt. Jessi is spending the summer of 2002 in Portland fulfilling graduation requirements at the Casco Bay Weekly newspaper. She will also be a part of DoubleTake Magazine’s Adventure Academy (at the end of summer 2002) that takes high school students interested in documentary photography and writing on a 5-week trek through Washington State, serving as a writing mentor and peer guide for the students.

Adrienne Schatz is a graduate of Colorado College with a degree in creative writing. After Salt, she remained in Portland preparing for her summer 2002 documentary project (with Salt partner Sean McGann) in Eastern Europe.

Lorienne Schulze took a semester away from Warren Wilson College to hone her photographic skills at Salt. After Salt, Lorienne decided to stay in Maine and finish her bachelor’s degree as a photography major at the University of Southern Maine.

Sally Schumaier held her degree in journalism from the University of Iowa when she realized she wanted to spend an intensive semester focusing on nonfiction writing. Sally is the winner of Yankee magazine’s New Voices award for her story, Welcome at Shaws. She is moving to New Mexico to work for Outside magazine.
It has often been observed that Salt, now in its 30th year, is very much a work in progress. This year, for example, we have expanded the semester program from 13 weeks to 15 and have had our largest enrollment ever. We have added Radio as a program track. We opened our newly-renovated gallery, where six exhibits will be mounted in 2002.

This magazine, too, is a work in progress. This issue is 12 pages longer than its predecessor, and contains six student works—all from the 2001 fall semester—instead of last issue’s five. The four collaborative pieces were selected by a faculty-staff panel from a field of 16 candidates. Two photo essays were chosen from among two dozen. All of Salt’s teachers and staff members participated in the selection process.

The process was informed by several thoughtful and thought-provoking conversations about the nature and purpose of the magazine. Those conversations continue even as this issue goes to press. Here are some of the questions and observations currently on the table.

What is the Salt style?
Is the magazine mission-driven or market-driven?
Should we accept advertising?
Should we include more information about the Salt Institute?
Should we produce curriculum guides to the magazine for use in Maine secondary schools?
Salt is a showcase, a gallery between covers—not serving a market need, no targeted audience.

Examples of the Salt style are to be found throughout the next 70-plus pages: clear, honest writing; unposed photographs of a particular moment. A review of magazines published since 1990 suggests strongly that this publication is wholly mission-driven—that it is, in fact, a showcase—and that its intended audience is anyone interested in reading about the lives of Maine people. Anecdotal evidence indicates that many copies of the magazine are read by several people. 2000 copies are printed, but there is no way to know with certainty how many readers Salt has.

If you have gotten this far, it’s likely that you are one of them. In this issue you will find Cambodian Buddhists, people living with AIDS, and the 13 residents of Chesuncook Village—prime examples of the diversity Salt records and celebrates. Look for more examples on our web site (www.salt.edu).

If you have thoughts on how the magazine can be improved, please share them with us. If you like it, or if you don’t like it, please tell us so, and tell us why. We think Salt is a good magazine, and we know there is room for improvement. We’d be glad to hear from you.
How to Peel a Persimmon

A persimmon is a squat orange fruit with a dry and curling green top. It sits in your hand with a satisfying weight, feeling cool and round on a sweaty palm. Its reddish skin is firmer than that of a tomato, the fruit is all around softer than an apple, and it is sweeter than either. If you aren’t accustomed to eating persimmons, it isn’t immediately clear how to get inside.

In the sixth night after Soun Prak’s death, a woman lies down next to me to sleep on the thick, fuzzy throw blanket doubled up on the floor. The seven-day ceremony for this elder of Portland’s Cambodian community will be over tomorrow. Family members look drained. Soun Prak’s widow, Lay Long, moves about her living room more slowly than she did last night, in the white clothing and the newly shaved head of a mourning wife.

Before the prayers start, Pirun Sen, the president of Maine’s only Cambodian Buddhist temple, hands me a thin book, its pages probably once white, but now yellowed with a few grease stains on the front. It is called Aspects of Buddhism, printed in 1976. “Be careful. It’s my only copy,” he nods as he passes it off to me. Pirun Sen is meticulous; it would not surprise me if he had kept the book with him these 25 years. He tells me to look up the Four Noble Truths to explain what this—he gestures to the decorated room, the monk, the altar to the Buddha, families, babies, death—is all about. These are the guidelines of existence by which the Buddha attained enlightenment, the four essential truths from which all else in Buddhism is derived.

1. this is suffering or unsatisfactoriness
2. this is the arising of suffering
3. this is the cessation of suffering
4. this is the path leading to the cessation of suffering

The monk has been driven to this apartment from the temple across town every night this week, to pray with the family of Soun Prak. Prak was a Buddhist priest. In Cambodia, he performed a particular funeral ceremony in which a body is unearthed after three months, the flesh scraped, and the bones cremated. Pirun balks at the thought of attempting this ceremony under American law, but once, when the temple’s former treasurer passed on, a body was unearthed after four years at Portland’s Evergreen Cemetery, viewed, and then cremated.

I sit on the mats after the prayers, flipping through the book. A man named Tong sits next to me. He offers to help explain things. Tong appears to be in his mid-thirties. He wears office clothes and a pair of round, wire-rimmed glasses. He works at a shrimp processing plant and immediately expresses his guilt about that, because there’s “a lot of life there,” and so he’s breaking the first Buddhist law, not to kill. “For survival,” he shrugs. Tong is a worker, father, and husband, a student of Buddhism. He is a Buddhist “guide.” Next week, when we meet at the temple, he’ll say that a lot
of people take the first fundamental teaching of Buddhism, that “life is suffering,” and mistakenly perceive it as pessimistic. “I mean, who hasn’t had a suffering life?” Tong reflects. “In American ways,” he observes, “Oooh, life is wonderful. You want to be upbeat. But if you...use this as a base, then you can find the light.”

Twenty years after arriving in Portland, Maine, Pirun Sen rests his slim frame on his dress sock heels in the temple he has helped build. It has not always been easy. “We want to do the same thing as in Cambodia, but it’s not going to work.” Pirun shakes his head, eyebrows raised. This is not, after all, Cambodia. This is Maine.

In 1981, 17 Cambodian families landed in the auditorium of Portland’s Chestnut Street Church. They had been living in refugee camps on the Thai side of the Thai-Cambodian border after escaping their country. Pirun was among them. If he had known how cold Maine was, or what it looked like, he says that he would not have chosen it. If he had had the choice to move to a warmer state like California, he’d have gone there. But, Pirun will remind you, “There is no choice in Thailand. You get here first.”

In 1985, as Portland’s Cambodian population grew, four men, including Pirun, put together enough money to rent a two-bedroom apartment. They invited a Cambodian Buddhist monk to live in it and called the new religious space Wat Samaki, which roughly translates into English as “Temple Teamwork.”

Tong says that the Buddhist spirit cannot be held down. “When the communists come in Cambodia, the first thing they do was destroy religion, so they destroy the temple...they destroy completely. They have war, and Cambodians run away from the communists, go to other country, and some come to the United States. So when people start to build life, they raise money, they send back to the temple. Now they build more temple than before. You can take people away from their culture, but cannot take the culture away from the people.”

Where the high brick and jagged cobblestone streets of Portland’s city center give way to the sprawl of its suburbs, where short roads of old trees reach wiry black fingers toward a colorless sky, you will find this temple in its new location. It’s easy to overlook the recessed clapboard house that is the color of sand, squatting at the bottom of a short, pitted dirt driveway: 55 Dedham Street. Wat Samaki. Look up from the driveway, and if the monk is home, he will open the upstairs door to see who’s arrived.

Two plastic plum trees in full pink bloom flank the stairs leading onto a deserted deck, their plastic trunks wedged between weathered planks. A tall wooden pole is planted in the hard dirt in front of the house, and at its very top is a metal triangle where a Cambodian flag used to hang. The words “CARPENTER RORN” are scratched into the cement foundation of the deck, and then a word or two—the same, perhaps—written in the curves of Cambodian script just after.

The house is at the edge of a new neighborhood of boxy white homes stranded in groomed stretches of bright lawn. If it is Wednesday, the couples who live in the subdivision are at work. If it is Saturday, they are inside, relaxing. If anybody’s inside Wat Samaki, they are probably relaxing too, or studying, cooking, sipping hot tea, watching TV, helping children put their shoes on, asking, praying, or brushing their teeth.

Enter Wat Samaki by climbing the narrow stairs beside the deck. Shoes off. The fulcrum of the temple is behind this door: the altar and a low platform, 3x5 feet, where two red satin pillows form a seat for the monk. He keeps his glasses unfolded on a stack of Portland Press Heralds. His reading lamp has no shade, so he has folded a glossy ad page from one of the papers into a cone and stuck it over the bare bulb. Today, there’s a liter of Mountain Dew and an open box of Little Debbie’s Apple Flips on the platform. On a makeshift table rest three bottles of drugstore perfume, toothpicks, incense, a pink Bic lighter, and a candle wedged into an iron Buddha. Any of this might be gone tomorrow, but there will always be a tea service set up: an overturned cup on a folded paper towel, on a plate, next to a red aluminum thermos with painted flaking flowers.

The phone rings sharply in the monk’s bedroom, muffled through the walls, and his voice fills the empty altar room. The cordless phone beeps once as he hangs up. Wait by the altar for him, counting Buddha statues and listening to the wind rattle windows loose in their frames; he may or may not emerge.

When the resident monk at Wat Samaki walks downstairs, he holds his robes to his lap with both hands, looking down in front of him. They are bright orange, shiny spun silk that falls iridescent in its airy folds. When a follower visits, or he is performing a ceremony, his natural smile falls and he closes his eyes to chant, face still, keeping his rhythm by tapping one forefinger against his hand. Visitors call the monk “Dac-gun,” which means “child.” The monk
The Venerable Enda Choti Ranko

in turn them calls them “Nyom,” or “parent.” When a monk leaves his family, he becomes the child of the people he serves. He is wholly supported by them.

Tong explains the relationship. “Even if you give him poison, he have to accept it. You’re responsible for your own action. That’s why usually you give something good to the monk, because it blesses. You get it back.” “He don’t give up choice. That’s his choice,” Tong explains. “It’s a freedom.”

He is, depending on who you talk to, the ninth or tenth monk to live there, and has now lived in the tiny room in back of the altar for two years. He is 5’5, maybe less. In Cambodia, he is still regarded as the highest ranking monk at his temple of 70 young monks who had come to study under him. He’s only been back once since leaving. Ask what his name is and he says, “Next time, next time.”

As fall progresses, the monk has stopped nervously stretching his hand behind him to check the heating vents and started wearing socks and a long-sleeve orange sweatshirt underneath his robes. Usually, though, he’s barefoot, flexing his toes unconsciously as he sits cross-legged on the platform, six feet removed from anybody in the room, sitting alone.

Tong explains why Wat Samaki is important to Cambodians living in Maine. “This is just like a little branch of Buddhism. We not really big here, but for a community of 1500 Cambodians, this is the place that we all come to worship. We come to interchange what happened. In Cambodia, you don’t see many homeless. But there is homeless Cambodian. The purpose of temple is to give them a second chance. Sometime, these people stay here temporarily so they can find work. That’s why we need the temple.”

Three people are living at Wat Samaki this Halloween night. Sittey (pronounced si-TEE) Mok chops pork for dinner in the downstairs kitchen. Phoc (pronounced po) Sen
lingers in the cramped room. The two men live and volun-
teer their time here, preparing tea for the monk, taking out
the trash, and driving him on visits and errands. Sittey says
that in a Cambodian village, a monk walks around in the
morning carrying a large bowl. People put food in it as he
passes. Here, Sittey or Phoc cooks for him, or members of
the temple bring food from home. When it’s snowing, and
nobody ventures out to the house, the monk makes himself
lunch or tea.

Sittey sleeps downstairs in a square room of boxes and
clothes. He stays here during the week and at his Portland
apartment with his wife and four-year-old son on week-
ends. He stays at the temple because there’s nobody else to
assist the monk. His thick, black hair is wild. Tonight, he
missed going trick-or-treating with his son, and he laughs
that this makes him “want to cry.” He won’t be here long.
He hurries back and forth around the room in sweatpants
and bare feet.

Phoc can’t afford Portland rent. He lives throughout
the temple, watching home improvement shows in the
upstairs altar room, chopping chicken on the kitchen floor,
puttering in the driveway. He sleeps by the big new televi-
sion on the rugs of the altar room, and folds his bed up
every morning into a thoughtful stack of blankets. At 30,
Phoc calls himself “an old man.” He has round, brown
eyes, thinning, wispy black hair, and restless mannerisms.
He likes to wear a blue mesh soccer shirt that says
Kampuchea Krom in white block letters across its back.

Even in broad sunshine, this tiny kitchen is dark. Its
windows are covered with brown, flowered wallpaper peel-
ing in corners with rectangular slits cuts out at eye level.
Household supplies and cooking ingredients cover the
kitchen table—a roll of toilet paper, a fire extinguisher, a
browning pomegranate, a Fleet Bank mug, a socket wrench,
Coffee Mate.

Tonight the monk is up in his room, “relaxing or
sleeping,” according to Phoc. During the day, sometimes he
and the monk watch the large television in the altar room
together. “If he talk, I listen,” says Phoc. “But I don’t know
how to talk to him back. Just talk a little bit,” he shrugs.
Phoc is Cambodian, but from southern Vietnam.
Vietnamese is his first language, Cambodian his second,
English his third.

Sittey stands at the table and chops the meat quickly
with a large knife. Fine cubes break off the pink fist of
pork. He learned to cook from his wife, but since he’s
older than she, he speculates that he might be better. When
asked, he says he’s “thirty-six. Thirty-five, thirty-six,” and
laughs. Sittey’s wife is a Tiger on the Chinese astrological
calendar. He says she is “twenty-five, something like that.”
“Angry. Mean.” Phoc knows his astrology. He is a Rat.
Quiet. “I talk little. Some people they talk a lot. Some peo-
ple not talk a lot.” Phoc wants to learn English perfectly.
He gets frustrated with himself because he “can’t talk about
Buddhism. Can’t talk about war.” He deflects compliments.
“Stupid is stupid,” Phoc says.

He was working at a sea urchin processing plant in

*Wat Samaki, Cambodian Buddhist Temple, Portland.*
Portland, but the season’s slow and he’s out of work. He gets bored sitting around the temple all day. “Just sit there and nothing to do,” Phoc explains impatiently. “Just relax, lie down. It’s boring. You gotta do something.” He’s moved around since he’s been in the United States so he doesn’t know many people in Portland. “And I don’t have no girlfriend. I’m so lonely.” Phoc claps his forearms at his back and cracks his toe knuckles on the floor, looking down. He moves to look over his friend’s shoulders, speculating that Sittey—born in 1967—is either a Goat or a Horse.

“A horse run fast,” Phoc says, acting out a gallop with his arms. Sittey ignores him. “He always run. And tired, too. The horse work hard.” He pauses. “That’s what the books say. It’s true or not, I don’t know. You think so?”

Sittey does work hard. He assembles computer parts for a company in Scarborough. He likes his job because he doesn’t have to worry about explaining things in English; he can demonstrate what to do with his fine hands. He also worked at a sea urchin processing plant before this job, and at an electronics company in Canada before he immigrated.
The flames of three stubby candles on the altar reach their liquid points toward the ceiling.
to the United States. If he had it his way, he'd be back in Cambodia on his family farm.

Sittey finishes chopping and hands the pork over to Tai, who has wandered out of the bedroom to help cook. He’s also staying in the temple while trying to find work in Portland.

Tai has just lost his restaurant in Florida. Another afternoon, as he stands on the upstairs porch smoking a Marlboro from a pack that the monk gave him, he mourns that he's lost everything. Now he sleeps in the room with Sittey, where thin green fabric hangs in the center to separate their spaces carved from all the men's scattered clothing. As Tai cooks, he moves four pots around and watches at the stove, mouth half-open, half-smiling.

A knock at the door, and trick-or-treaters appear, holding out their bags. Nobody has remembered to get any candy.

"I have something," Sittey says, leaving his chopping station. "Quarters," he announces when he emerges from his room, and he plunks them into the kids' bags. They thank him. Money's good. "It's bad to have no candy," he laughs after closing the door. He adds a pile of crumpled dollars and coins to the table for the next kids, and puts his shoes on to go home and see what kind of candy his son got.

It is the night before one of the temple’s annual celebrations at the Chestnut Street Church in Portland. Sittey writes the name down for me in rounded capital letters, kinankan. It's like a fundraiser for the temple, but participants are not expected to give anything. But the Board hopes. The temple could be better if they had more money.

Pirun Sen has just walked in wearing his purple windbreaker, heeling off his shoes at the altar room door. The smell of incense infuses the patchwork rugs that cover the blue industrial carpet. Phoc and Tai sit sleepily to the side while Sittey, Pirun, and the monk work out the logistics of the next day. If 15 people show up the next day, Wat Samaki's celebration will be too large to be held at the house.

Sittey scoots from his place against the wall and has me write down the five things that Buddhists must follow “to be good people.” He lists them off on his fingers, and watches carefully as I record them: not to kill, not to tell a lie, no drinking, happiness between husband and wife and—he gets stuck on the fifth, puts his head down in concentration, and taps the index finger of his right hand to the pinky of his left. He mutters the rules to himself. Ah. “Not to take things that don’t belong to you.”

When Pirun starts to explain things in English, the monk leans against the wall and tosses a tube of rolled-up paper in the air, glancing at the conversations going on around him. The next morning’s celebration will provide him with new robes from Thailand in their plastic shrink wrap, spending money, and whatever he needs on a daily basis.

The next morning while it's still dark, volunteers pack all the floor mats, trays, and wall decorations from Wat Samaki into their cars, transporting their temple to the same echoey, wood-floored auditorium of the Chestnut Street Church where Pirun Sen first arrived in 1981. A makeshift altar to the Buddha is put together in the chilly room. The thirty or so members who attend sit scattered around, having brought money and red-cellophane wrapped gift baskets of donations. Candles are lit, balanced on plastic liter bottles of Pepsi and Mountain Dew. Normally, members of the temple would parade around the building with all the donations before the celebration started. This year, Pirun explains, there was no time to go to the police and get a permit, and he felt that after the terrorist attacks of September 11, he didn’t want to make anybody “uncomfortable.”

During the ceremony, Wat Samaki’s monk sits in front of the crowd, his robes catching the fluorescent lights. He makes speeches that are punctuated by feedback of the microphone and directed toward the side of the room where the men congregate. Pirun and Sittey sit here, listening. The older kids play basketball on the auditorium’s indoor court, and when somebody yelps or a sneaker screeches on the waxy floor, nobody shushes. Smaller children run between clusters of grown ups during the prayers.
and the meal on the floor that people create circles around. Temple members dish out rice, fish, meat, vegetables, and persimmons onto paper plates. Phoc sits alone on the periphery of the crowd in a tucked dress shirt and belted pants. When Sittey's boy crashes into Phoc's lap, flailing around, Phoc places his hand protectively over the child's head so he doesn't hit it on the floor.

At the end of the day, there is $1000 to go into the temple's savings. In a year, another ktinnakten will raise more. I ask Sittey how the monk will use the money given to him.

"Just donation," he replies, cocking his head at me. "Maybe he need to phone to other monk at temple in Cambodia."

Wat Samaki was not supposed to end up in suburbia. Portland's Congress Street eventually winds past the Maine Mall and International Jetport, giving way to reaching green fields of dairy farms and white churches whose rusted tin bean supper sign hinges squeak in the wind that rolls down this road. It ambles into the town of Buxton, Maine, where Wat Samaki should have been, but is not. In 1989, the temple wanted to move from its 2-bedroom apartment onto a larger property. The temple considered buying a plot of land in Buxton, but bowed out of the process when the neighborhood protested. Pirun says that if "The Buxton Affair," as it was referred to in the press at the time, hadn't happened, "we would not be here." He throws his arms out to the walls of the altar room and means here, in a little house, in a subdivision. If they had
been able to relocate to Buxton, Wat Samaki, he says, "would be better." There would be more "sleeping quarters and more land."

Pirun knew at the time that the people in town might not be familiar with Buddhist temples, so he spoke with pastors in Buxton about the temple and his religion, assuming that they would in turn pass this information along to their congregations. This never happened.

Carl Estes, a Buxton berry farmer who served on the Planning Board at the time, speculates that while there were logistical concerns with the purchase, and nobody could see how the Cambodians would ever make a chicken barn liveable, "People in the neighborhood were uneasy. They didn't know what to expect from the group, really. They didn't know what to expect."

On Buxton's Simpson Road, a large corner of old farmland is skirted by young, golden forest. The lot harbors a looming metal barn that sits right up on the road. Wat Samaki, Inc., planned to purchase this land. On their application to the Buxton Planning Board, they proposed to use this property for:

1. A residence for monk and two assistants
2. Daily religious study and meditation by monk and assistants
3. Occasional teaching of Buddhist doctrine and traditional Khmer culture and language
4. Annual observances of special spiritual occasions

By the time the Buxton Town Council met to discuss the matter, TV and news reporters were there to watch. The following appeared in the Portland Press Herald:

"About 65 residents, far outnumbering the half dozen or so Cambodians present, jammed into the Town Hall for the hearing, prompting the fire chief to move the crowd to more spacious quarters in the Frank Jewett School cafeteria next door.

And, citing 'unanticipated disruptive effects' on their neighborhood, a group of about 60 residents of the Simpson Road area turned in a petition urging the denial of the Cambodians' application."

Wat Samaki, Inc., withdrew its application within the month.

In 1991, after the 55 Dedham St. building was purchased and the temple's application to the town of Buxton dropped, an engineer from the Buxton area volunteered to try to help Wat Samaki level the ground around its new house so the surrounding land could be used for celebrations as they had intended. "He felt bad for us," Pirun remembers. As it turned out, this project would have been far too expensive. Within five years the subdivision that surrounds the temple was built, so the land was gone. The cars could not be parked, the children could not run around when it was warm, the people couldn't walk in procession, nor could they come together in this space to talk, eat or sleep as Wat Samaki had intended.

They wanted to do the same thing as in Cambodia, but this is not Cambodia. This is Maine.
Sittey and Tái, the chef, are lounging around the altar room when I arrive. As I take my shoes off, the monk gets up and disappears into his room. "Shower," Sittey explains. The monk's visiting a family tonight. Maybe, Sittey offers, I'll get to speak with him before his ride gets here. The monk leaves the house from another door; I don't. We sit on the rugs anyway. "Farm. I'd like to be a farmer," Sittey suddenly offers. He laughs. He says he doesn't have enough money to be one. "In Cambodia, I have big farm. I feed animal...so my mind is only farm. It's nice and calm."

He runs downstairs to get a video of it. The snow on the big television snaps to an image of an old couple—his mother and father—sitting in the near dark. The woman's chin and cheekbones are lit from beneath, and the sound of night cicadas pulses from the screen. Sittey translates. She's talking to him. Now that they have a camcorder, they can show Sittey the farm that he sent money home to buy.

Sittey sits cross-legged, slouches his shoulders over his lap, remote in hand. He intermittently fast-forwards through panning shots of Cambodian horizons of banana trees, low, dark mountains, and dull, hot blue skies. "It's just to show the farm, that's all." He stops whenever a person comes into the frame.

In eight more years, the young fruit trees—oranges, persimmons, mangoes, jackfruit—will be tall and bring money. Right now, the plants are small but the land is big: it takes five hours to walk across it. Sittey wants to save more money to buy the farm a tractor—about another $10,000. This comes up as they crank start the one piece of machinery that his family has. "See how they start it. There's no starter. It's so funny. There's just one of them. They have a hard time to make a farm because no machinery. They have to do by hand."

Somebody on the video is laughing, somebody is yelling to somebody else across the field. They are working in baggy t-shirts, jeans, skirts, long-sleeve cotton shirts, and straw hats. A long, dry rice plant swishes. Sittey's brother describes the land to him. He says something and Sittey laughs about it and doesn't translate. Here is a rice field we just planted. Here is a banana grove that we'll cut down in a few years. Banana trees are a waste of space. You can't sell them because everybody has them, and they make too much shade. You can't grow other crops around them.

"They work hard," he says. "They're so heavy!" he translates. "I'm tired!" they're saying. A couple of women throw bundles of rice onto a high wooden platform.

Sittey wants to go back. "When there's no war...I have a lot of fun with my family. Work together, and enjoy. It's just like heaven, you know." He turns his eyes upward and lifts two palms, letting them drop back down to his lap. "When one of my brother there, and here, and my mom there, it just like my mind is crazy. Miss them too much. When together, it's good. Feels good. It just like in heaven."

Sittey laughs at the ground and turns back to the video. "See? How they work by machine."

He points to images on the screen, nearly touching it. Sittey has smooth, bulky forearms and narrow hands with fingernails grown long. Their delicateness emphasizes the space between his fingertip and the screen. His finger lingers over the figure of his mother talking to him through the camera, her one elbow leaning on a rake, explaining how she's feeling better and that she felt like working today. It looks like if he could reach through the screen, it would give way to his touch, allowing just the one finger to get a feel for the hot day, and maybe he could hear the tractor moving over the land somewhere at the other end of his farm.

Tong states what isn't necessarily the obvious: "When people come to see a monk, he should be able to answer any question that we have. No limit. But you have to ask to get it. They won't tell you. You have to ask what you want to hear."

Tonight, Tong sits beside the monk as an interpreter. The flames of the three stubby candles on the altar reach their liquid points toward the ceiling. He has taken a few hours off from his night shift at the shrimp plant to help. Tong says he can translate because he "sees the gaps" between the worlds and three languages—English, Cambodian, and Pali, the language of Theravada Buddhism—being exchanged. Sitting with his feet to the right, with windblown hair and rolled-up shirtsleeves, Tong
looks through his glasses while the monk talks, nodding emphatically. “Ki-dai,” he says, voicing his understanding of the point being made. “Ki-dai. Ki-dai.”

The monk leans against the wall with his hands in his lap, eyes shifting back and forth between his audience and his translator. He smiles slightly and speaks. First and foremost, the monk says that he's here to teach people “to do the right thing—to respect the social and spiritual laws of Buddhism.”

One of the temple's annual celebrations at the Chestnut Street Church in Portland.

It’s clear that he shaves his head (conduct), as sometimes it is clean-shaven and other times not, but it’s less obvious that he shaves his eyebrows (conduct). He doesn’t use any products that are scented and affect the senses of other people (conduct), because, he explains through Tong, “scents are artificial things that only give temporary pleasure.” He does, however, keep perfume to scent the water he blesses (conduct). When people take the water home, a good smell stays with them, and they’re reminded of the luck he has given them.

Two hundred and twenty-seven conducts delineate the details of the monk’s daily life. He sleeps on a hard surface so that he doesn’t get comfortable and forget his purpose. He doesn’t look around when he walks; only three feet ahead. He doesn’t touch other people, and other people don’t touch him. He doesn’t say whatever comes to mind. As he lists the basic rules, he gets stuck, and goes back through them in his head, counting them off on his fingers. He remembers another—he doesn’t waste time.”

The conversation is interrupted as the phone rings by the monk’s knee. He picks up briskly. “Hello?” Pause. “Tee?”

The call is for Sittey, or Tee, as everyone calls him. The monk pulls the phone an inch away from his ear. “Tee!” he shouts. He thinks Sittey is downstairs in the kitchen. “Tee!” Sittey’s gone. The monk takes the message and continues.

He’s been a monk since 1964, when he was 16. In 37 years, he has never left the monkhood, even during the war in Cambodia in the '70s, when he fled to a temple in southern Vietnam, also known as Kampuchea Krom.
Two hundred twenty seven conducts delineate the details of the monk’s daily life.

Tong editorializes. “Never.” He pauses. “Wow. That’s a long time. Why he enjoy doing that? Most people find that Buddhist is really...,” he searches for the word, “satisfaction. Some Cambodian become all their life.”

The monk watches while Tong speculates about him. When he first came to the United States, the monk lived at temples in California, and then in Minnesota.

“Generally, in California, the weather somehow like Cambodia,” Tong interprets. “It’s hot. Cambodian over there is more active than here because it’s hard weather. So, here, most of the people are working, are cold, they’re not spend much time outside.” Tong, laughs and adds, “It’s really quiet here.”

So quiet, in fact, that Wat Samaki is the only temple where the monk has been without peers. Even in Minnesota, he lived with four other monks. He says that people think he must be lonely by himself at Wat Samaki. But while many people enjoy the freedoms of life, he enjoys his solitude to study the word of the Buddha, because he “finds peace in it.” Tong adds, “They need to find the truth, you know. To find yourself. To be lonely is not bad.”

In less than an hour, I learn that the governing principle of Buddhist conduct is the aspired accumulation of good “credit” in their many lives—bonh—that is “earned spiritually in your conducts.” A person with a lot of bonh is protected from others’ baph, or negative actions. Unlike karma, which can be positive or negative, bonh can only be good; it is like an invisible shield. The Buddha had so much bonh, mosquitoes didn’t even try to bite him.

The monk doesn’t want me to think that he wasn’t interested in talking, but that he has been anxious about not being able to speak English. He is “more than happy to share the Cambodian culture, Cambodian custom, and Buddhism, the law of the Buddhism, but it’s hard because he doesn’t speak the language.”

A hum develops in the space between us. Tong says that when Cambodians visit the monk, they bow three times to him. “It’s like opening a book to read.” When leaving, bow three times again to close it.

I bow three times, and the monk asks Tong to translate one last thing before we leave each other.

“He says that all the monks in Buddhism are like raindrops.” If you think of Buddhism like a rainstorm, Tong explains, the number of people that have been touched by it since its beginning are each part of that storm; every monk and every follower is a raindrop in the storm. I’m trying to picture all the people across the world as part of some countless number. The monk continues, and Tong
adds, “And you, too. He says you’re raindrops, too.”

This time, it doesn’t occur to me to ask what his name is. Later, I visit Pirun Sen’s cluttered office at the Portland Public Schools Multicultural Center. He has a new bumper sticker on his door, “No one is free when others are oppressed.” Pirun originally told me to call the monk Dac-gun, but today he phones the monk at the temple and has him spell out his given Buddhist name over the phone: the Venerable Enda Choti Panho.

Back at the beginning: on the sixth night after Soun Prak’s death, a woman next to me lies down to sleep on the thick, fuzzy throw blanket doubled up on the floor. The seven-day ceremony will be over tomorrow. Family members are drained, and the widow Lay Long moves about her living room with less energy than she did last night, wearing the white lace shawl and newly shaved head of a mourning wife.

Last night, the fifth night, the room felt bright, and vibrant, and people sat on the floor and passed trays of tea and soda back and forth, divvying Dunkin Donuts coffee up into smaller cups. When the Ven. Enda Choti Panho started the prayers, the kitchen was still full of the voices of the older children yelling. The phone rang and Lay Long answered it, “Hello? Hello?” She stepped easily over the bowed backs.

Soun Prak had requested that he be cremated. Family left the house in the afternoon to view his casket at a parlor on this windy late fall day that whipped leaves around the parking lot as it filled with cars. The funeral processed to Evergreen Cemetery, where the crowd pressed tightly into the cavernous, cement crematory with its imposing, shiny machinery. Members of the party placed thin bundles of flowers, incense, and candles on Prak’s chest. Workers closed the casket with white gloves, and slid it into the steel hole.

After the services, the room feels different. Lay Long brings out a tray of rice noodles, curry soup, Thai basil, and strips of banana leaves. The thirty or so people present seem warm, full, and empty. The Ven. Enda Choti Panho chants on a microphone, and all the knees are shifting left and right, moving weight over right hip and left hip. He flicks a wooden brush and flecks of water dot the backs of deeply bowed bodies. Some people hold their hands to their foreheads, their chins, or their chests, as they fall into rhythmic prayers. Some rest their forehead heavily on their hands, laying their exhaustion in front of the monk, who takes it dispassionately, and offers back familiar words and sounds. Tong's 4-month-old baby, Sally, scans the room from the circle of her mom’s arms, whose palms are pressed together in prayer. Tong’s wife checks on her, and smiling to herself, presses Sally’s hands together between hers.

Pairs of little shoes are tipped on their sides and turned upside down on the temple’s upstairs deck. A large family is visiting Portland from New York.

The Venerable Enda Choti Panho sits next to the altar with full plastic shopping bags that the family has given him at his side. Whenever things die down, he opens one of them and rifles through what’s inside. He extracts a bottle of coconut drink and calls an older boy over to take it. He pulls out three persimmons and tells the boy to give them to me. I’m also handed a plate and a wooden-handled knife whose sharp, shiny blade bears the tiny inconsistencies of hand-sharpening.

The family turns to watch, the first fruit in my left hand, the knife in my right. I start to chip off irregular bits from the skin. I can hear the monk talking, talking, and the little boy in jeans and a t-shirt comes back over. “He’s showing you. Do it like that.”

The monk holds a persimmon in his hand and peels it smoothly, starting from the top, away from the hand that holds the fruit. A long curl of red skin falls over the back of his hand, and when it drops, he cuts the fruit in half and makes two even nicks to remove its core. He hands the two pieces off.

I get through the three on my plate in the same way, cut them into fourths, and move the plate to the center of the room. He tells me to eat them. The pinkish-orange wedges dwindle, and he hands the boy another three for me to peel. When the family gets up to leave, I’m left sitting with a full plate of sweet fruit.
Unmasked

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOANNA JOHNSON

Unmasked: Facing Trans Identity in Portland, Maine

"Drag queens and dresses and daddies in leather
Rope burns from tied up and tickled with feathers
Tender young chickens all tied up in string
These are a few of my favorite things

When your eyes stick and your wig falls
And you’re feeling sad
Just simply remember my favorite things
And then you won’t do... BAD DRAG!"

Lyrics by Polly Yourathane

Backstage at the University of Southern Maine's Royal Drag Show, a transformation is underway. A final touch on the slender arch of an eyebrow is carefully drawn in, a last check is made on a private tuck, hip pads and latex breasts are adjusted, and nerves are jittering in everyone's belly.

Polly Yourathane is the character creation of Kevin Head, and it's the name she wants to be called. It's "her" and "she" even when Polly looks more like a Kevin, wearing grey sweatpants with no shirt, and a five o'clock shadow. But Braden Chapman, Polly's roommate and last year's...
Polly Yourathane getting ready for a drag show at the Underground.
USM Drag Queen winner, is always “he.” Pronouns are a tricky thing for transgendered people.

Dressing in drag is not a usual thing for Braden. It’s performance; it’s why he’s a theater major. But it’s also part of his identity. “Doing drag helped me to discover my gender identity and my identity helped shape how I do drag,” Braden says. Changing his biological sex or taking hormones are not things Braden is interested in right now. He’s comfortable with a fluid gender expression, what he calls “gender queer.”

Every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday Polly changes out of the sweatpants into a clingy, shimmering gown, spends about an hour caking on foundation and harsh streaks of blush, and heads out to karaoke at Somewhere or to the Underground for drinks. She hopes that one day she’ll have sex-reassignment surgery and then maybe it will be easier for the world to call her Polly.

Moving Day. Braden left his dorm room to take an upstairs bedroom in Polly’s house. According to Braden, housing is the biggest issue facing trans students at USM.
It takes Polly about an hour to do her face and hair before a show.

Bearden’s “Hedwig” tattoo.
Braden performing at the 2001 Annual Royal Drag Show.
Welcome at Shaw’s

STORY BY SALLY SCHUMAIER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY LORIENNE SCHULZE

White blazes on the bark of tree trunks mark a footpath that begins in Georgia and ends in Maine. Each year, three to four million people come from across the country and the world just to walk all or some of its 2,167 miles. It’s called the Appalachian Trail (AT). It weaves and meanders up the Appalachian Mountain Range, connecting towns and terrain, land and lives. In Maine, in a 700-person-town called Monson, the trail intersects a road called Pleasant Street where a white two-story boarding home stands with a wooden cut-out of a hiker in the front yard, and a sign above it that reads “Welcome at Shaw’s.”
“Do you ever have the house to yourselves?” “Not too often.”
On the front step in the waning of a November afternoon, Mr. Shaw sits quietly as a surprisingly warm sun retires into the horizon. His arms rest on the knees of his blue Dickies as he warms himself in light that feels as if it must be left over from summer. He stares out across the beaten pavement of Pleasant Street, and out over Lake Hebron where pines and spruces line the needle covered shore.

I've been looking for him to say goodbye, thank you, take care. All the things you say to someone you've come to know and are sure to leave. I walk across the front yard and join him on the step. We sit hip to hip, though there is enough room not to. Then I say my farewell and we hug. He smells of breakfast and warm skin, and I hate to pull away. And then I am leaving, rounding the corner of the house toward my car.

He speaks up after me in an old voice that carries resonance through gruffness, “You're always welcome here, you know that.” He waves a hand through the air, his other tucked deep in his pocket. “Our door's always open!”

It is something the Shaws say often. In their home, you learn what it means to always have an open door. What it takes. What it gives. And that's how this story begins. With an open door.

Inside, the kitchen is warm with steam. Steam from potatoes boiling in large stainless steel pots and steaks frying on the open flattop. The clear panes of the kitchen windows have beaded up with condensation, caught between a cold night and a hot dinner. Pat Shaw works over her ten-range stovetop, lifting lids, stirring, smelling, tasting. She stands just barely taller than the pots that she watches from behind round glasses. A mess of a bun on her head has let loose wisps of long gray hair that drift softly upon her shoulders. She is soft. Soft in the way she speaks to you with a delicate voice, and the way in which she smiles slowly, revealing deep dimples in the yielding flesh of her cheeks. She smiles this way at her husband, Keith Shaw, as he seats himself at the long rectangular wooden table, set with two of everything. Two salts, two peppers, two ketchups, two sugars, and too many napkins. Mr. Shaw pours himself coffee from the coffee machine next to the table, spilling black water onto the pale blue, snowflake tablecloth. He's wearing his usual blue Dickies and a plaid shirt under black suspenders. At 72, his long face is worn with creases, but his eyes are the crisp color of turquoise. He mumbles through his speech comfortably, doing so as he greets his son, Keith Jr., who enters the kitchen leading a trail of hunters behind him.

Keith Jr. is 21, over fifty years younger than his father. He has short wavy, dark blonde hair and a dimmer version of Mr. Shaw’s eyes. He's in the process of taking over the boarding home in preparation for when his father no longer can, a point in time he is unsure of, but one that hangs close. He is polite and easy-going in the way he tells the hunters and hikers to take a seat where they like.

With hands that look blackened with earth, the three hunters remove their caps before scooting chairs out and sitting down. After a day of tracking moose, they've come home with only close calls. They breathe in deeply, an unconscious act triggered by the rich aroma of meat sizzling and the bitter waft of coffee brewing, and comment on an ever-growing hunger in their stomachs. This sentiment is echoed by the hikers, two girls in their twenties, as they set flower-painted plates before us and fill our water glasses. Dressed in clean clothes and showered, with wet hair pulled back from their faces, they are restless with the promise of steak. Steak and potatoes, homemade gravy, fresh green beans, cooked carrots, buttered bread, and pie. An apple pie Mrs. Shaw baked today.

With dinner laid out before us like a feast, Mr. Shaw speaks up abruptly, “Well, yep, let's eat.” For the first five minutes there are only the sounds of forks scraping against plates, serving bowls clanging against dishes, heavy breathing in between bites, and food being chewed, savored, and ravaged all at once in the mouths of ten strangers who, by the time there is room for pie, will no longer be strangers.

For thirty years, this has been the Shaws' business, providing a home and family to those who are away from their own. “The door’s always open here. You can bring anybody,” Mr. Shaw says. “Don’t make a difference who it is. I'm willing to share my home with anybody.”

Shaw's is a boarding home for Appalachian Trail hikers during the spring, summer, and fall months when they are either thru-hiking the entire trail (which takes an average of five to six months) or section-hiking parts of it. During the winter season, the Shaws welcome hunters, snowmobilers, ice fishermen, cross-country skiers, anyone who needs a place to stay or a meal to eat. And it began incidentally with one hiker and a chance meeting.

“It was an accident. I went down to the post office to pick up my mail,” begins Mr. Shaw, “and the postmistress
had told the [hiker] about this place... So, she introduced me to him, and I brought him home and gave him a bed and hot shower and a breakfast, and at that time I think we charged him $7.50.” Mr. Shaw reaches a hand up to rub the back of his neck. “And that’s where it all started.”

In a black, weathered three-ring-binder that was the Shaws’ first guest book, the hiker’s name is scribbled in cursive on yellowing paper, dated June 23, 1977. Shortly after, word-of-mouth traveled on the trail that “Shaw’s is the place to stay.” Within one month, they were accommodating 20 hikers a night. And by 1988, their home had become so popular that they appeared in National Geographic as the featured stop along the AT. Since then they have appeared in Backpacker Magazine, Down East, and numerous books published for hikers including Ed Garvey’s well-known The Thru-Hiker’s Handbook.

They’ve housed over 34,000 hikers. You can read in Bill Bryson’s book, A Walk in the Woods, that “Shaw’s is the most famous guesthouse on the AT, partly because it’s the last comfort stop for anyone going into the Hundred Mile Wilderness and the first for anyone coming out, but also because it’s very friendly and a good deal.”
For $35.00 you can sleep in a private room, eat a homemade dinner and breakfast, and take a hot shower.

"We treat them like one of the family," Mr. Shaw says about his guests. "Just because you're a stranger, that don't make you any different than one of us." His eyes are focused and earnest, and he pounds on the table with his forefinger emphasizing certain words. "Everybody has the right to be here, and how you gonna get acquainted if you don't sit and talk and get associated?"

The Hundred Mile Wilderness begins off Route 15, after Monson's old and few downtown shops grow sparse and the speed limit picks up again. There on the right of the highway, across from a slate cliff, is a sign that marks the beginning of the trek. It's earned its name, because for the most part, it is the only section of the AT undisturbed by towns or sites of civilization for a stretch of 100 miles between Monson and Mount Katahdin, the end of the trail.

In mid-June when the sun is hot and the North Woods are thick with blackflies, hikers see Shaw's as a haven before enduring the weeklong hike of perspiration and biting insects. And for those hiking in the opposite direction, Shaw's is their refuge after the journey, where they can rest calloused feet and fill empty stomachs.

Dinner is long and drawn out, purposefully lingered over. The hunters are the first to leave the table tonight, anxious to sit in the back room with their boots off and enjoy a cold beer in front of the television. Keith Jr. joins them. Having been raised in a house full of hikers and hunters, he says, "I feel like I grew up with a really big extended family." It shows in how easily he interacts with people he's never met. He bends back the tab on a can of
beer and smiles at the table before leaving the kitchen, past the small laundry nook, to the back room where the hunters are laughing with heels propped up on tabletops. The two hikers, Morris and Lopside, are still seated at the table with Mr. and Mrs. Shaw. The girls go by trail names, symbolic nicknames hikers give each other, which began as a trend in the early '70s, approximately 30 years after the trail was complete.

"I think I'm on my third helping," Lopside confesses pushing her long brown braids behind her shoulders. "I can't get enough of good food." Hiking an average of fifteen miles a day, hikers burn more calories than they consume on the trail. Their appetites are often unmatched, in this case, even by the hunters.

"Oh, thank you," says Mrs. Shaw. She eats little in comparison, but takes her time, making her meal last as long as everyone else.

"Thank you for giving us a warm, dry place to stay," says Morris as she sops up the gravy on her plate with wheat bread. "We definitely appreciate that a lot."

"Well, I appreciate your work, too, believe me," Mrs. Shaw says. Morris and Lopside are working for their stay. They help cook, clean, and make beds in return for meals and a room to sleep in. They've been staying with the Shaws for two days and are supposed to leave tomorrow, but doubt they will, admitting, "The vortex of a wonderful town and wonderful people sucks you in."

Mr. Shaw sits at the end of the table underneath a mounted deer rack from a buck that he shot when he was eleven. Hanging on one of the antlers is his green Baxter State Park cap, home of Mount Katahdin. I ask him what it is that's sucked him in; why he likes dealing with hikers and about his appreciation of the trail.

"It really brings people together. They learn how to associate no matter what color their skin is, or what nationality you are, old, young, rich or poor."

Mr. Shaw retired in his 50s after years of working for other people on dairy farms and in different manufacturing plants. "We don't do this for our living," Mr. Shaw says about the boarding home. "We do it because we want to do it and we enjoy meetin' people . . . I've met some of the nicest, outstanding people that anybody would want to meet anyplace."

However, there have been times Mr. Shaw has had to ask hikers to leave. Once the shed that they renovated into a hikers’ supply store was broken into, and cash and merchandise was stolen. Last season a hiker ruined their pool table by cutting through the felt with a knife. "I told him where the road was and that he better move fast," Mr. Shaw says, pointing a finger out the window toward downtown where Route 15 lies in the distance. But he notes that those instances are rare. "They just get too much alcohol layin' around in the tents, drinking, stuff like that."

And so the doors remain open to a house set up for the convenience of its guests. Off the back of the large communal kitchen is a TV room, and off the front is a closed-in porch that serves as a make-shift office for hikers with a desk stacked full of hiking books and trail pamphlets. Above the desk is a corkboard with useful numbers and thank-you notes from former hikers tacked to it.

Since the business has grown, the Shaws have had to expand their property. In the backyard of the main guest home, they've built a smaller guesthouse above Mr. Shaw's woodworking shop. The hikers' supply store sits next to the barn where they raise cows for meat. And directly across the street, they recently purchased and remodeled a two-story house on a plot of land where they are currently building a tenting site.

Of all this, the Shaws' only private space is through an archway off the side of the kitchen into a small sitting room, which adjoins their bedrooms. In the late evenings, when the wood burning stove in the kitchen dies down to only embers, they will disappear through this archway. Only then do you realize that they are rarely alone.
I asked Mr. Shaw about this once; if they ever had the house to themselves, as we sat at the kitchen table and he sorted through his mail. He looked into the black of his coffee, stuck his lower jaw out and ran his hand over the baldness of his head. "Not too often," he said glancing up, rubbing the stubble of white whiskers on his face. Then he looked over at Mrs. Shaw: "Do we, Pat?"

She was bent over the sink, washing dishes with water that steamed as it poured from the spigot. But when he spoke, she turned to him and shook her head in agreement. Her gray eyebrows arched apologetically, her lips half smiling, half hesitant.

A long time ago though, he began telling me, they had a big group of hikers in one night, and someone had set a tent up in the backyard. This was just three or four months after they were married. Each had been married before. Now they were in their 40s, and had just begun to open up their home and their lives. While everyone was clearing the table, Mr. and Mrs. Shaw snuck outside to "get away from all the commotion." They climbed into the tent and sat there. Pretty soon, he told me, everyone came looking for them, came outside yelling "Hey, Where's Keith? 'Where did Pat go? 'Where my Mama go?" He mimicked their calls from a memory easily reached, and began to laugh. His laughing was hard and sudden, and Mrs. Shaw stopped her dishwashing and quietly shook as she laughed, too. She put her dishtowel down and leaned up against the side of the counter, waiting to find out what she already knew happened next.

"Well," he continued, pausing for a moment to add suspense, "We were in there just laughin' our butts off!" Then his laughter grew so that he had to lean over the table to let it all out, and she continued giggling gently. They stared at each other from across the kitchen, and I felt that I shouldn't be there then. That somehow I had found myself inside that tent.

Then all his expression gave way to a cough that rose up and stole the laughter; just seized him. It was hard, coarse, raw coughing, and it grew worse until he reached into his front shirt pocket and brought out an inhaler, and sucked deeply from the plastic tube. Three assisted breaths, and it quieted, settling back into the depths of his chest. Mrs. Shaw turned to the sink and as she picked back up the dish towel, I heard her faintly, quietly say, "Oh, dear." It was just a whisper.
"Everybody's got hardships. So you can't quit life on one day of sadness."
"Oh dear. This guy thought he wanted to dance."
Morris and Lopside clear empty plates from the table as Mrs. Shaw sets pieces of pie in their places. When Mr. Shaw chews his lower jaw almost meets his nose as he gums his food. The girls talk about how cold the mornings on the trail have become, and how hard it is to push yourself to just get up and walk.

"I've had people here that are gonna quit the trail," says Mr. Shaw, "and they've already done all these miles. Then before the day is over, I've had them getting ready to go back out again... Just a little friendship and a little respect and you let people know that well, everybody's got hardships. So you can't quit life on one day of sadness." The girls comment that they are still happy to be inside and sleeping on beds, if only for a while. Mr. Shaw's hearing is poor and he often interjects immediate thoughts into ongoing conversations, not realizing he's done so. But each time, the table stops to listen.

"You young ladies want to eat a whole lot tonight. You're gonna have to eat my cookin' in the morning," he announces.

"That bad?" asks Morris.

"Believe me, I can burn water." We laugh through mouthfuls of brown sugar, baked apples, and whipped cream.

That night I go to sleep in the "bunkroom," the first room at the top of the stairs with seven wooden-framed beds, a large dresser with an antique mirror, and small bedside tables with old Sierra Club magazines fanned out on top. Each of us spreads our sleeping bags out over neatly made beds with plaid wool blankets and climb inside.

We fell asleep quickly, or possibly it was just me. And I don't believe my body turned or tossed once in the night. It did not think of waking until the cow mooed to be fed as the sun burned above the horizon, and the smell of bacon frying slipped beneath the bunkroom door.

Last spring Mr. Shaw had a "sick spell." He was in the hospital for his second heart-bypass surgery, and the nurse told him he would not make it. "I told her I'd rather die at home and not at the hospital, and the doctor dis-charged me." That was over two years ago.

He's had nine operations during his life. He was shot twice serving in the National Guard after World War II, and now age has brought on more recent health problems. With the pride of any survivor, he lists them off: nerves that have been cut out of the back of his head, arteries taken out of his legs, a wire screen in his stomach, one rib removed, one lung removed, and a back that snapped while working in a manufacturing company.

"I do a lot of things that hurt, but I do them anyway. It's like the trail... you gotta keep goin'."

His heart is what he has to watch, though, his doctor said once when he came to visit. Mr. Shaw also has trouble breathing at times, and so carries two inhalers in his front shirt pocket. At night, he often falls asleep to the hum and help of an oxygen tank.

"I don't have no fear. I'm gonna die with everyone. I'd rather stay around with my wife, with my son, for a few more years. In the meantime, if it's meant to be, I'll be here. If it's not, I won't be. That's the way of life."

Since his last stay in the hospital he has begun to turn over the majority of the work to his son. Keith Jr. does 90 percent of the driving, shuttling hikers to and from the house, and most of the manual labor. However, he appears to be in the background, as if waiting in the wings. Mr. Shaw is still the front man, advertising and doing the public relations work, cooking breakfasts for guests, and handling the finances. Everything else Mrs. Shaw will do: the cooking, cleaning, bookkeeping, reservations, and shopping.

"I attempt to try to do or fill in when and where I can," Keith Jr. says, tilted back on the hind legs of a wooden chair. "My Dad's worked his whole life and it's time for me to step into his shoes and fulfill them the best I can."

Keith Jr. had different plans at one time that coincided with his hobby and love for cars and snowmobiles, trucks, and four-wheelers. He is often working on his truck, or expressing his anticipation for snow, eager to take his snowmobile out onto white-covered trails.

"I was going to go to school to be an automotive mechanic. But my dad had a bad spell the fall of '99 and I figured he helped me out for twenty years, I could at least
help him out for a couple of years. But then, I decided that I wanted to do this instead.”

His senior year of high school, a work-study program allowed him to take certain days off school to help his father with the business. They were renovating the house across the street at the time, gutting the inside and plastering over new walls.

When asked why he changed his mind, he responds, “I really enjoy meeting people from, I guess I can say I stole the line from Dad, but all over the world. There’s been some times here at the table where you have people from New Hampshire or California…. And two seats down there’s somebody from Asia. So many cultures at one table.” It’s an unusual thing to picture in Monson where everyone seems to know everyone else, a town that Keith Jr. refers to as “just a speed bump on the way to Greenville.”

“I’m glad he’s got a good feelin’ about it, though,” Mr. Shaw says. “This last two years, he’s put a good interest in working around here and doing things, helpin’ hikers. We’re proud of him.”

“It’s not just like next season or whatever that I’m aware of yet that he’s going to say, ‘Hey, here you go, see you later.’ He’s not that way,” says Keith Jr. shaking his head about his father. “You know the saying, ‘where there’s a will there’s a way.’ He’s going to have his foot in the door somehow or another. I can see him rolling around here in a wheelchair or on crutches, kicking me in the ass trying to get me moving.” He laughs loudly, suddenly. “Or trying to chase a hiker down the road.”

I imagine the surrendering of a business that is also a lifestyle will be difficult for Mr. Shaw. Though he has slowed down, it is hard to picture him not there. It seems as if he’ll always be cracking eggs at sunrise.

“Good morning! What’ll you have?”

At 7:00 a.m., Mr. Shaw is flipping eggs in cast-iron skillets and cutting leftover potatoes from dinner into wedges for hash browns. Today he’s dressed in a green, ironed, button-up shirt and his face looks freshly shaven. He greets guests who rub their eyes as they make their way to the table. Having been awake since five o’clock to feed the cows, his energy exceeds his younger guests. In a playful mood, he slides across the linoleum floor with a spatula in the air and imitates Jackie Gleason, yelling out “How sweeeeeect it is!” He laughs at himself, hoping everyone else will, too, then returns to looking over eggs that fry sunny-side-up.

Mr. Shaw’s breakfast has a reputation along the trail. It’s known in terms of measurement, as one might refer to lumber, called the “4x4,” which refers to four of everything. Your choice of four eggs or four pancakes, four pieces of bacon, four pieces of sausage, four pieces of toast, and wherever there’s room left on the plate, a pile of hash browns. Also sitting on the table will be doughnuts, coffee, milk, and orange juice. “Never leave the table hungry,” Mr. Shaw says.

There is a famous story on the trail about the hiker who fell to the floor because he ate so much at Shaw’s. One year, a young man decided he would out-eat anyone who’d ever been through Shaw’s. He sat at the table and ate six doughnuts before requesting a 4x4. After finishing, he requested another, ignoring the gasps form the rest of the table. He sat there until he had eaten 18 eggs total, and 12 of everything else. Then suddenly he stood up, grabbed his stomach, walked around the table, and fell to the floor moaning. “He sounded like a young girl having a baby,” Mr. Shaw said. He spent the next three days in bed at Shaw’s until he saw a doctor, who told him that he had almost ruptured his stomach. The story traveled, like all things do on the trail, that at Shaw’s you would not leave the table hungry.

“H

How about makin’ an apple pie today,” Mr. Shaw says.

“No, I don’t have time.” Mrs. Shaw has just woken and is eating her breakfast of toast and a banana at the table that is now empty.

“What if I peel the apples?” asks Mr. Shaw as he slides an arm into his coat.

“No, Keith, I’ve got too much to do today. Sorry, but you’ll just have to go without.”

Keith Jr. follows his father outside to his woodworking shop, a one-room addition off the smaller guesthouse behind the driveway. It smells of sawdust that sits on the floor and floats in the air in front of bright windows. Tools hang from hooks on all four walls, and scraps of metal, plastic, and wood sit propped up in corners. Mr. Shaw and Keith Jr. light cigarettes from the same pack, then begin clearing space on a workbench to measure out boards for a cabinet Mr. Shaw is making. When hiking season dies down, time opens up for the Shaws to return to abandoned projects and enjoy personal hobbies.

The workshop is kept cooler than the house. Mr.
Shaw wears an old leather coat, and Keith Jr. keeps warm in a Florida State sweatshirt. Though there are two generations between them, they look like old friends smoking in the cold over cluttered workbenches. The two have a respectful relationship. Keith Jr. is careful with his father’s age, repeating things many times when Mr. Shaw doesn’t hear him, and Mr. Shaw acknowledges that “He’s 21 and it’s not my place to tell him what to do, or what to say, or where to go.”

Keith Jr. is built like his father, medium in size, sturdy. They both stand with legs slightly spread, shoulders back, at times shuffling at the ground beneath them. They are similar in how they talk to you as if they’ve always known you, how they laugh hard and work hard, and how they have time for everything and nothing all at once.

“That boy was my shadow,” Mr. Shaw likes to tell people. “Back when he was little, no matter where I went that kid was with me. He’s just my boy, just wanted to be with Dad... when he was three years old, I had him drivin’ the car. He’d stand up in the seat and take hold of my truck, like that, with one hand and steer with the other hand...wherever I went he was always with me.”

Mr. Shaw measures out a right angle with a ruler and a broken pencil stub onto a piece of wood that Keith Jr. holds steady.

“Oh yeah,” Keith Jr. will say. “I was my dad’s shadow.” With such an apparent age gap between them, they are different in obvious ways. Keith Jr. describes his father as often doing and seeing things “the old-school way.” He prefers mechanics to woodworking, and has his own ideas about running the business when his time comes.

“Everything could be done if you set it up more so there’s a time for this and a time for that, more like a schedule or itinerary, it would work better....But as Dad always says, we try to accommodate the hikers to their schedule.”

Mr. Shaw acknowledges that hikers, and their needs today, have changed since he began the business. “There’s a lot younger people doin’ the trail now than there used to be, and the younger people seem to be more determined. They think a lot of the places on the trail should be a place to give them everything....There’s a limit to how much these places can do, and a big, big difference in just demandin’ or askin’ for help.”

Keith Jr. still wants to maintain the “home-style atmosphere,” he says. “I have a lot of different ideas that I’m just kicking around. I’m just going to do a test drive. And if I like it, I’ll keep it, and if I don’t, I’ll try something else.”

At noon when they’ve grown hungry again, they walk back into the house where Mrs. Shaw is in the kitchen peeling apples and pinching out piecrust. “Oh, looky here,” says Mr. Shaw peering over her shoulder. “Mother made me a pie, after all.” He takes his finger and pokes her in the right side under her ribs. She playfully slaps him away and continues on with her paring knife.

At 65, Mrs. Shaw has been caring for hikers for 25 years. “A lot of meals, a lot of dishes, a lot of corners to clean,” she’ll say without a hint of dissatisfaction in her voice. If there is a tone to her words, it is only one of fatigue at the end of the day.

“She’s a real hard worker,” says Keith Jr. “She’s the foundation of the business...she does everything to bring it up to par. This, that, and everything in between.”

At night, around eight o’clock when Mr. Shaw disappears into his bedroom to watch Jeopardy or an old war movie before falling asleep, Mrs. Shaw stays up to finish any work left from the day. Keith Jr. will eventually go to bed and she’ll say, “Goodnight, love ya” as he walks up the stairs to his room.

Tonight she sits at the kitchen table wearing her house shirt, a flowered print turtleneck she rolls up at the sleeves, and gray slippers that shuffle her feet from room to room. She has pulled a load of laundry from the dryer, blankets and pillowcases that smell of dryer sheets. She folds them across her chest with neat creases, and talks about the mending that needs to be done, now that the season has slowed down and she has time to catch-up on what she calls “heavy housework.”

She seems to enjoy the evenings, the nights when the house is still and she can sit momentarily. There is a painting that hangs on the kitchen wall of a mountainous landscape. Mrs. Shaw painted it in “the wee hours,” she says.
She went to Ames where there was a sale on paints and brought them home to try. The painting is done in strokes of blues and greens, whites and reds, blacks and grays.

"It’s supposed to represent destruction before utopia, you know, that sort of thing. But Keith thinks I should have a hiker in there." She points to a place in the painting between two trees. "But if you look real close you can kind-of see one there, just a hint of one. That’s what I wanted to do."

You wonder what else she can do well, what else she enjoys that she may not have time for since they opened their home. She pulls out a photo of herself when she was 19. It was taken when she was in the Air Force during the Korean War working as a clerk, typing secrets over a typewriter for who she didn’t know. In the photo she’s standing on a runway in a field, wearing a fitted dress, elegant and practical with a string of pearls around her neck. Her now long, thin gray hair was then dark and thick, and curled gracefully at her shoulders. She’s smiling warmly at the camera with full cheeks and big eyes under thick eyebrows.

It was taken long before she knew Mr. Shaw. Each has led a life or two before the one they now live together. You can see this in the photographs on their walls of children and grandchildren from previous marriages and lives. Mrs. Shaw has lived in Texas and Florida, New Hampshire and Connecticut, but returned to Maine, where she was born, to take care of an ill sister. Mr. Shaw also lived in different states and came back to where he could “enjoy [his] outdoor life.” Eventually they met in Monson at Mr. Shaw’s 47th birthday party.

“The guy I was working for,” Mrs. Shaw says, “was a friend of Keith’s and he asked me to come along….I ended up coming, and well, hum,” she pauses and laughs. “Oh dear. This guy [Mr. Shaw] thought he wanted to dance.” She told this story one night at dinner when Mr. Shaw was there. He replied by teasing her, “I was too young to know better, and too old to do better.” He laughed at his joke and pulled on her hair to let her know he was teasing. She played along, dismissing him with a sideways glance of her eyes.

“She’s always been so understanding,” says Keith Jr. about his mom. “She’s always been there no matter what I got myself into. She’s a hell of a listener. You know, a real sweet lady.”

Yet she is not afraid of being stern. She will quickly scold Mr. Shaw if he’s been smoking in the house when she’s asked him not to. And she will tell rowdy guests to watch their mouths in front of young ladies. But usually she is humming or talking quietly to herself through her housework. And at the end of any given sentence she will end with “oh my,” a smile, a nod, something slight.

She admits that it will be hard for them to retire. She may have more time for crocheting and painting, and possibly Mr. Shaw could still do his woodworking. Nonetheless, it will be difficult for them to give it up.

“He’s going to punch until he can’t,” she says about Mr. Shaw.

“I ask him for something I don’t quite understand,” says Keith Jr., “I ask him to give me a hand, to get me started. And he’ll do it and keep going. And I’m like, ‘Dad, hey!’ He’s got to do it for me, you know.”

“Well,” says Mr. Shaw, “as long as I can do it, I’ll be doin’ it. I’ll be helpin’ my boy.”

Mr. Shaw is sitting behind the wheel of his Pontiac, slouched into the beige seats, driving us down Route 15. He woke me early for breakfast and told me that I could go along with him to run errands for the day.

We are coming back from a hardware store, another hardware store, the bank, the auto-parts store, and the meat market where we picked up 421 pounds of Black Angus beef. The deep red and salmon colored meat sits cut and packaged in Saran-wrap and thick white butcher’s paper in the backseat behind Mr. Shaw. It was once his cow. He bought her at two months old and raised her until she was two years old and ready for slaughtering, which he did last week.

He had to shoot her. “Right here,” he says pointing to the space between his eyes. “They go down before the sound even leaves your ears, they’re down with their throat cut.” He had a hiker help him slit the throat so that the meat would “bleed out real good.” They took turns cutting the hide off in one continuous stretch of flesh. Then Mr. Shaw took her to the Countryside Meat Market where they cut and packaged the meat for $116. Now she was riding home with us in about 90 different cuts of meat: tenderloin, ribs, and ground beef.

I ask him if it’s cheaper to raise his own meat. He replies that it’s not, adding, “I like animals. I like having them around and they know I like them, so they like me, too.” He’ll walk into the barn just to pat one on its head or throw them a handful of grain. “It’s what I feed them that makes the meat melt in your mouth. What you put in your cow you get back.”

He drives well, despite his doctor’s advice not to because it can be strenuous to his heart. But it may be a
long time before Mr. Shaw completely gives it up, or gives anything up, everything up—to his son, to the years, for good.

Our trip out had been lively, with Mr. Shaw greeting every clerk in every store. To the women he would say, “Hello, hello! Oh you’re looking as beautiful today as ever,” and they would smile and thank him. Everyone asked if the hikers were still coming through, to which Mr. Shaw would reply that it was slowing down. Then he would strut down the aisles, his hands in his pocket, chest out, searching for what he needed: an electrical switch, a bolt, a tarp. He would ask me to read the prices when the print on the items was too small. Then he would make his purchase, say “have a nice day,” and we would be on our way to the next place.

In the car, though, it is silent as we head back into Monson, past the town’s welcome sign. There is only the sound of air rushing past an open window. And then I hear him, the words being sung.

“If I could turn back the years, put the gold back in my hair.”

The words are soft and mumbled. They rise and lower as he sings them to a tune that only he hears as it stretches and plays out in his memory.

“If I could turn back the years, erase the lines from my face, and put the gold back in my hair.”

He doesn’t strain to remember the lines. They are there for him easily. He stares down the road and at times turns to me, smiling with eyes so blue they appear young, fresh in contrast with the wrinkles in his chin, cheeks, forehead.

“If I could turn back the years, oh yes, erase the lines from my face, and put the gold back in my hair.”

He sings a little more and I hold onto it; clutch at it like the trees to their yellow leaves. I feel again like I’m inside that tent, glimpsing moments that are not mine. I don’t dare breathe for fear I might exhale the moment away.

Then his voice wavers, trailing off, and the words are gone. But the last note he sang hangs in the air between us. We drive on and I wonder if the tune is still there, playing in his head. If maybe it is always playing in his head.

Throughout the archway off the side of the kitchen is a quaint room with hanging plants and photographs on the walls. There is a piano no one ever seems to play, piles of bed-sheets folded high on the corner chair, and small glass figurines displayed on shelves that Mr. Shaw made. The room is dim with only the flashing of a television set turned to Sixty Minutes. Mrs. Shaw sits on her couch covered with square-patched quilts, and Mr. Shaw is sitting on a tan recliner, his feet curled up beneath him. At times his eyes are open watching the television screen, then his head tilts back against the headrest, and they are closed.

We spend this last time after dinner relaxing in their sitting room, looking at pictures of children and grandchildren, and of the only child that belongs to them both, Keith Jr. As we talk about family, Mr. Shaw turns to me. “There’s one thing I didn’t tell you,” he says.

And what he tells me next he has told me before. It’s about his hope he has for his son to marry soon and have a child. “Then I can chat and enjoy myself with the baby,” and he would know that Mrs. Shaw had someone to take over for her, as well. He tells us goodnight and shuffles into his bedroom, shutting the door behind him.

“We all have our number,” he says. “Some comes earlier than others. I’m ready to go anytime. I feel free, clear, and clean. In my knowledge I never did anything that bad in my life to feel so that I’m not ready…. When I lay down at nighttime I put my head on the pillow. I can lay there and relax and think about what I’d like to do the next day, and enjoy life, and go to sleep at ease. And wake up in the morning: Here I am again.”

I rise one last time to eat a breakfast that fills me beyond filling. I wash the dishes in the sink, change the sheets on my bed and lay the used ones by the washer, and then gather my things. Mrs. Shaw is standing by the wood stove, drying her long hair as it hangs damp and loose down her back. I hold her close as we exchange farewells and take cares. Then I walk out the back door to the driveway where Keith Jr. is buffing the dirt off his blue pick-up truck. He holds a hand in the air to me, and I wave goodbye to him, to the young man who also holds in his hands the future of the “most popular guest house on the AT.” Looking at him in his Florida State baseball cap and steel-toed boots, I wonder what Shaw’s will become. But for the time being, I return to what it is. I walk down the driveway to the front of the house to find Mr. Shaw. He’s sitting quietly on his front step with his face to the sunlight, framed in the arch of an open door.
You are in a hallway. As a door opens and shuts, light beams against the thick walls for a white moment, you blink and it's dark gray around you again. At either end of this hallway there is a staircase.

You are in the hallway on the second floor of a home called Peabody House and you can hear heartbeats all around you. There are faint heartbeats that whisper, rolling along the ceiling and from within the walls, like ghosts. There are heartbeats that dance on strong tiptoes from smiles of staff members downstairs in the kitchen as they joke and burn dinner's Italian sausages on the grill. This hallway doesn't feel like just another hallway. It certainly doesn't sound like anything else. The air in this hallway feels trapped – if a window would open it'd fly away and breathe again.
Members of the staff at Peabody House take care of Thom.
So you breathe. And as you walk you try to make it seem normal that you’re tiptoeing and as you breathe you act like your head isn’t pounding with heartbeats.

On the wall hangs a portrait of a woman with white curls and a smile like an old riddle. Her eyes go deep as she looks at you from under an elegant veil of oil paint and mood lighting. A pink feather boa has been hung from the spotlights framing Ms. Frannie in a familiar way as if it were actually swinging from her proper, upright shoulders. In 1984, before the disease even had a name, Frannie Peabody lost her grandson to AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome). A well-known Portland philanthropist and historian, Frannie was 81 at the time.

She had the vision and drive to see the necessity for a place like Peabody House in a community where, according to her, “many men and women lacked the emotional and financial resources to be cared for with dignity during the final days of their lives.” In 1996, after years of active involvement within the AIDS arena, along with the dedication and support of many in the community and five other founding board members, Peabody House opened its doors as the first AIDS hospice in Maine. For “a life that could’ve been nothing but card parties and cruises,” says Albert, a Peabody House employee since 1996, Frannie’s life exemplified the uncommon awareness and ability to give in a way that empowers change and enriches lives.

What was physically built at the end of Orchard Street in Portland’s West End, among tall, proud Victorian time-piece houses was a place that meant, in Frannie’s words, “safety, security, and love.” What is built here between people is a support that holds you in the greatest time of need; life in the ever-presence of death. Frannie Peabody died the summer of 2001, at the age of 98. As you stand here in this hall and look around these walls and within this air and within each soft heartbeat, she lives.

“You are right at square one of the most important plague that’s hit the world.” Albert says, talking about his job. He has worked at Peabody House since 1996, the year his life partner passed on from AIDS.

“He had a sore throat that wouldn’t go away.” Albert’s work here is rooted in his need to “give something back.” Scars from the past fuel his dedication and caring.

Albert wears darkish, square glasses and sits behind his round belly as he laughs often and loudly. His hands hold him, as he rests his weight against the kitchen cupboard. He speaks efficiently in an effort to make his point quickly and clearly. “This work fills a part of your life.” He looks down for a split second, and the pause sits between you.

“Perhaps more than it should…yes, it’s very hard.”

Albert sits at the kitchen counter, fidgeting with this week’s grocery list. Above him, a piece of paper has been taped to a cupboard reading, “Approach love and eating with reckless abandon.” Porcelain roosters and polished chicken-shaped cookie jars look down on you from atop the cupboards. Cupboards are filled with a calico array of mugs left here in the mysterious way most kitchen cupboard mug collections form.

Small white labels that are just a little worn, read in strong block letters, “cooking utensils,” “plates and bowls,” “instant breakfast and hot chocolate,” “Tupperware” on all the drawers and doors.

Sandie bends over the crockpot humming on the counter top, and breathes in the hot smell of the stew—today’s lunch. They are a pair, Albert and Sandie, working together for two years. The past half hour was quiet. Medications aren’t administered until after lunch. They have devoted this time to uncovering the origin of the mysterious white chewy substance in the stew. “It’s got to be egg.” Sandie guesses, unsure. They both nod and lift round spoonfuls into their mouths.

Sandie has spooned bowls for two residents, Thom and Ricky. They sit across from each other at the dining room table, adjacent to the kitchen. Ricky eats efficiently, appreciatively and quietly.

Meals here are made for everyone. If someone doesn’t like what’s made, they don’t eat it. They can make something else, or not. Appetites vary with medications and taste preferences in a household of fifteen employees and six
residents. Christopher, a staff member with an accent like a proper southern belle, made the stew earlier today. He loves to cook and talk about his cats. And he hates celery. There's no celery in this stew, but there is hard-boiled egg. Thom sits a little bent over, his large, gold glasses overcoming most of his small, square face. He has been dropping sarcastic jokes at the dining room table, reminiscent of an upset teenager. Everyone but him laughs at the jokes. He's very troubled with the mystery stew ingredient and says, "I just would never ruin a perfectly good stew with hard-boiled egg. I used to roast the chicken all day... completely separately... and use all fresh herbs, so all the tastes stood alone. I mean, you don’t use a crock-pot." He slowly makes his way to the sink to dump out his bowl, having taken two bites. He gently pats Albert on his shoulder and doesn’t say anything. He creeps towards the cellar door, announcing he’s going down to have a cigarette and invites anyone interested to join him. His pants hang heavy and empty from his hips.

George, another resident, is untouched by the stew controversy. This is another lunch, like most for George where the main course is a plate full of chicken wings. Twenty barbecued chicken wings prepared methodically from freezer to microwave with tender care by Sandie or Albert or George, if he wants. George sits at the head of the square table, wearing the same striped-collared sweatshirt with thick gray cuffs he wore yesterday. Curls and bolts of black-brown hair dance out from under his B.A.S.S. fishing cap, the same one he wore yesterday.

George stumbles on his words like they're cement blocks stuck somewhere in the plumbing between his brain, heart and tongue; relics from last year's stroke. A pile of napkins that is routinely set next to his plate - today by Sandie- shrinks, transforming from a neat rectangular stack to a gnarled, red and brown-stained mass on the also routinely placed garbage plate for chicken bones and the napkin mountain.
Every chicken wing routine is accompanied with a milkshake routine. Today's flavor is Sandie's special secret vanilla, which George says is his favorite. "That's 'cause only I know the secret ingredient!" Sandie laughs at herself as she bends and reaches, collecting a bottle of vanilla extract from the spices cupboard, the French-vanilla flavored coffee mate from the fridge, and the vanilla ice cream from the freezer. "I'll never tell!" Sandie imitates an evil cackle as her fingertip pushes a button, starting an explosion of stirring in the blender. George laughs through his hoarse throat along with her, his smile about to push his ears off his head. The shake is poured and George will sip it slowly throughout his day from a travel mug.

Sandie sits next to Ricky at the other end of the table and the three of them enjoy their meal. Albert stands to begin washing the dishes left in the sink, and Thom sits downstairs and smokes.

Next to the kitchen on the first floor of Peabody House is the dining room, three resident bedrooms, two bathrooms: one for guests and staff and one with a shower for residents, and the formal living room.

The living room is yellow from sunlight and happy striped wallpaper. Seams on the sofa wear the look of time, fraying only slightly at that spot countless backs of knees have pressed into. The fabric flowers of throw pillows have faded as well to a comfortable washed out version of their former regal selves.
And Bobbie K. sits where he always sits, looking at the television screen in the far corner of the room. He stares and it's hard to tell if he's actually watching the re-running faces of The Andy Griffith Show or The Walton's that roll over in this box. He rarely laughs at the jokes on the screen. He may lean back, exposing his belly in the air looking like he just got off a hard day's work. He may sit straight up, knees square with shoulders, hands gripped and inter-twined square below his chin, pointed directly at the floor and staring hard in concentration.

A personality trait of HN (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) and AIDS is its stubborn refusal to sit still. Since its earliest research work the medical community has faced new, often boggling, advances of the disease in unpredictable ways and unimaginable paths. There is no room for words like "guarantee" in this wormhole. In this biological game of cat-and-mouse, the face of AIDS is ever changing.

At Peabody House it has entered Bobbie's mind. His body looks strong, as his hands grip to each other as if holding tight to a reality only he knows now. Trapped in the parts of his head housing memories and clarity, AIDS has its own grip on Bobbie now.

So he sits on the sofa, unaware of exposed skin, smiling and offering quick, polite nods to greetings from people walking by. It's comfortable to sit next to Bobbie on this fading couch, sit and get lost in laugh tracks and Technicolor smiles. It feels familiar, like most memories do.

Sitting in the library with Thom makes you want to take up as little room as possible; let him lead you through the room, his favorite books, what he recommends you read, where to set your drink. Let him lead you through a conversation and he'll take you into his past and into his future as if they are one, all rooted in a kind of rare spiritual language. He is an unavoidable host, offering to refresh drinks, and saying, "When I used to throw parties, it just didn't happen...no one walked around with an empty glass."

Leaning forward, he'll subtly slip a coaster under your sweating glass to protect the chipped antique surface of the coffee table divide between you. Sitting back, he adjusts his hips like they are two disconnected children being hushed back to sleep. He speaks as he moves and touches, and is soft and deliberate. Every move is with justification and purpose; every move is orchestrated under his control. He spends his days completing tasks as if at a job. He began organizing the shelves in the library two days ago. There are 21 shelves, each filled with books. The two shelves Thom has completed are obvious; bindings aligned, stacked orderly by height, titles singing harmoniously in alphabetical order.

"My name is Thom White. I'm 50 years. No," he pauses and sideways smiles, "I'm 45 years old." Laughing at his slip, Thom sits back in his chair and the light shines in his eyes.

"I feel like I'm 55! I was originally from Rumford, Maine...I ended up in Los Angeles. I lived there for eleven years or so." He speaks very rhythmically as he talks about California as if it is another world.

"I just know that in my life there's something really, really powerful going on."

"I met my partner, Michael, in LA. He was really the love of my life. I don't have difficulty expressing a sense of love and loss. Because it's all a part of who I am; what went on in my life. And where it brought me in my journey."

Thom says his journey has been a life-long search for peace. "I just know that in my life there's something really, really powerful going on and it's so powerful that...umm," You want to hold him as he cries. He fidgets with the fringes of his pant cuffs with his knobby fingers. "I have no control over it at all."

His bedroom is warm and welcomes you in with forest green. The light inside feels like falling asleep, foggy and familiar at the same time. He has lived at Peabody House for just over two months, and moved into this room because the noise level was too high downstairs for him to sleep late.

"I'm never alone. I used to be very afraid of dying alone in my sleep. But, I am really not, because always when I wake up in the morning, during the day, when I wake up in pain and can't sleep at night I know I am not alone. God is there." His eyes roll instead of search, when he says God.

Thom walks you out, like a polite father showing his guests to the door. An exchange of polite hugs completes most visits. "I'm going down to smoke if anyone wants to join me."

"I just know that in my life there's something really, really powerful going on."
Smoking. There are three places to smoke at Peabody House. One is out on the deck, off the dining room. The other is the basement. There is also a secret place to smoke when solitude is desired, behind the garage and next to the garden in the backyard. Everyone smokes. Talking as they breathe through emotions on a cigarette. You watch the cigarettes being sucked down to the very tips of their filters. Residents say it helps pass the time. Staff seem to smoke to breathe.

George walks backwards down the curved staircase into the cellar because the railing is only on the right. His right arm bounces to an offbeat of its own. "I have to go like this." And he grins to tell you that last year he had to take the elevator.

Martha Stewart appears on the television screen as George smokes and says, "Thom wants to die." As if he was telling you about fishing or dancing. "Ooh! I like this lady!" Martha Stewart is nodding placidly at the two of you, and George releases his stream of white smoke through a smile.

There is a space here in the basement where most of the laundry is done, and plywood shelves are stocked full of laundry detergent, office supplies, and bleach. In the space leading back to the smoking room and the TV there are small duct taped squares on the floor marking space for storing residents belongings that don’t fit in their bedrooms.

Steve, a resident who has just returned from a two week trip to Arizona to visit his mother, joins Thom and George, smoking menthols and speaking softly. His Massachusetts accent is strong and heavy with nicotine. Periodically when he laughs he will raise his hand across his chest and touch the bandages at his collar line with timid fingers. He says it hurts to laugh right now. Yesterday Steve had surgery, and the IV had to be administered through his jugular vein. He is in pain today; he will sit in the basement smoking for most of it. He talks a lot about his family; and how in his six months here, he has come to terms with calling Peabody House "home."

Sitting with the residents is OJ, the Executive Director of the house and a veteran psychiatric nurse. Her attention is physically focused on Thom; she leans with shoulders and knee pointing at him. He has been complaining of a side effect of a new medication and having some back pain. She laughs, smiles and talks with both Steve and George as she tends to Thom.

OJ is the kind of woman who turns a hug into a conversation, filling in gaps and replacing things that are too hard to say sometimes with tight arms and support. She has been one of the two nurses here, both starting nearly a year ago.

The four joke about being a family. Arguing which would be the Queen of the house, Steve relinquishes the title as he promised "Princess." George offers only hearty hoarse laughs from his chest at his housemates and OJ. They laugh at who – between Robb, the second of the nurses and Clinical Director at Peabody, or Albert, or Thom will be given the title of "Queen."

OJ blinks slowly and her eyes smile even when shut. She breathes deeply, inhaling the white cloud from Steve's cigarette, as if it were the aroma of a freshly baked apple pie, saying, "I quit last month." Triggering a snort of sarcastic disbelief from all three men. "No, I quit last month, but luckily all I have to do is come down to the basement and get my fix!" She appoints herself the "Mother" of the house.

As each person sitting in this basement throws their head back, or gingerly holds a bandaged throat, crosses a leg and slaps a knee, or re-adjusts to find a comfortable position, they look like a family for a moment.

Everywhere in the house there is an odor fought by potpourri and fresh-cut lilies. The meandering smell, something like the inside of an orange pill bottle lingers silently; humming the words that define parts of the house, parts you'd like to forget. Words like central line, scar tissue, medication, intervenes, morphine, porto-cath, and latex gloves.

The cigarette smoke overpowers the whispering smell from upstairs. But, something else speaks of AIDS' hand in the daily lives of residents here. Behind Steve, sitting on the couch in front of the television, on the other side of the basement wall draped with white Christmas lights and the year-round hanging plants, through the cement blocks and wooden beams, sits a garbage container. It is bright blue with a bright orange plastic bag blousing out around the rim. Large white letters are stenciled officially the way only a phrase like "Bio-Hazardous Waste" must be written. Here, AIDS is wet tips of syringes and needle pricks.

Within this contaminated plastic box, it is bed sheets with bodily fluids and blood.
Bobbie K sits where he always sits, looking at the television screen in the far corner of the room.
On the 2nd floor, it is a warm memorial room lit with small red candles where a hand-made quilt hangs, constantly under construction and in prayer for sisters and brothers lost. Upstairs in a bedroom AIDS is a shaking hand resting on a thigh, as George tries to remember his mother’s name.

AIDS is stretched skin at joints older than they should be. It is shaky smiles at old television shows, people talking up close in your face so you can understand, and favorite dinners. It is surgery and lots of sleep, quiet blankets and lost time you thought you owned. It is walking canes and losing your voice. AIDS is the foundation of Peabody House, its purpose and the quiet adversary. Although the family within these walls is not genetically bound, there is blood connecting them.

“You don’t die of AIDS, you die of the complications that AIDS creates,” the Head Nurse, Robb, explains. You can count on change here. AIDS is not just a diagnosis here; it is something that floats between all the heartbeats. It lives within the creaks of floorboards under heavy feet, or tired feet, or feet that step – drag – step – fall. Its fingertips graze just under the skin, leaving a heated fire trail of itching, scabs and spots with pain’s initials on them. AIDS lives here, and what living means differs for everyone.

"I was diagnosed HIV positive, umm... five years ago. Yeah, three weeks ago it was five years."

Steve crosses his feet at his ankles with his knees locked straight in front of him. The sun is bright in the basement today, and Steve squints as he talks. Although still healing from surgery, he’ll smoke most of the afternoon away.

“I was in shock. I think, it was two years prior to that that I watched my sister-in-law die of [AIDS]. Just four years of being miserable. I went off the deep end, I mean I was so depressed; I went out that same day and made all my funeral arrangements. The same day, I wanted to kill myself.”

Killing himself consisted of diving hard into drinking; drowning in a desperation foreign to his life of security. Colby alumnus, professional figure skater, and one-time paramedic, Steve saw himself as unarmed to enter a hopeless battle. He turned inward, and shut out help from his large family.

“I remember it was right around Christmas time and I was so sick, I was having seizures. I just remember trying to get to the phone, getting out of my bed, crawling to the phone, and it came unplugged. I was so weak, and I was living by myself, praying to God someone would find me. And this went on for four days.” This was almost four years ago, and the time and experience wears well in his words.

And Steve sits taller as he tells about how he decided things were going to change, and he decided to accept his life, and ask for help. Steve is 35 years old. Thirty-five years old and living in a nursing home. His therapist told him about Peabody House and he agreed to live here before seeing it. Today he agrees to each day without knowing what it will entail, reconciling his battle with AIDS. “If I have to live with it – I have to live with it.”

He laughs and drops a sarcastic joke about a staff member, and then shakes his head, ashing his cigarette, saying, “I'm not dying, and this isn’t a death sentence. I mean, you live with this disease. Want to know what my next thing is? I’d love to be one of those storm-chasers. Go to the Midwest and chase tornadoes and things. That’d be cool.” His hands feel the edge of the bandage, and he readjusts the collar of his shirt.

In the basement, near George’s hunting gear and family albums, there is a white pipe that grows out of the cement floor. It extends through the ceiling and into the small first floor bathroom designated for staff and visitors. Stepping into this space – not much larger than a phone booth – you take a deep breath. On the walls hang framed pictures of faraway places. It is easy to escape into the images like cutouts from National Geographic, showing jungle trees, grassy hills, farmland in the distant sunset, or mountaintops that glow. Turning around inside the bathroom, you drift away into these crookedly hung departures; exotic places, perhaps only imagined by some here. Being in this room is an experience, and you are reminded of the sort of experiences the staff here go through. The air in the hallway outside this door bears down. Peabody staff shoulder the weight of providing a wide array of services not only specific to an AIDS hospice, but specific to a home. You’ve seen the tired in their eyes, and heard spite on the tips of their tongues only to become eyes that smile brightly with words as sweet as dripping maple syrup. You stop, and realize no family is perfect.
If you're standing at the right spot out on the deck of the Peabody House you can see Casco Bay and the strange old Western Cemetery at the same time. At the same time you can hear the voices of recess singing from the elementary school at the top of the hill and sit and smoke a cigarette or three with George. Next month, George will have been a resident at the house for a year.

"I used to live out there," George's voice is tired. His throat seems to have been asleep for the past year, and every other part of his body is doing the speaking, now. Now he smokes and a long stream of exhale cloud pushes itself from his mouth.

George is 52 years old. Both thoughts and movements are limited for George, but are very deliberate. When you talk to him, you realize how often you smile. It's hard - close to impossible - not to smile because George is smiling. When he puffs on his cigarette his cheeks sink in. George sits on the deck; the tips of his ears are red from the cold. He insists he likes it, and will stay out five minutes longer every time someone mentions the cold. And he'll smoke maybe four cigarettes, and he tells about hunting, and about his four girls and one boy, and the girl that gave him AIDS, and his car he drove in Alaska while stationed there in the Air Force. He never fought in Vietnam, but he was in active duty "...refueled planes in Alaska." That's where his leg was injured, where he acquired the limp, and that is where he drove motorcycles. His voice limps like his stride, falling over word hurdles with each story. There is no hurdle near his smile, though. George's smile is winning. "I'm not dyin'." He says rhythmically. It's one phrase that he never trips over.

This sequence of stories is daily and might happen more in one day if George forgets your face. The radio on the deck sings an Elton John song, and George yells in his whisper, "Ooh! I like this guy." Every word is definite...definite and defiant, and you see how much those can be the same. George spends hours out here, in the B.A.S.S. fishing hat and in his memories. And his convictions. "I'm going t'get lots of money. Y'know how much? I'll show you how much." A hand that shows the trails of hard years of working, of jet fuel, and motor oil, and hammer heads lifts itself heavy in the air and begins to loop and drop and loop. Zeros dance like bubbles in front of George's sagging bright eyes, and he traces out a number. "That's how much." And he smiles, leans forward in the way he always leans forward, from his belly, hips unmoved, and shakes another cigarette out from the red pack. "I'm not dyin'." He just wants you to know.

Kat is twenty-two years old. She first came to Peabody House as a high school student from Gorham High. "December 21st, '96 was my first official day volunteering in the house." Her Long Island accent creeps into her voice as you drive with her, or as you sit and she yells at traffic. "I was a volunteer for three years. My first day as a real employee was January 10th, 2000. I've been here a while." Today she is in on her day off; she is taking George to Sebago Lake for fishing. He has a coupon for a free coffee, and wants to stop at a bait shop on the way out of town. Kat is late. George has been hiding his excitement for this all week. When you see him smoking at a fast rate, and notice how little his hand is shaking today, you realize how ready he is to leave.

In the car, George wears pitch-black wrap-around sunglasses and smokes. At the coffee shop he steps slowly and sideways and makes his way to the crowded counter with Kat behind him. He orders his hot chocolate, redeems his coupon, and checks out the travel coffee mugs on his way out. He goes backward down the cement stairs and as he passes a bright green motorcycle parked outside says, "Ooh, I like those. In Alaska, we used to race these."

Kat relies on George for directions to the marina he used to work at. He wants to stop by and say hello to his old boss. He worked there over a year ago, before his stroke; before Peabody House.

Kat walks outside, and smooths her hand on the lacquered side of a boat on display, "If only I'd get a raise, this is totally the boat I'd buy." Leaning on a chain link fence and smoking, she looks as if she's simply passing time and
"A morphine pump is one of the last stages of care. It's pure comfort care, pain management."
the sun dances on the lake water behind her.

Inside the showroom, George has landed himself in the office of a salesman. He's flipping and unfolding scraps of paper housed in his coat pocket. He hands the man a torn yellow piece with his choice of engine size, color preference, and boat engine he's interested in. Kat slips into the office now, and sits next to George; their knees touch gently.

He slips in and out of present and past stories with the agreeable salesman who is focusing hard on every word, gesture, and sound as George communicates as best he can. Sometimes Kat will speak up — randomly and not often — but never for George. She looks helpless and young, but you can imagine her re-telling what's happening here, and you can see her commitment. It's his choice. What he wants to do. She won't interfere.

And you wait. George haggles with the salesman for over an hour and the sun shifts over the lake. "I'm not payin' for it now; just send me some stuff on it." George is direct and to his point. The salesman points his question to Kat, "That's Room 1, 14 Orchard Street?" Kat and George both nod without a word. He'll take home two brochures and run his large fingers over the smooth glittering paint of the boat on the sales floor. He says he'd get blue if he could choose any color. Definitely.

George doesn't want to go fishing anymore. In the car on the way home, he is quieter. Kat asks George, "Are you happy?" and George leans over from his waist, the same way he does when ashing his cigarette, and pats Kat's shoulder, "Thanks, Kat." George looks out the window nearly the entire ride back to Peabody House. He says he's going to eat chicken for lunch when he gets home; he hasn't had chicken for three days.

Thom's bedroom is on the second floor, next door to the library. As you come up the back stairs, you turn to your left. It's room number 4. There are two other bedrooms to the right with a washing machine and dryer in between. You walk behind him as he floats up the stairs, sometimes pressing his weight on his cane, sometimes missing the edge of the step with his toes. He is carrying a traveling mug with ice cubes clacking the sides and cranberry juice floating in between. He tells you he lost his sense of taste from a medication and now to taste something, he has to feel it. He swallows all his pills without juice.

"... 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, (coughs), 18... times 7, times 55... I'm taking 567 pills a month; this from the guy who used to hate swallowing aspirin." Thom sits at his computer, typing in slowly his med count for the month; what kind of drug, who makes it, the dosage, details. "I like to have this level of control, it's just good to know exactly what I'm taking." His hips and tailbone have started giving him trouble — giving out on him, a common side effect of new HIV drugs.

Tonight, he re-upholsters the footstool that stands at the end of his bed. The first time he does, he'll notice the vertical stripes of the fabric have been stretched crookedly. Despite the pain of squatting on the floor — his joints stressed and tired — he determinedly squats, tears, pulls and rips each heavy-duty staple out from the wood, and repositions the fabric. "I'll sleep well tonight," Thom says.
for a living. As one of two registered nurses on staff at Peabody, he may be on call for weeks at a time, 24 hours a day. "I've been HIV positive for nineteen years." You see his skin is a little grayer than it should be, and his eyes wear many layers. Un-medicated and free of any HIV-related illness, Robb's strength comes from a balance he finds between his own personal journey and his work.

"This [living in the Peabody House] in a lot of ways is perceived as, 'This is the last route for me, and who knows how much time we have.' During that last part of the journey. And if that's the case, the thing that keeps me here is, I want to get things done as fast as I can for them, because we don't know how much time they have. We don't know how long they'll have to enjoy whatever it is we're trying to do... My job isn't to hand out meds, or make certain they're eating, because that's their choice to make if they're going to eat or take their medications or whichever. My job is to provide as smooth a transition and as calm an environment for them to live in, whatever that is, and that's really hard."

Robb's hands sit out in front of him on the tabletop like he's willing them to sit still. "Because they don't have a whole pile of dreams left, or the big ones they might not be able to obtain. If they have the time, they don't have the energy. So whatever I can do to facilitate a sort of peace and harmony and closure for them, I'm going to do." And you wonder, as he refuses to look anywhere but straight into your eyes, where such strength comes from.

For himself, Robb explains, "I know intuitively there's nothing to be afraid of. I'm afraid of pain. I'm afraid of people not understanding where I am, emotionally at any time in that; I have a hard time letting people in anyway. But, I'm not afraid of the actual dying."

There is one thing that Robb does not do here. "I have a hard time going to the services that we have here afterwards." He coughs more as he talks about this. "I can be there for the whole journey up until that point, but I have a real hard time being there after the end of it...as far as holding their hand and being there taking their last breath, I can be there for all that."

Robb is not a stranger to loss; on his own journey he has found an understanding of purpose to what he does here, with his life. "I have lost so many special people in my life to this illness. I don't know why I'm still here and they're not." His words are rooted in a humbleness much more fervent than self-doubt. "I had a friend here in town who's recently passed away. He knew Frannie quite well and he was out there speaking to the community...various organizations about being HIV positive, and I didn't go to his service. I felt it was much more truer honoring of him...being here at work." If funerals and memorial services are celebrations of a life, for Robb, Peabody House is the supreme extension and celebration of life with AIDS.

He says that this stage in the house's history is an example of the changing face of AIDS. In 2001, four people passed away at Peabody House, tapering off a nearly 2 year period of time where no memorial services were held, no quilt patches sewn. Today he looks down the hall and into the future, and explains that no one at Peabody House is currently in an imminent stage, when death is symptomatic and inevitable.

As he speaks about Bobbie K., you see drops of sadness between his words. Robb has just returned from a two hour road trip to Buxton, Maine to pick up some of Bobbie's belongings; his room on the first floor serving little more purpose than a bed and closet for the past months.

"For me the imperative is to get their room to feel like their room. That's why I went to Bobbie's to get whatever stuff out of the trailer he was selling, and bring it here. And I feel in some senses, from being sick, I've let him down, 'cause I still haven't started painting his room. So we can get all his stuff in there, so he has a real sense of... 'This is mine. This is where I can be me. If I have to scream, yell, rant, rave this is where I can do it, safely and without any judgment.' " He coughs off remnants of his sore throat, looks you directly in the eye and says, "Next week, I will be painting Bobbie's room, come hell or high water."

Tom is in his room napping, too. Recently, he has gone through the steps of instituting a morphine pump as his primary source of care. Kat explains, "A morphine pump is one of the last stages of care. It's pure comfort care, pain management."

Thom's state means that he will stop taking all the other pills and medication. It means he will have the power to self-medicate his comfort level and maintain a flow of morphine at anytime. He argues with the voices of the drug that row through his blood, but in all this he looks up, eyes wide and stares somewhere in you. And then his eyes roll back in his head sharply, and his neck falls bent into the pillow. You press your tongue to the roof of your mouth, and hold your breath.

Then his shoulder whose joint is the dot connecting his stick arm to his stick figure body, twitches slightly, and he rolls over on his side. He won't notice if someone is in the room, in the near-85 degree room, with him. He slips
in and out; his stuffed animals and teddy bears, once propped neurotically in the center of his bed, lie limp on the floor.

The light in the house tonight is warm and purple. Once inside the embrace of his room, he speaks about his last doctor’s appointment. “My doctor... he said.” His sentences move like tar. Words chosen carefully, timing precise as coughs rise up from a dark place inside and sound like he is sobbing. But, he isn’t; somehow Thom’s eyes look stronger than ever tonight. “My doctor... he said... I won’t see Christmas.” He sleeps between phrases. Then he asks you to help him change into his pajamas and his structured routine shines through as he instructs the exact way he’d like the lights in his room turned off. “You can start over there, and turn each off and then stand at the end of the bed.”

Movement in this room begins to time itself to the sound of Thom’s morphine pump, as it clicks and ejects the liquid rush, and clicks and waits the thirty seconds to click again. “Do you know what’s special about this pump?” Thom gently lifts the edge of the gray pouch off his belt. “This morphine pump belonged to Frances Peabody.” He says her name in his way of making things more formal.

His entire chest is lifted and yanked from inside, and he dabs a crumpled tissue at the corners of his mouth continuously. And the morphine pump clicks, and Thom holds his finger on the trigger, dragging out the dosage. Leaning over him to say goodnight, your shadow could crush him. Slipping an arm under his back to raise him into a hug, your forearm could fold him in half. He gently kisses your neck under the ear and his skin is so cold.

Now, members of the staff at Peabody House take care of Thom. Strength in hands holding tissue paper skin, and soft voices asking what kind of juice he wants in his mug. This care is the simplest. It is their job’s heart. This is why Peabody House exists. The business is dying. Glued together in support for their business, the people of Peabody House, residents and staff, are tripping through this world of laughter and tears and the truths that make up life: good food, aching feet, quiet smiles, past loves, afternoon naps, hang-nails, money problems, laundry, humor, the litter box, regret, dishes, donuts, old friends, sadness, constipation, your mother’s eyes, rent, pills, dignity, independence, and death.

This is why Christopher is starting to prepare the pizza dough for lunch at noon. Heidi walks down the stairs in her gray hooded sweatshirt, to join Steve in the basement for a cigarette. Albert has just left for the day, and George still sits out on the deck watching Casco Bay and talking about hunting. OJ will stop in Thom’s room, joining Carla, a staff member close to Thom, who has just returned from a vacation, to hold his hand and tell him what time she’ll be in tomorrow morning. Time inside this house moves slowly.

Steps here echo like a heartbeat rhythm whispering names and ages. Guaranteed within these walls built by a community in need, is a place in death and memory much more beautiful than a statistics list or hospital bed. When a door is closed at Peabody House it is quietly clicked, and someone walks down a dimly lit hall and toward a place of peace.

You’re in the hallway lit now by the haze of Christmas lights decorating the front staircase. Christopher has gone home for the night. Carla is the only person working. The light and the air prompt her to tell a story, as the house begins to breathe its steady nighttime tempo.

“I was working alone the other night, and came upstairs real quick to grab a blanket for Thom. I heard Heidi crying in her room.” Carla’s voice rolls over the words with a purpose. “She hasn’t been around a lot of death, and seeing him... it’s hard for her; for all of us, but she’s having a hard time these days.” Her voice gets softer as she touches her heart and her eyes squint in a constant smile. She explains in almost a whisper that Heidi came downstairs to join Carla and Thom in the front room. The Christmas tree poised like a proud statue in the front window radiated a white light into the air. “And Heidi is just sobbing. She sits down right in between the two of us. She puts her head into Thom’s shoulder and tells him she doesn’t want him to die. And he’s stroking her head and just holding her in his arms.” Carla takes a deep breath. And your head is fuzzy with the images. “He says, ‘I’m not going up or down, I’m going forward.’ And it was just amazing.” She stops talking and looks you in the eye, like she’s sharing the last piece of her birthday cake with you. All her hours and all her motivation lie in this story. “And he just held her, and she was crying, crying. And he was being so strong.”

“Things like that, you know? That’s why Peabody House exists. That’s why.”
The TV fills the living room with a monotonous buzz. Other than that the room is oddly quiet, a rare instance of solitude in a crowded household. Ana squirms in front of the TV, transfixed, while Mary does homework in the kitchen.
"Life is merciless. You can have have things today, tomorrow you can lose it." Michael Ogustino sips his coffee as playing children shriek in the next room. "Now I take life easy; losing things doesn't affect it." Michael smiles and spreads his hands. His dark face is open and friendly, his smile easy. It is hard to believe that this man once knew the terror of abduction and near-execution.

Michael and his family were forced to leave Sudan in the face of possible arrest and execution by a suspicious government. Leaving the country meant losing Michael's position with the United Nations, the family's economic status, the comfort of a social world with the same ethnic and linguistic heritage.

"When you come to America, you must leave behind what you used to do," Michael says. "In America, you must start over." Starting over, in Michael's case, means a 72-hour-week factory job for him and a job as a hospital cleaning lady for his wife Dozette. Pay the rent. Pay the bills. Feed and clothe the children. Save money against a better time. This is the litany that governs the parents' days.

Their five children -- Samira, Marko, Jackson, Mary, and Anabiri -- speak fair English, but grammar and writing are hard for them, and they must master these tools in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. Only then will they be able to move on to the kind of education that American kids receive.

Family -- aborokporo in Zande -- is the reason they have come to the United States. Family is the reason they have survived. Family is what was threatened and what is now safe -- and that means more to them than anything else, here or across the ocean.
Hannford's parking lot is filled with Zande who have come to perform traditional Sudanese dancing and music and to give away free tastes of African cooking. Seeing a group of Sudanese pull up in a car, Mike breaks into a smile as he walks over to greet them.

The cleaning finished, Dozette leans on her supply cart in the hospital's corridor and sighs heavily. As soon as the family's financial situation improves, she hopes to give up cleaning hospital rooms and return to the English classes she had to abandon when she took the job.
The woman repeats herself several times. "Do you want to know how to do this?" Many of the kids in the room ignore her, but Marko listens. "See, you put the glue there and you can keep building it up." She motions toward the Popsicle-stick log cabins that the kids are supposed to be building, demonstrating the technique. His face scrunched, Marko sorts through her words and soon nods vigorously, picking up glue and some sticks.
Dozette yanks on a braid, tightening it. For the fifth time this morning, Ana screams with pain, or annoyance, or both. Her mother's movements are brisk but not without love. Though she must work in the afternoons and evenings, Dozette is home every morning to take care of the younger children.

Thanksgiving night, and the Center for Cultural Exchange hums with the energy of the Zande community. Jackie is among them, ready to move after sitting out while her father and the older people dance.
Everyone has gathered in the kitchen, a family united by strong bonds of love and mutual comfort. Seated at the table, Jackie answers questions from Samina and Mary. Marko, dancing to his own drummer, grins and spins in a circle. Ana is quiet but soon will yell "I'm the baby!" and become the center of attention again.
Chesuncook seems some random intersection of the invisible lines of latitude and longitude set adrift in the woods. Its road isn’t on maps. A century ago, its three hundred residents had a post office, school, church, and even, for a while, telephone lines connecting them to the end of the lake and the rest of the world. The telephone poles and official buildings have since disappeared, but the church remains, mostly unused, with old children’s school desks piled in the basement.

Cars can’t handle the road, so we walk in. On our first visit, the leaves were flaming reds and oranges still holding tight to the trees, and air warm enough that we were sweating after the four and a half miles. On later trips, we wanted long sleeves, and two weeks from now, we’ll walk in around midnight with the moon nearly full and snowflakes swirling in the clouds of our breath. Today it’s raining and I’m walking quickly. Most of the leaves have dropped. I step around a puddle, its surface opalescent with motor oil. Someone must have come out recently. The road sees a lot of activity this time of year, with everyone bringing in winter supplies and shuttling hunters in and out. Even with their monstrous military-issue vehicles, the thirteen residents only have another month or so until the road’s entirely impassable and they turn to using snowmobiles.

The village is a few hundred-acre island surrounded by tens of thousands of square miles of privately owned logging land. From Millinocket, the closest town a little more than two hours away, a logging road takes you past the turnoff to Kokadjo and Greenville to turn right on another dirt road—Pine Stream. It ends at the parking lot ten miles down, and the tote-road to Chesuncook leads from it.

Three miles towards the village the woods open and the lake appears. The road passes the old Priest’s House and Maggie’s camp up the hill; it twists and a wide lawn leads up to a white patrician home—the Lake House Inn. David and Luisa Surprenant run it; they bought it from Maggie McBennie three years ago. American flags flutter in front, and their two dogs run around outside. David works on the addition in back. The lawn continues to the faded garden and greenhouse, big climbing tree on the hill with Jacob up in it watching the older kids playing Marco Polo below him. More lawn, and then the road again, splitting and fading out to the right towards Red’s and Graveyard Point. It leads left up and around to the church, the cemetery, Pete’s, and Jack and John’s. It continues past more camps, most empty for the season and a few abandoned for decades, out the other side of the village to the old dump. The road keeps going and I don’t know where it goes or where it ends.
"This is the way these people are, this is the life they\'ve created for themselves and you can\'t change them."
It's easy to forget the date and day of the week here. Often there's no real reason to remember. “We're all up here for one common thing, and that's to be left alone. And to live pretty much quietly and peacefully.” David Surprenant and his family moved up full-time after several years of spending summers here, and brought the number of year-round households to four. Perhaps the only things they all share are a desire for solitude, and awe for their surroundings.

“You don’t find it in the congested areas. The day’s gone, and they didn’t enjoy it. Up here...a lot of times I’ll just catch myself staring at the mountain. People don’t seem to take that time to enjoy what they’re doing.... When I first talked to Red about it he said ‘Geez, it took me almost four years ’til I settled down!’ A lot of those pressures are self-imposed. There is no rush. I’ll do it tomorrow.”

I’m by the upstairs window in the house John’s building, flies and ladybugs buzzing around and sawdust from the circular saw floating up and catching the light. The noise from several generators rises and falls throughout the village. They power TV sets and VCRs, dishwashers, clothes dryers, microwaves, the Lake House’s copier and fax, and John’s saw.

I look over at Jack’s next door—see the neat stacks of wood, birdhouses and propane bottles. Then I hear hollow footsteps against bare wood: John carrying things around. He started the house over two years ago as a combination workroom/garage, but it’s evolved into what will be the guesthouse of a larger Victorian home he’s planning. He’s building it partly as investment, perhaps to live in, and entirely for the aggravation and pleasure of building something perfect and beautiful.

“John is excruciatingly slow, deliberate, very meticulous and has the patience of Job. Except for with me. He can be quick with a sharp word.” Jack’s half-joking.

Words between them are frequently sharp or complimentary. They’re about to start making and putting in John’s window frames; he’s found an antique they’re using as their pattern, but Jack suspects the dimensions are warped and things may get ugly. He’s waiting now before starting in on the frames, covering propane bottles with plastic and string to keep the snow off them this winter.

An old army plane flies overhead as we stand watching while John and Jack work on John’s house. Their dentist is out for a joyride from Millinocket. He flies over buzzing us a few times and waggles his wings as we wave. The Surprenants use him, too. Jack tells us he makes house calls. The plane circles a few times more, and wanders away again.

Twenty-three years ago John stepped from a floatplane onto the Chesuncook dock, a skinny kid with a single suitcase. He’d answered Jack’s newspaper ad for summer help, stayed that season and never left. He is simple, private, and introspective, has a huge respect for living things and a passion for craft; he hews logs with old tools in the old way. Last year, someone in Hawaii heard about his work and flew him there for the winter to hew logs for their home. He loves to see how other people live and needs doses of civilization to refresh his appreciation for home. The small Victorian he’s building rises tall and stately on the hill amongst the rougher camps; he wants a crystal chandelier for the living room when it’s done.

Jack shoots blue jays, and leaves them on the lawn to feed his foxes. He tells us to keep looking out the window and we might see foxes walk by though it’s early yet, just four, and they usually come around six. We’re sitting in his little kitchen drinking tea—it’s cool and sunny outside but sweltering in here; we sweat sipping hot tea from our mugs. He’s a towering man but perches comfortably on the counter, joints a bit stiff and hair turned wispy and white. His home is immaculate, and he has a temper. Decades old hunting trophies look down at us from the living room; he’s lived here longer than anyone. Other residents say he is this place’s history book.

His white house is sealed against ladybugs, front porch entirely covered with plastic and windows lined with blue tape. “There’s millions of ‘em! How I hate the god-damned ladybugs!” As we talk he stands and crushes one on the ceiling, another on the wall. Says he killed 17 on the way into the shower this morning, and one more once in the stall. The village is infested. The screened-in porches of every camp itch and crawl with them, and they leave stains everywhere. Jack grumbles that his back cabin “looks like someone smeared calf-shit all around.” They stink. I hold one cupped in my palm and lift it to my nose.
and inhale…faint, but acrid and musty. It bites me and I flick it. It spins across the table and falls to the floor. Multiply this by the hundreds of thousands swarming the village this early October.

T
he new dam flooded Graveyard Point in 1915, and they moved the cemetery from there back into the woods behind the church, where the dark cluttered path opens to a small and sunlit space. One of the newest headstones belongs to Maggie McBernie’s husband, Bert. They spent forty-four years together in Chesuncook nearly alone, saved their money and planned to enjoy it in their retirement. When he died unexpectedly a few years ago, she was so angry with him they say she still comes up and stomps on his grave.

I only met Maggie once, the week before she left. She’s finely featured, approaching elderly, and I think of her as tall, though I can’t remember her height. Her gray hair was swept away from her face, she was wearing jeans, a flannel shirt, and hiking boots, watching while a friend repaired her four-wheeler. She turned occasionally to say it’d be a few minutes more before we could talk, and then a few minutes more, her voice cool and measured, the accent perfectly preserved Parisian. She did not like Paris, and so when she fell in love with an American at the end of the war and the city was so torn, it seemed an easy thing to follow her husband Bert back to the place he was raised. His family ran the Lake House in Chesuncook, Maine, and the young couple eventually took it over. They were there together forty-four years, and Maggie never left the village for grocery runs or to visit town at all, only to return to France occasionally to see her family and mother. She said during one
twelve year stretch, she and Bert were the only winter people. "We loved it, it was just the two of us..." She's stayed in Chesuncook after Bert's death, and spent the first winter here alone but other residents said it was hard on her, she was changed when they saw her again in spring. I was taken aback that there was no contact at all with her throughout the winter—her camp is only a quarter-mile up the tote-road. But there are not friendly and strong connections between herself and the other year-rounders. She left for Greenville a few weeks ago; she’s visited friends since Bert's death, but this will be only her second winter out of Chesuncook since she came.
Bird season started October second, moose season begins now, a week later, and deer season starts next Saturday. Luisa gives us the run-down. “No white. No white t-shirts, no white anything. I won’t even hang out white laundry. Starting next Saturday, all my whites go straight to the dryer.” New England’s hunters, warm with liquor and anxious to see deer anywhere, have been known to shoot cows and clotheslines. There is always Orange for protection; it shocks the eye and casts a neon glow on any skin near it. Its pigment takes over the essence of any article of clothing, so that it doesn’t really matter whether you buy an Orange poncho, hat or vest—it’s simply Orange. From here on, Luisa’s kids wear Orange when they’re outside.

Hunting season means a lot of shuttling for David and Red, picking ‘sports’ up at the parking lot and returning them later to their vehicles. Everyone knows pretty well who’s coming in when, who’s picking up who and how long they’ll be in. Red’s old army ambulance rumbles by the Lake House and back again carrying men in Orange. Later you’ll hear a shot fired in the woods and see splotches of Orange moving through the trees.

Peter, Red’s cousin and another year-rider, is a naturalist and guide. He doesn’t go after this crowd. “I’m not so much interested in the hunters and fishermen, as I am people who just like to get out to such a unique spot and enjoy it. You know, hikers and skiers and snowshoers. Tree huggers and leaf-peepers and all that.” He does hunt, though, and when he cleans a grouse, sometimes opens up the stomach to see what it’s been eating, tries to find the plant in the wild and taste it himself.

We’ve parked the car, shouldered our bags, and are about a hundred yards down the tote-road when we hear a huge slow engine growling down the road. In a moment it comes into view—David Surprenant’s massive beaten beast of a WWII tractor modified with a flat-bed. The cab army green mottled with camo-smears and rust, the tall mud tires wrapped with chains. The front windshield’s cracked in bull’s-eyes and meandering hairlines. David leans out of the window. His full beard is trimmed close to his face, either brown or blonde but with enough red in it that it’s hard to decide one over the other. His grin is relaxed beneath steady eyes. He’s tall, strong, a big guy, and today he’s driving out with John to help with a propane delivery. Jack and John are getting twenty-four 100 lb. tanks of propane; it’ll last them until February. They’ve butted the tractor up to Pine Stream road. David’s in the back, in beige Carhartt pants and suspenders, as always. He lowers the huge tailgate and climbs out. We wait.

"I’m not so much interested in the hunters and fishermen as I am people who just like to get out to such a unique spot and enjoy it."
"We're all up here for one common thing, and that's to be left alone."
We’re all leaning on a couple of pickups parked in the lot. We’ve been waiting a while, and David’s starting to get frustrated. He’s forgotten to bring a radio from home. He had a call from them this morning saying that they’re delivering at ten, but it’s 10:30. There’ve been plenty of times that the delivery’s been forty minutes or an hour late, but plenty too that simply never materialized. If he had a radio, he could call Luisa back at the house and see if they canceled or were running behind. Without it, we’re here indefinitely, until they arrive or we get tired of waiting.

He finally takes his shotgun out of its case and walks down the road to see if he can get a grouse. When he returns twenty minutes later, he’s holding a bird by its feet. He tosses it in the tractor, and walks over to us again. We wait a while longer.

We ride back without the propane. When we arrive at the Lake House Luisa’s walking towards us. “They just left.” She says. Arrived two hours late. “I told them they’d just have to leave it there.” It means another three hours out of tomorrow’s day.

Luisa calls us outside so we won’t miss the UFO. “You just missed it flying over the house,” she says. We do a double-take. “Oh yeah, we see something like this at least every other month.” She shrugs her shoulders, tells us to get the field glasses by the piano. There’s a point of light a little larger than a star hanging low on the horizon. It flickers, and takes the binoculars I see there’re a couple different colors, many lights on a single object that blink in a weird pattern. I find another object a good distance to its right. They don’t move for several minutes, and when I look away for a few seconds one has zipped much higher in the sky and more to the left, though no farther away. They hang there motionless much longer than it takes to run down the list of logical options. None fit. We shrug our shoulders with Luisa. The Surprenants have long ago stopped trying to make sense of them; they’re just a funky part of the landscape. “Maybe the government,” they say. It makes as much sense as anything else.

D

David’s got a deer, his first ever, on the first day of the season! He’s outside, and everyone’s rushing around. He’s been trying for a deer for six years, first in Massachusetts, where they’re from, and now here. Luisa’s all a-flutter and proud of him, puts on a silly accent and says “Mah man went out and brought home the bacon!” We all laugh. She’s calling David’s brother, Uncle Charlie, but only reaches her little nephew. “Tell him uncle David got a deer, an 8-pointer!” A little voice over the phone line asks, “What’s an 8-pointer?” Everyone laughs.

David’s hitching up the trailer, and kids come rushing in. “Dad says Lyssa has to come!” Lyssa, the oldest, is twelve and her grin is huge. “Dad says I have to come!” She’s trying to lace her boots and looks up at me. “My fingers are trembling so I can’t…” the rest of the sentence is swallowed up in her excitement. Alyssa’s sitting behind her dad on the four-wheeler, dwarfed behind him, pony-tail pulled through her cap and arms around David, jacket loose around her shoulders.

The wind bites cold and sends chill fingers up the back of my scalp, eyes drying in the wind, inhaling the piney forest and four-wheeler’s exhaust. Sean, my photography partner, stands next to me in the trailer and the four-wheeler roars along, spraying black mud on our fingers and wrists as we hold on.

We’ve stopped. Our breath swirls around us and leaves are wrapped wet around the trailer tires. We climb through the fallen moss-covered trees to some point David’s leading us to.

The buck. There’s very little blood. David parts the fur to show one pink bullet hole into the flesh. A little blood trickles from the buck’s ankle and antler. His tongue is gray and covered with leaves and pine needles, his eyes are already milky and blue, staring and rimmed with long lashes. He’s begun to bloat and his sides are swollen; he’s begun to stink already. Though it seems we’ve all spent a long time standing silently and staring down at the body, I think we’ve all been talking and moving around it, searching out the bullet holes and listening to David speak about how it was done.
Sean and David are pulling it by the antlers over tree trunks and brush; the deer groans deep and steady as the bloat escapes. The guys laugh harshly at the smell and keep moving. A tuft of fur catches against a knot on a fallen tree and is left behind, and Lyssa notices and reaches to touch it. David’s rinsing his hands, wiping them on an old bed sheet. He’s never done this before. “You squeamish, Lys?” She shakes her head no, smiles. He’s hoping she’s right. His knife parts the fur, the skin, the connecting tissues. The body opens like lips curling away from a mouth.

His hands reach in, he’s split something that hisses hard and wet for a few seconds, splutters thick and green. The stomach’s huge, bulging out, veined white over its swollen surface like veins on a leaf. David lifts it out, and the body steams. All is pale and contrasting against the dark leaves and earth it rests on.

The smell is warm, sweet, strong, and very bad. Alyssa holds a front leg up and away from the body to help her dad, wrinkles her nose against the odor. David makes little sounds every now and then, but continues calmly, a little unsure of how to go about it but sure it will get done.

“I’m not big on liver, but I’ll bet Jack is... Lys, get the water out so I can get some of this off...” the water’s poured, the liver slips away like a fish and lands under a branch. He picks it up again, rinses it, puts it into a ziplock in Lyssa’s backpack.

David raises the deer and blood drains from over fur and onto the ground. All of us are clustered around, dealing with the smell, pressing close and cold near the body. David’s done, and the deer lifted into the trailer.
We’re back, kids swarming around, Luisa busting in her smile and everyone peering into the trailer, the dogs fascinated and spooked. We change quick and then roll out again to Jack’s to show him the deer and offer the heart and liver, walk into his gunsmithing workroom. The low ceiling is hung with implements of all sorts, there are guns lined up along the wall. Jack will retire in a few years; his work is famous and beautiful, he gets sent business from all over the world. There are wooden counters everywhere, and the light is low.

Jack hands David a Miller Lite and a shot of Southern Comfort, and we stand with him and John. They talk about tracking. Jack nods. “Funny how things you see with those field glasses get hard to find when you get there!” Everyone agrees. “And those tracks make awful poor soup!” Laughter. Jack invites us back the next day to try the heart and liver. We arrive for what we thought was a snack, and discover Jack’s prepared a full spread. He refuses to sit down and works in the kitchen, leans in the doorway and chats with us as we eat. He’s made pickles from his garden, and green beans and potatoes. The heart surprises me in its rich flavor and texture until I remember the obvious—it’s a muscle. He’s fried the liver with onions and bacon. We drink water and have hot-milk cake and homemade vanilla ice cream for dessert. We sip tea and Frangelico. Everyone groans in appreciation and protest.

It’s not often anyone in Chesuncook sits down with other residents and has lunch. The conversation is easy but a little guarded. They talk about hunting and the kids, they gossip a little, a little sharply, but back away from meanness. There’s obviously an involved history between Maggie and Jack, the two longest residents of the village. He says, “She’s not what she seems.” There’s a long series of innuendo about the tension between them. That Maggie’s husband Bert made several of his friends promise when he died to take care of her. “Did you promise, Jack?” Everyone laughs as Jack shakes his head with a grin. “Gee, I wonder why.” “You’d help her off the pier, is that right?” “If there was a hole, I’d help her into it.” The feelings seem to be mutual.

Maggie hated the main barn behind the Lake House with a passion that begs an explanation she never gave. Once she sold the property to the Surprenants, she insisted the barn be burnt. David Surprenant helped her move the forty-four years of accumulated junk in the house out to the barn. Books and useable furniture, boxes of clothes she’d brought from Paris, the things she knew she’d never wear. She’d toss boxes of photos into the flame and when anyone protested just said they were old, bad. She figured it was her history, and that was finished. David remembers. “Every morning I’d go out and stir the coals, throw more stuff on. Non-stop I’d burn. I had a fire going almost two weeks straight.”
people from away bringing money into the area. “So it’s out of state money. That’s where the problem is. People in Maine have an ethic that you’re born with. I don’t know if it’s in the water or what it is, but people from away don’t have it. You can’t explain it to ‘em... they want more for less. People aren’t what they seem. Maine people are.” That the Surprenants next door are from that farthest away of places—Massachusetts—goes unspoken. The Katahdin View and Lake House hold the only commercial permits in Chesuncook, and in recent months some resentment has arisen between them around the price each charges customers for hauling propane into the village—David now charges less than Red. Under the weight of this and a few more disagreements, the tentative friendships between them have been suspended, and each reports on the other’s vague unwillingness to cut through the unspoken things between them. When Red passes by on the road, they may still wave but the waves are... different, each side agrees. They all raise eyebrows and shrug shoulders, say nothing more.

The one-room church is small and whitewashed with green trim. Its wooden floors are scarred by lots of feet and shifting wooden pews. Its front room is the village library, and has become a sort of village repository. Jack’s old record player and bound collections of classical music sit beside a mason jar of nameless puzzle pieces, and the shelves are scattered with rusted logging paraphernalia. Services are only held in the summer, and every Tuesday, Red returns the previous visiting minister to the parking lot and picks up the next. This is also where the yearly town association meetings are held, and where everyone, part-timers, and summer people, convene the first Saturday in August. Red was present for one of the largest changes these meetings brought.

“When I came here I got everybody to join [the association] because they were complaining about the way it was, and then they counted the votes, and there was this power shift in the village. That’s what it was. Maggie and Bert were figureheads here for a hundred years, so they ran everything, had everything the way they wanted it. He died, and she sold the place, and it was just time for another generation. And, well, that transition never happens easy. But that hatred and bitterness is dying off, because the people are leaving, dying. So hopefully it will go, and it won’t be passed down.”

Foxes have been turning up dead the last couple years. Several adults and the litters born underneath the camps near Jack’s place have been killed. Jack considers the foxes pets, and feeds them. Red’s two pups were never on leashes and were blamed. Jack called the warden, who arrived at the Surprenants, was directed to Jack’s and then to Red’s. Red was in town, so the warden confronted Sheila, and told her the dogs had to be controlled or Red would lose them. By his choice, the dogs have disappeared. Red’s said nothing more about it, and the two households haven’t spoken since.

Luisa Surprenant’s black hair is in a ponytail and her dark eyes look steady at you through glasses. “[The association meeting’s] about the only time when you’ll get everybody in the same room together. But there are still sides. Somebody sits on the left, somebody sits on the right. Or, you know, if he’s sitting in the back I’ll go sit in the front, that sort of thing. The thing that always amazed me, there’s probably like twenty people here on a regular basis [in the summer]. And I guess you could put them all in the same room, but it’d be a very quiet room.”

“I never suspected that these twelve people did not get along. It’s not a conflict. A conflict is something that is there. There’s nothing there.” She gestures around her. When I asked if she’s changed at all since moving to Chesuncook, she said that at first she hoped to try and smooth all the tensions, but eventually woke up one morning and looked in the mirror. “This is the way these people are, this is the life they’ve created for themselves and you can’t change them.”
David's got a deer, his first ever, on the first day of the season!

Luisa said she hadn't been out to Graveyard Point for a long time, even though it's so close, just a two-minute walk from home. "I've never, ever, ever seen this. In all my years. The water's usually up to the grass line. It's incredible." We looked across the dry expanse between water and yellowed grass, watched the wind kicking up swirls of sand near the water. She shakes her head. "We've been here up on ten years straight and it's never the same."

At the river's mouth, a mile or so around the lake from the village, the old boom piers come into view; they've been left abandoned since 1971, when river-running logs was outlawed and the piers were no longer needed to corral them as they floated downriver. Now they're entirely exposed—as they haven't been for decades—and attached to shore on spits of mud. Up the river, the other piers teeter lopsided, falling over in odd directions. Each is successively smaller until the water makes its final turn and disappears.

Back on the trail, towards town, I see where Peter began to mark the trail's turns with orange tape and paint to guide the tourists up to the road from the lake.

"There's still a lot more ground to discover. I keep making trails, and when I say trails I don't mean something 6 feet wide you can drive your four wheeler down, but just walking trails through the woods and through the trees."

Peter marks trails, maintains them sporadically, and maps them. He wears reading glasses, he's a big man in his fifties with grizzled beard and short wavy hair.

Luisa is in her rocker working on a quilt, Lyssa reading. Mitch and David are playing checkers against Jake, and Erin's stretched out on the back of the couch watching over them.

Luisa's taken her hair down and it flows over her shoulders, the palm of one hand raised to touch her cheek. She yawns once or twice. "Okay my darling urchins. It's 9:15." Time for bed, but the little movements and conversations continue.

She's got freckles, talks fast, and has a Massachusetts accent with a touch of Maine thrown in. Speaks the Portuguese she grew up with when her mother calls, switching in and out of the two languages in the same
conversation. When we talk, she pulls certain words out of her mouth—Vavó, the kids’ grandfather, and chorizo, Portuguese sausage—in an accent so rich it surprises you. She teases her kids, ruffles hair and yells sharply at everyone to get outside, now! I mean it! when they’re too much to deal with in the kitchen. She home-schools all the kids, grins telling me about the kids’ reaction to moving here full-time. “Okay, so now that you guys know we’re going to live here, what do you think?” Erin’s reaction is ‘Yay! We don’t have to go to school!’ I said, ‘Honey, school comes to you.’” Before the Surprenants moved up three years ago, there’d been no families in the village for fifty years.

“You asked me last time what my favorite place in the village was, and I thought about that for a while. And I guess it’d have to be this house. Here. Just doing, just hanging around, just being here. Yesterday we went to town, but you come back and it’s like you take a nice deep breath and say I’m home. It’s peaceful, no rush. If I don’t do it today, I’ll do it tomorrow. If it rains today we go tomorrow. You don’t depend on anybody else, nobody else is depending on you. You’re just, you’re on your own.”

When Bob Young died it was last June. He went to take a nap and never woke up, which was fine because he always told everybody ‘when I die I’m gonna die up in my camp in Chesuncook, sleeping.’ The State said we couldn’t move him, ‘cause he wasn’t pronounced dead by a medical examiner. Somebody with authority. And it was pretty obvious he was dead. Nobody knew where we were, couldn’t find us on the map. They couldn’t get a helicopter in, couldn’t get a plane in. The medical examiner goes, ‘Well, I’m not going to be able to get up there til tomorrow,’ and I said ‘He’s going out today, cause we’re gonna
need a shovel to pick him up in the morning, cause it’s hot! We finally decided just to take him out, screw the state. They said, ‘We’ll send you up a couple wardens to the bottom of the road, we’ll meet you there.’

“He was in a sleeping bag, which was convenient, so we just zipped that back up, and brought him out. Got a short ladder and rolled him, strapped him onto that, used that as a stretcher. We had to bring him out from the second floor, it was kind of like a loft. Bob was about, geez, three fifty maybe? Six five? Big boy. Peter was there, John—and John and Bob were real close, kinda like a father figure for him. So it was tough on Johnny.

“We got him out, and put ‘em in the truck. We had Red drive and met the two wardens down there. So they photographed Bob, and the only thing we had to put him in was a deer bag. You know? Like when they have a road-kill? [The wardens] were all shook up. That was funny. Well, we were used to Bob being dead. These guys weren’t.”

Snow has fallen and melted again, the lake is soggy and the sky is low. I walk towards Pete’s silhouette in the near dark, and meet him as he examines the lakeshore.

“Anything cool walking around?” Tracks, I’m curious. He shakes his head. “Ah, a marten and a couple foxes. And something,” here he smiles, holds his hands apart a few inches wide, a couple more inches long. “Some kind of varmint.” I look puzzled and he grins. “Surprenant. One of the kids’ prints. Do you know of any kids growing up with an experience as unique as this?”

David gives a bird he shot to Alyssa, the oldest, to deal with. A few of the kids and their cocker spaniel follow her away from the house. She stands, spreads the bird’s wings and stands on them, grabs its feet and pulls, all in the space of time it takes me to realize what’s about to happen. Its flesh is pink run through with thin blue veins, the intestines are spilling out everywhere, dark green and muddy looking, the dark slick liver shiny in its lobes. She does it matter-of-factly, tosses the offal into the bushes so the dogs can’t eat it. Lyssa scrapes feathers away from the flesh, kneeling with her long wavy red hair getting caught in the sun. The entrails are stuck with feathers. Dexter gets too close and she whacks him on the nose with the flat of the knife. In minutes, she’s holding a perfect grouse breast in the palm of her hand, and carries it back to the house with brothers and sister trailing behind and talking about dinner.

“It hasn’t been any detriment to their education.”

David’s in the rocking chair in the kitchen, it’s after dinner and everything’s quiet. “If anything it’s made them more independent. I just told Luisa, we’re not raising Indians. We’re raising chiefs. And that’s the way it is. That’s the attitude my parents took, and out of eight of us, we’re all self-employed.

“Raising them to be independent is tough at first. You know, when you first see ‘em as a baby, you can’t even imagine they’ll be leaving some day. But it’s all a part of life. I mean, everybody, every parent would like to see their child go in their footsteps, but that’s not the way we’re raising them. We’re raising them to be independent. I don’t want any of them ever to feel they’ve disappointed us [by doing what they want].”

Peter decided Halloween should fall on the 30th this year, and walked from house to house telling each to have their candy ready early for the Surprenant kids. He didn’t bother telling the Lake House until almost twilight on the day itself, when he showed up and mentioned a couple part-timers would be leaving the next day, and still wanted to get in on the event. Luisa’d learned of the change indirectly the day before and complained loudly and often about it until Pete arrived, watched him with a twitching mouth as he explained things, and within a couple hours had the kids bundled up and ready to go. In one of the very few concerted efforts of the entire community, the kids made out like bandits.

Pete’s the only year-rounder who manages to operate outside the squabbles and feuds. As far as I can tell, he just ignores them, half aware they even exist. In one conversation, he volunteered he thought of everyone in the village as a member of his family, and it’s a sentiment so far away from everyone else’s that I’m still not sure if he was completely serious. He’s definitely the only one who could mean it, though. He invites himself in to watch TV with Jack and John, helps Red with random odd jobs, and rides out with David to split wood with him in the parking lot. All of the labor is bartered—Luisa just struck a deal with him to supply him with freshly baked cookies—and the exchange is friendly. He carries a lot of information between the interested and silent households, amuses and exasperates everyone—they’re glad to have him around.
This is a snapshot of this instant, and the picture’s blurred—Maggie is moving out of the frame, the Surprenants are settling in, John moves away for a couple months in the winter and Jack stays, Red and Sheila stay, Peter stays. For now. Everyone stays for now and hopes to be here later; no one’s sure of everyone who’ll be here in ten years. Some say everyone will be, plus several new additions, others think a few faces may change, others think the only one remaining will be Jack.

Living here, you watch the seasons change, you’re always noticing more subtle differences in your physical surroundings and in the people around you; each adult has told me that everything here is always changing, the view changes every day. They’re watching the mountain and the lake when they say it, but their relationships change just as much and nearly as often.

It’s a small town condensed to thirteen people, the squabbles giving it energy but made more personal by its size. There are facts and opinions everyone can agree on. There’s what they are sure of that the others would contest, and what they’ll swear they’re sure of, though some doubt they might have misunderstood or misconstrued the situation. They know the worst, and perhaps the best, of each other’s opinions. Maybe the grudges have set and solidified too powerfully to turn back from them at this point. Maybe they haven’t. They can’t escape being acutely aware of each other’s presence, in any case, and they understand each other’s love for this place if nothing else.

The Surprenants and Red and Sheila have not been getting along for several months. It’s a few days after Thanksgiving, and David and Luisa know they’re back from visiting Red’s parents, but have seen none of their usual movement around the house. They’re just a touch concerned, and David is going to check on them. He returns after running into Pete on the way over, who confirms that Red and Sheila are fine. Luisa glances out the window towards their place. “We see smoke coming out of the chimney but we haven’t seen hide nor hair of them...if we lived in town, would [we] even notice? If we were in town, none of this would matter.”
salt

A Surprenant Family Album
Chesuncook, Fall 2001
Photography by Sean McGann
Hey! Wait a minute! I just finished reading this magazine and I'm still not sure just what the Salt Institute does.

The experiential education programs of the Salt Institute collect, communicate, and preserve non-fiction stories about Maine people, culture, and landscape that, as they relate to the larger world, foster community and celebrate the diversity and commonality of humanity.

Salt’s educational programs: Students immerse themselves in one of Salt’s three tracks – writing, photography, radio – for 15 weeks, much of which is spent in the field “getting the story.”

The Salt Gallery, at the corner of Federal and Exchange Streets in Portland, exhibits student, staff, and alumni work, and occasionally displays work by visiting artists.

The Salt Archive preserves more than 600 student projects documenting Maine life. A photographic and oral historical collection of more than 400,000 photographic negatives, 5,000 prints, 4000 tapes of oral history interviews and their written transcriptions represent communities diverse in their ethnic and socioeconomic composition.

Salt’s Annual Fund: Tuition income covers about 80% of annual operating expenses. The annual fund is an opportunity for people who are interested in Salt’s work to support that work with tax-deductible unrestricted gifts.

Salt’s web site: www.salt.edu If you are interested in learning more about Salt, the web site is a good place to visit. You can download an application, read faculty biographies, and see and hear recent work by our writers, photographers, and radio students.

Salt magazine: The next issue will be published in January 2003, the beginning of Salt’s 30th anniversary year.