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New England

i.

What makes a town stand tall?

Trace the Canadian boundary of New York, from Niagara Falls in the west to Rouses Point beside Vermont, and insensibly this question poses itself. Something is changing—but what? It is not the topography—gently undulant farmland, not far from significant water. It is not the climate—long biting winters and sufficient growing seasons. It is not the nation or the state or the schools or the people, which are one. And yet, as you head northward from Oswego, the amiable bounty of the roadside lapses into shabbiness. Structures seem to be flaking, rusting, leaning, warping into earth. Windows are boarded with buckled plywood. Cars and trailers gaze forlornly from front yards, pleading to be purchased for five, four, three hundred, or less. Fields have been abandoned. In one town (why shame them by naming them—they have worries enough), I see a sign for Little League. I venture up the path a way. The Little League fields in my town are sodded and edged and buffed: diamonds shine. Here I find only head-high weeds, blooming yellow and purple, and one sway-backed bench.

The people too turn grimmer as you turn north. Torn clothes and stained T-shirts suggest indifference to appearance. Attractive futures straighten our spines: that is why soldiers are made to stand stiff: their very posture constitutes a salute. Dim futures make us slouch.

The map suggests highways may be to blame: the water-highway of the Erie Canal, which the turnpikes paralleled, brought trade to Western New York, and still people pass this way, along the Interstate. No one travels through New York's northern hump unless they have to (to visit, for example, the grave of William Almon Wheeler).

These northern towns were not always stooped and shuffling. Spires and porticos and florid carpentry recall a prouder epoch, when neighbors lived where they were born and a farmer could grow, with application, into affluence and esteem.

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What makes a town stand tall—or a man—is the chance to rise. We grow taller by reaching. Take from a man—or a town—or a nation—that hope and good posture no longer seems worth the effort. “Life,” observed Dr. Johnson, “is a progress from want to want, not from enjoyment to enjoyment.” Were we wise, we would desire nothing more than desire.

Cross the bridge into Vermont, over Lake Champlain, and the view changes. Northernmost New York, above the Adirondacks, doesn’t conjure much, but Vermont is a postcard. When, we wonder, did Vermont become “Vermont,” cradled in quote marks, a place of high mountains and simple values, of healthy exertion and crafts and folk art and heritage and engaging taciturnity and sensitivity to earth, a state somehow emblematically “American”? The physical variation between Vermont and northernmost New York isn’t enough to explain the difference. Vermont, too, was once a place of rural communities and rugged farms. Vermont was not bolstered by great highways or large industry. Yet Vermont found hope, a hope reflected in its cleanliness and comeliness and bustle, its evident cheer. It made itself something. How?

Vermont today is so much “Vermont”—in quotes—it’s easy to forget this picture is a confection, not a foregone fact. Faced with a declining agrarian economy and remoteness from urban hubs, Vermont reinvented itself. It took what it had—picturesque mountains, forests, clean air, cooler summers, covered bridges, Yankee ways, respected schools, and cows—and composed them into a “lifestyle.” Calvin Coolidge, a Vermonter, helped: there was something oddly refreshing about his wry silence and curt confidence. Robert Frost helped too, who kept readers confused whether he came from New Hampshire or Vermont (his entrancing homage to New Hampshire ends with the line, “At present I am living in Vermont”). Frost conceived of an America so clear and true and vital we yearn to be swaddled in it. Grandma Moses helped with her whimsically bucolic paintings, which portrayed a paradise in the orchards and snows. Skiing helped, which became popular after the Second World War, as did cars and roads, which facilitated travel to and fro. The Sixties’ counterculture helped with its anti-urban, anti-slick bias that found in Vermont a congenial setting (Ben and Jerry, of ice cream renown, cleverly packaged this bias, making “Vermont” virtually synonymous with sweet, creamy, natural, funky, and sincere; more recently, the Vermont Teddy Bear Company has been luring buyers with the same bait). Computers help, which more and more enable us to work away from cities. So does our zeal for exercise, especially hiking and biking, which the state’s scenery encourages.

These were ingredients, but it took chefs, lots of them, collaborating, often unwittingly, to stir their state into a state of mind. One of these chefs was an heiress of railroad and sugar fortunes, a decorous Episcopalian one would never have taken for a pioneer. Electra Havemeyer Webb was a lady doomed to a life of pampered futility, of stupendously accomplishing nothing with exquisite taste. The deepest hurts recorded in Mrs. Webb's biography are her mother's critique of a purchase ("Well . . . if you could have seen my mother's face! She said, '*What* have you done?' And I said, 'I have bought a work of art'") and her chagrin at her mother's being jailed for a night as a suffragette ("Of course most people think it is a joke but I felt dreadfully. . . . It was all in the papers and I was really very upset over the whole thing").

Ease is a disease: that the majority longs to be infected does not make it less crippling. Mrs. Webb survived privilege. What saved her was a mysterious avidity, her ceaseless, restless craving for the refuse and bric-a-brac we now honor as Folk Art. She saw, she wanted, and she could afford—masses of the stuff: farm tools, moccasins, dolls, toys, sleighs, carriages, decoys, bandboxes, shop signs, pill boxes, covered bridges, quilts, lighthouses, locomotives, sawmills, scrimshaw, music boxes, steamships, posters, carousels, bonnets, mittens, samplers, porringers, figureheads, spinning wheels, weathervanes, whirligigs, ladles, calipers, crockery . . . the extent of her collections dizzies. Her parents had been noted collectors of European art, whose bequests to the Metropolitan Museum in New York City include some of our most cherished images. They too deserve praise. But Electra (along with a few other early Folk Art aficionados) did more than collect: she widened and democratized our conception of art. As, through our history, we have expanded suffrage from property-owning white males to all adults, so we have expanded the parameters of preciousness, finding beauty in the quotidian and mundane. The Shelburne Museum in Shelburne, Vermont, which houses Mrs. Webb's legacy in 37 antique structures, not only draws hundreds of thousands of tourists each year to this once remote village, it contributes to the idea of "Vermont" as a land that thumbs its nose at luxury and honors the laborer and housewife and the works of their hands.

"What is man but his passion?" wrote Kentucky's Robert Penn Warren in his masterful poem, *Audubon*. Passion rescues us from the mire of meaninglessness, quickens our pulse, and gives us cause.

Mrs. Webb's passion made her life a pilgrimage. Her legacy helped salvage a small state and give it new vision and purpose. She and many

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others provided Vermont with those cozy quote-marks that shelter it from despair.

ii.

Dark, quiet, cool. Not even the ping of acorns or the whisper of leaves soon to fall. The stillness rings.

It was two New Englanders wakened me just now, talking across a stone wall, though I don't know they ever met. By the time Robert Frost (b. 1875) embodied "New England" in the national consciousness, Calvin Coolidge (b. 1873) was long dead.

No region's name is more evocative. Granite, we think; forests; hard farms; coastal fisheries, whaling; taciturnity; Puritans; propriety; frugality; maple syrup; snow. Homage and challenge nest in the name. Not the old England this, but new, improved: in the words of its first governor, "a shining city on the hill."

Frost and Coolidge both defined themselves by this place. Coolidge is buried not two stones' throw from where he was born, in a room behind his father's general store. Across a dirt road, at 2:47 a.m. on August 3, 1923, having been wakened by news of President Harding's death, Coolidge took the oath of office from his father, a justice of the peace. Then he went back to sleep. Frost was born in California to displaced New Englanders. After his father died, Frost, age nine, and his mother brought the body home, and stayed.

Frost's two preserved farms—in Derry and Franconia, New Hampshire—aren't much; neither is the Coolidge compound in Plymouth Notch, Vermont: simple white farmhouses; wood stoves; Spartan amenities. The only toilet in the Coolidge house when Coolidge was President—and this was the 1920s—was a two-seater with no running water. Martin van Buren, who enjoyed the best things in life, installed indoor plumbing in his house in Kinderhook in 1840! But that was New York—and a social climber.

Frost and Coolidge flourished in the Roaring Twenties, but in their homes you hear no roaring. Bobbed flappers, bathtub gin, flashy spenders, the leering and the sneering, not a hint of them. The Twenties were a decade of upheaval—in politics and the arts—of socialism, cubism, Nazism, imagism, surrealism, all sorts of isms—but here all was tradition and quiet.

Their voices were quiet too. After Lincoln, Jefferson, and Grant, Coolidge is the ablest writer among our Presidents. Read his *Autobiography* (if you can find a copy). The prose is clean and precise—no convoluted syntax, no striving for effect, not an extra word.²⁶

During the long vacations from May until September I went home and worked on the farm. We had a number of horses so that I was able to indulge my pleasure in riding. As no one else in the neighborhood cared for this diversion, I had to ride alone. But a horse is much company, and riding over the fields and the country roads by himself, where nothing interrupts his seeing and thinking, is a good occupation for a boy. The silences of Nature have a discipline all their own.

To Frost too, being alone with a horse was memorable:

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

“Old-fashioned” may be the adjective that comes to mind, reading these passages. Their elements—a man, a horse, nature undisturbed—recall a bygone, almost mythic past. But the style is new. Old-fashioned, in the Twenties, meant ornate periods and upholstered rhetoric. As assiduously as any of the declared innovators of the age—Pound, Joyce, Eliot, Gertrude Stein, Hemingway—Coolidge and Frost are stripping language of its encrustations, the coats of paint that had hidden its grain. But unlike the self-styled “modernists,” neither Coolidge nor Frost opts for obscurity. They speak to be understood. They have something to say.

Coolidge is usually rated by historians among our lesser Presidents. This is puzzling. 1923 to 1928 was a time of economic prosperity and domestic and international calm. Coolidge was popular and respected, elected in his own right by a large margin. He was honest and clear. He made worthy

²⁶Weighing in at 30,000 words, Coolidge's *Autobiography* is a pamphlet compared to recent Presidential tomes. Clinton's, at more than 700,000 words, requires a wheelbarrow.

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appointments. He restored dignity to a Presidency sullied by scandals. He had a noble vision of America that he expressed forcefully and pursued consistently. That he failed to forestall a worldwide depression suggests that he could have.

Frost, too, fared poorly with scholars and critics, at least at first. His popularity was held against him. His clarity and simplicity and familiar forms were seen as lack of originality.

To understand judgments one must understand the judges. Historians, scholars, and critics are bystanders. They comment on the action in their fields. They favor excitement. It gives them more to talk about, which, in turn, makes them more interesting. The self-evident is anathema to the interpreter: it deprives him of vocation.

Frost and Coolidge stood for Yankee virtues: simplicity, frugality, probity, liberty, self-reliance, clarity, hard work, and turning a buck. They were not pretentious or elitist. They saw themselves as ordinary men, speaking to ordinary men. Both felt contempt, even pity, for the hoity-toity and high-brows.

They were true conservatives. That's what life in a farming community makes you. Rural neighbors have to behave to survive. Risks are avoided, strangers and innovations distrusted. Farmers are too tired to be eager for novelty.

The values espoused by a Frost or Coolidge seem right to the American majority. Greed, vanity, ambition, boredom, fear, may cause us to veer from those values but we don't feel good about it. In our hearts, we long to live a clean communal life among decent neighbors. Frost and Coolidge speak to that longing.

No vision, of course, is adequate to all occasions. Americans change things when we have to, and those moments call forth a different sort of leader. In politics as in art, the oscillation between innovators and traditionalists, agitators and comforters, is ceaseless. Americans have generally shown a sound instinct for choosing the leaders we need. Only in the decades before the Civil War did all our leaders fail and that was because, short of violence, the problem was probably insoluble.

If a President is to be measured by his values, vision, efficacy, and effect, Coolidge deserves honor. His values were sure and good; his vision—of free enterprise and less government—was constant; he implemented his plan; and his results were impressive. As Ronald Reagan noted, with his characteristic twinkle, "You hear a lot of jokes every once in a while about 'Silent Cal Coolidge.' The joke is on the people who

make the jokes. Look at his record. He cut the taxes four times. We probably had the greatest growth and prosperity we've ever known. I have taken heed of that because if he did that by doing nothing, maybe that's the answer."

iii.

We can smile now but Hannibal Hamlin, we feel certain, found his pigment no joke. Except for Charles Curtis, who had Indian blood, Hamlin was our darkest Vice President or President. Folks talked. The hulking, brawny comer struck back. "If the gentleman chooses to find fault with me on account of my complexion," 27-year-old Hamlin mocked a flush-faced elder in the Maine legislature, "what has he to say about himself? I take my complexion from nature; he gets his from the brandy bottle. Which is more honorable?"

Black-and-white photography bleaches. We feel Hamlin, though, behind his bushy eyebrows and jutting jaw. Here is Lyndon Johnson a century earlier: a looming, defiant, self-made politician from a scorned state (Texas in the 1930s was as remote and rugged as Maine in the 1830s), barreling toward his goal.

Hamlin's ambition descended from a grandfather who sired 17 children with two wives. Eleazar Hamlin called his children Asia, Africa, Europe, America, Cyrus, Hannibal, and the like. A man who names his children after continents and conquerors isn't one I'd mess with.

Hamlin didn't mean to be Vice President. If he'd attended the 1860 Republican convention in Chicago, he wouldn't have been. As Chair of the Senate's Committee on Commerce, he had contracts to dole out. (Lincoln's Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles described Hamlin as "rapacious as a wolf" for patronage.) As Vice President, Hamlin could only sit and wait. ("Wheeler," he groaned to his friend and future Vice President, William Almon Wheeler, "I will take lunch with you on condition that you promise me you will never be Vice President. I am only a fifth wheel of a coach and can do little for my friends.")

Presidents nowadays select their Vice Presidents and give them assignments. Lincoln had never met Hamlin before their nomination and, the evidence suggests, didn't like him. Hamlin was too sure of himself, too critical, and too rigid on the ticklish question of abolition. Lincoln quipped that Hamlin shielded him from assassination. Do you think, he asked, that "the

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Richmond people would like to have Hannibal Hamlin here any better than myself? In that one alternative, I have an insurance on my life worth half the prairie land in Illinois.”

It is hard not to chafe with Hamlin—a man of might doomed, when might was most needed, to impotence and disregard. He had so little to do during the bloody summer of 1864 that he volunteered in the Maine Coast Guard and for two months served sailors chowder.

Lincoln booted Hamlin from his reelection ticket. He needed someone more appealing. Whispers that Hamlin was a mulatto were no advantage in a contest Lincoln feared he'd lose. Lincoln would have denied his involvement in Hamlin's dismissal; deft Presidents leave few fingerprints. But Lincoln was boss and Hamlin was booted: one plus one equals two.

Hamlin would have denied punishing Lincoln for his humiliation. And perhaps it *was* a coincidence that Hamlin, who'd banned liquor from the Senate, had a bottle of brandy on hand to buck up his successor on Inaugural day. Andrew Johnson, who was feverish, took a sip too many and launched into the tirade that earned him the sobriquet “sot.” Had Lincoln's new favorite been slipped a mickey?

If John Wilkes Booth had acted nine months earlier, the dark man of Maine might have ended a triumphant giant instead of a fulminating footnote.

iv.

The career of Franklin Pierce makes us want to look away. It was all wrong—the man, the times, the result. Hollywood-handsome, Frank Pierce had the sheen of a winner. Affable and gracious, he charmed. But he was deviled by misfortune. Whatever could go wrong did, and then some. He died an embittered drunk.

In the beginning all was sunshine. His father was a Revolutionary War hero, veteran of Bunker Hill, Saratoga, Valley Forge, one of New Hampshire's leading citizens and a man of means. Frank was the cute kid brother in a big family, petted and adored. Everything came easy to “this beautiful boy, with blue eyes, light curling hair, and a serene expression of face,” as his college roommate (and bosom friend) Nathaniel Hawthorne put it in a fawning campaign biography. Frank was elected to the state legislature when he was 25, to Congress when he was 29, to the Senate

when he was 32, its youngest member. He was always up for a party. "I have been leading, I need not say, a very agreeable life," he wrote home from Washington.

Oh, to be Franklin Pierce! But then . . . he married. What was it, we wonder, Frank saw in Jane Appleton, a small, frail, shy, gloomy woman? Frank was affable, bibulous; Jane wanted him to stay home and sober up. Jane wanted Frank out of politics, and more than once in his career he acceded to her wish. They quarreled. Then their children started dying: their first, Franklin, in infancy; their second, Frank, at four; and their last, Bennie, in a railroad wreck, decapitated before his parents' eyes, two months before his father's Inauguration. Bennie was 11. Jane saw Bennie's death as God's way of clearing the President-elect's desk. Her bitterness coils through the centuries like electrical smoke: Hawthorne himself could not have envisioned a more brooding character. Jane's first two years in the White House she remained upstairs, writing letters to Bennie. Imagine coming home to that after a rough day at the office.

And rough they were.

Pierce had not sought the Presidency and didn't know what to do with it. He was nominated on the 49th ballot of a punch-drunk convention as a compromise, a "dark horse." The nation was optimistic when he began his term, deluding itself that the Compromise of 1850 had closed the slavery debate. "I fervently hope that the question is at rest," Pierce said in his Inaugural address, "and that no sectional or ambitious or fanatical excitement may again threaten the durability of our institutions or obscure the light of our prosperity."

Pierce longed to please people, but he had no more success with the Union than with Jane. The Kansas-Nebraska Act not only failed to knit the states, it hastened their division. Could a confident, percipient President have forestalled Civil War? Maybe not. But waffling, temporizing, conciliating Frank Pierce was the worst man for the job.

He wanted to be renominated but his party wouldn't hear of it. Retired, he took his wife to Europe to restore her spirits, but to no avail. Back home, he enraged his neighbors with his support of slave-owners. On the day after Gettysburg, he gave a speech denouncing the Civil War and was almost lynched.

When Jane died in 1863, Pierce resumed drinking. "After the White House," he said, "what is there to do but drink?" Other failed Presidents had at least their earlier successes to look back on, an ascent from obscurity, say, or military triumphs. Pierce's victories were handed to him. His rapid rise in

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New Hampshire politics was his father's doing. His nomination to the Presidency was a fluke. Any time poor Frank tried anything on his own—choose a wife, lead a brigade, chart a course for the country—it turned out badly. His bad luck is almost spooky. He was eager for action in the Mexican War, then his horse bucked, startled by gunburst, tossing Pierce forward. His pommel pummeled his groin, causing him to faint, which gave him a reputation for cowardice. (One is reminded of the ridicule heaped on Gerald Ford, probably our most athletic President, when he stumbled before the cameras.) In 1864, Pierce brought his old pal Hawthorne to the White Mountains to repair his health; Hawthorne died in his arms.

“So what did he see in her?”

“You wonder,” my docent pauses. Her name is Chips—“Everybody calls me Chips”—Holden, an attractive older lady with a limp (last year she broke her ankle), who has devoted 20 years to this house. They call the house (inaccurately) the Pierce Manse (“manse” signifies a minister's dwelling—but then, wasn't Hawthorne's *Mosses from the Old Manse* being penned at this moment, some of it, perhaps, in these very rooms?).

This house was occupied by the Pierces from 1842 to 1848. Their son Frankie died here, in a room upstairs. Their son Bennie was born here. It was the only house the Pierces ever owned. In 1966 it was slated for demolition. Neighbors raised the money to move it to its present site in Concord, New Hampshire, down the road from the statehouse and the Pierces' graves.

A yolk-yellow autumn afternoon sun makes the drawn shades glow. We are alone, Chips and I. Her telephone number was displayed on a card in the front door window, in faded ink. The house was open only by appointment after Labor Day, she told me, but no matter, she'd be there presently if I could wait. I spread open a canvas chair and read in the warmth. I read about the Democrats' convention of 1852, how the leading candidates—Cass of Michigan, Buchanan of Pennsylvania, Marcy of New York, and Douglas of Ohio—stubbornly blocked one another, opening the way for a barely known former Senator from a tiny state. I read about Pierce's Vice President, William King of Alabama, our only President or Vice President to be sworn in abroad (he was in Cuba, hoping, vainly, to lick tuberculosis), our only Vice President never to marry, our only President or Vice President never to serve a day. I could not bring myself to read more about the Pierce family. It was too sad.

The advantage of forgotten Presidents is that nobody comes to see them. Nearly a dozen times this summer I have stood alone or with only a docent

in a President's home and listened to the silence—at Buchanan's in Lancaster, Garfield's in Mentor, Hayes's in Fremont, the elder Harrison's in Vincennes, his grandson's in Indianapolis, Harding's in Marion, van Buren's in Kinderhook, Polk's in Columbia, Taft's in Cincinnati, Coolidge's in Plymouth Notch. Here, now, in Concord, holding still, I could feel the Pierces, their hopes and fears and sorrows in the walls and chairs. Modern and popular Presidents we "present"—with movies and exhibits and guarded (I mean, guided) tours. We are herded through a script, like a ride at Disney World. Groups through Lincoln's home in Springfield start every 12 minutes.

Celebrity and our nation's growth have lifted our popular Presidents from us, into an ether where they float, neither gods nor men. Here I can touch: hold in my hand the President's ivory-capped walking stick (shortened by a later, shorter relative), his tarnished shaving implements, the stovepipe hat he wore at his Inauguration (which his wife would not attend, still grieving for her sons). I could see the chairs where she sat—and sat—a sad depressive, her Franklin dead, just a baby, her Frank sick upstairs, her Bennie, oh, well enough for now, the picture of health, but weren't they all in this house pursued by some doom?

"I think it was her conversation that attracted Frank," Chips muses, holding a large teacup, Pierce's father's favorite. "She was intelligent. Frank felt comfortable in her company. And she was said to have been beautiful, though you can't see it from the photographs. Also, she was well-born—her father the president of Bowdoin, her brother a professor. And she had wonderful manners. Do you know it was she who began the tradition—sad as she was—of placing little bouquets at the ladies' places at White House dinners? That tradition continued for a long time. And it was her idea."

v.

*By the rude bridge that arched the flood,
Their flag to April's breeze unfurled,
Here once the embattled farmers stood
And fired the shot heard round the world.*

The words—Ralph Waldo Emerson's—grace the pediment. The statue—by Daniel Chester French, sculptor of the Lincoln Memorial—depicts a handsome young man, standing foursquare, one hand on his plough, the

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other holding his musket, alert, yes, but no more heroic in posture than if he were out shooting rabbits or a pesky coon in his corn. This is not a military man, bent on martial glory. This is a volunteer, willing but not eager, called from his work to do a job that needs doing.

Across the field from the Minuteman statue, in Concord, Massachusetts, is a largish wooden house built by Emerson's grandfather, Reverend William Emerson. Reverend Emerson was Concord's pastor. On that fateful day, April 19, 1775, he stood with the Minutemen, while his anxious wife looked out her window to see if she could discern her husband through the smoke. (Reverend Emerson survived that famous skirmish only to succumb to typhoid the next year while serving at Fort Ticonderoga.) Sixty years later, in that same upstairs room, grandson Ralph Waldo wrote his first major work, "Nature," the foundation stone of American philosophy. A decade and a half later, Nathaniel Hawthorne used the same room to write his stories, *Mosses from the Old Manse*, the first American fiction that was more than fable or adventure. Hawthorne and his bride Sophia scratched sentiments in the windowpanes of this room: you can still read them. When Nathaniel and Sophia came to this house for their honeymoon, Henry David Thoreau planted them a garden, as a wedding gift.

We walk these few acres, the planks of the Old North Bridge, the wide floorboards of the Old Manse, with an awe almost vertiginous. The first battle of the Revolutionary War, the first American philosophy, the first American fiction! The author of America's most influential work of literature, *Walden*, planting pumpkins in the garden! What was it about Massachusetts' Concord?

There's a subset of historians determined to trace any flowering to its roots. They admit no miracles. A confluence of trends can be used to explain any event. The moment makes the man.

A rationalist, I too am interested in causes. In King Lear's words, "Nothing comes of nothing." The moment, at least, must offer the opportunity for greatness. Lincoln, for example, would never have been "Lincoln" without the Civil War.

Emerson would never have been "Emerson" without six generations of forbears who had been preachers; or without a community as curious and serious and communitarian as Concord. Concord from the first was a passionately earnest and cerebral place, dedicated to puzzling out God's mysteries and addressing the world's ills.

Thinking made Concord a hotbed of Revolutionary sentiment. That made them a natural weapons cache, after the British occupied Boston.

The weapons attracted the British to Concord, which led to the first shots of the war. Thinking gave rise to an Emerson, whose disciple was Thoreau, whose admirer was Hawthorne, and so on. Reformers bred reformers, writers writers, until Concord became, for a few dazzling decades, America's Athens.

Explanations can be advanced but they are never enough. Just as nature, by inexplicable accident, mutates, generating a new gene, for well or ill, so humanity spawns "sports," freaks, glorious or hideous or sometimes both, who, by any calculation, must be rated impossible. You can cite all the preconditions for a Socrates or Jesus or Shakespeare or Mozart or Thoreau, but you cannot predict them. The soil may be receptive but still you need the seed. And the seed comes from—where?

I know nothing of God. All religions seem to me shelters from the storm of doubts. Those who profess unreasoning faith have traded in eyes for ease. I wish them comfort. Who am I to judge?

I'd like to believe in some proffered god; it'd make life simpler. But neither can I believe in no God. Reason is a thrilling road to nowhere. A leads to B leads to C and so on, but then what? The world is too well made to imagine it makerless.

America is as much a wonder as any masterpiece of art. It seems impossible that a handful of ragtag soldiers could wrest their freedom from the greatest power on earth. That first exchange in Concord should have ended in the hanging of those rebels—by any calculation! It seems impossible that a small group of mostly young men, inexperienced in nation-making, could craft a new form of government that would not only endure but triumph over all other forms ever devised. It seems impossible that this flimsy enterprise could have been guided down the rock-strewn river of time without shipwreck. Impossible, impossible, impossible. Yet here we are.

So, yes, there is a Providence—that is, a Foreseer, one who discerns a future and steers us somehow toward it. And yes, he—she—it—whatever this entity may be—is, to this traveler at least, inaudible, so I must make my own way. And yes, I am free to fritter my being on meaningless work or obliterating play—the Foreseer has granted me that freedom—but could such waste gladden my heart?

My conclusion—to me it seems inescapable—is to make the most of my time, to use my life as if I were being observed by—whomever—call him Foreseer, call him Father, call him God—doing my best to make Him proud. And to thank him for his presence in my world, made manifest in Concord—and in America—and in the veins of a leaf.

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vi.

This is my fourth climb to the leafy summit of Sleepy Hollow Cemetery. I'm hoping for several more before I die.

Thoreau is my father. My birth father never asked me how I was, or who. He told me. My choice was to accept or reject. I was readying my rebellion when he died. I was 16. My clenched fist swung at air.

Thoreau is always asking me how I am—and who. He used to smile at my absorption with appearances and chide me for wasting my chance. He encouraged me to look at my life and say what I saw. He was wise and funny:

The greater part of what my neighbors call good I believe in my soul to be bad, and if I repent of any thing, it is very likely to be my good behavior. What demon possessed me that I behaved so well?

We shared the disease of journal-keeping.

Every man has to learn the points of compass again as often as he awakes, whether from sleep or any abstraction. Not till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world do we begin to find ourselves.

His kidding deflated disappointments.

You need not rest your reputation on the dinners you give.

He said it was OK to dream.

I learned this, at least, by my experiment; that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.

I argued with him, as one should with a father. Why couldn't this extoller of life admit to the pain that drove him to Walden, his nervous collapse after his beloved brother's death? And what are we supposed to do about kids? And who'll bake the bread or mend the roads if everyone's studying the stars? And is loneliness really preferable to love? (Thoreau hated to be touched.)

No prescription is perfect. But Thoreau freed us spiritually as our Signers, 60 years before, had freed us politically. If we were enslaved to obligations

or expectations, it was because we'd allowed it. Our new free state permitted a new free spirit. Sadness was not our fate but our fault.

Walden remains one of history's most exhilarating exhortations, right up there with the Declaration of Independence, the Gettysburg Address, and the Sermon on the Mount. Nothing new on your shelf is half as bold. Rinse your life in its intelligence and watch the crud flake off.

Thoreau issued me my passport to America. "Only that day dawns to which we are awake." His headstone is the perfect tribute. Here on the holy hill of the American intellect you'll find Emerson, Hawthorne, Louisa May Alcott (author of *Little Women*), her dad Bronson Alcott (father of Transcendentalism), Daniel Chester French (sculptor of the Lincoln Memorial and the Minuteman), reformers, abolitionists, Congressmen, eccentrics, Elizabeth Peabody (founder of the American Kindergarten movement), Anne Rainsford Bush (the first woman licensed to drive a car). Square foot for square foot here is more intellectual audacity and zeal to do good than in any graveyard in America, maybe the world. And what honor is bestowed on the most daring of these darers, the spiritual father of us all? Barely a foot high, out of unraked dirt, amid tree roots, pine cones, pebbles, his marker juts crookedly. "Henry" is all it says.

He'd have thought it fine.

vii.

It took me too long to find Henry Wilson not to write about him.

Henry Wilson is a name known to only a handful of Americans, all experts or buffs. How interesting or important could Henry Wilson be if I've never heard of him!

Very interesting, it turns out. And surprisingly important.

Grant's second Vice President, Henry Wilson was a member of our log-cabin club of leaders, men who rose from rural penury to the political heights without the advantages of birth, education, or connections. It's a small roster—Jackson, Fillmore, Richard Johnson, Andrew Johnson, Garfield, Barkley, and of course, Lincoln—and all are heroes, no matter their records in office. (The inaugurator of the club—William Henry Harrison, whose 1840 campaign celebrated his log cabin origins—was a phony. "Ole Tippecanoe" was an aristocratic Virginian, a child of privilege who went west.)

Henry Wilson was born in 1812 to a lazy, boozing New Hampshire laborer. Apprenticed at age 10 to a local farmer, he drudged involuntarily for

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the next 11 years. He received no education. Age 21, he fled, changing his name (he was born Jeremiah Jones Colbath) and settling in Natick, Massachusetts. He took up shoe-making. Four years later, at age 25, he had a hundred employees manufacturing brogans.

Henry was ambitious, with the implacable anger of a man born wronged. He went into politics—for recognition, sure, but also to make it easier for poor boys to rise. He worked to end imprisonment for debt, reduce the poll tax, enact a secret ballot and mechanic's lien law, legislate limits to alcohol consumption, and fund public schools. Having been a slave of sorts, he abominated slavery. An abolitionist to the bone, in the roiling decades before the founding of the Republicans in 1856, he bobbed from party to party, searching for one that could gain him office and attain his ends. We may sniff in retrospect—what an opportunist, switching from Whig to Free-Soiler to Know-Nothing to Republican in 16 years! But what *should* he have done? The established parties, then as now, dodged the divisive issues to maintain their majorities. Only so-called fanatical fringe movements had the guts not to pussyfoot. Slavery blocked America's future: a revolution was needed to remove it. Eventually, after some false starts, the revolutionary party was formed and four years later it prevailed. Astonishingly, this revolution was accomplished constitutionally. We never had to change our form of government. We never failed to elect our leaders democratically. Though our Civil War was terrible, we didn't have to start over, as most nations have, with a new form.

From his election to the United States Senate in 1855, Wilson was among its leaders. He chaired the Military Affairs Committee, where he worked to provide Lincoln with the manpower and materiel needed to conduct the war. He pressed for the Emancipation Proclamation and the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth amendments, and rejoiced in their passage. Sharing his fellow Radicals' view that Andrew Johnson was soft on the South, Wilson worked for the Tennessean's impeachment—a sad irony, since no two political leaders, one a tailor, the other a cobbler, rose from such similar backgrounds. Though tainted by the Credit Mobilier scandal, Wilson's poverty attested to his probity (he had to borrow money to buy a suit for his inauguration as Vice President in 1873). Ignored by President Grant, bypassed by the times, he devoted his Vice Presidency to finishing his massive memoirs. He died in office, in 1875, after several strokes.

There is no sign of Wilson in Natick's Old Dell Park Cemetery. Nor is there anyone to ask. Dusk deepening, I scan the weedy rows with diminishing hope. Natick is one of those down-at-the-heels New England mill

towns that found new life in high-tech and the highway. The Mass Pike skewers it. Along the Pike are plopped those boxes people work in.

I really don't want to return to Natick tomorrow. Then an attractive young woman arrives in a bright red sports car to visit her grandfather. She doesn't know where Henry Wilson is, never heard of him, but points me to the house of the cemetery's former caretaker across the road. I knock uneasily. Robert Whitney is a frail, dignified gentleman. Widowed a year ago, his neat home reeks of emptiness. Though flustered at first, he claims to be grateful for my intrusion. "I was just sitting daydreaming," he murmurs.

It's been a number of years since Robert visited that part of the cemetery. His wife is buried here and he will be too, when he "comes to his reward." He isn't absolutely certain where Wilson "rests." He holds my arm for balance: dark is deepening and there are roots and ruts underfoot. Finally we come upon it, a weathered stone, hardly bigger than a shoebox. The inscription? "Henry Wilson." No dates, no word of his service, no flag, not even a flower.

viii.

It is raining in Foxboro, Massachusetts. Acorns rat-a-tat my roof. This campground is almost empty. The cyclone of Labor Day has whirled children back to school, their parents to work. Now there are only old people—and me.

I think, not to think. The Presidents protect me from my present. In a few days I will be home. I do not know what to expect—or what I want. I have been free this summer. Home, I wear my past like a heavy coat.

I am thinking of sons and fathers. John Quincy Adams (JQA) and John Fitzgerald Kennedy (JFK) were dutiful sons. They did their fathers' bidding. The elder Adams and Joseph Kennedy, Sr., both knew how to hold a grudge and get their own back. Determined men, each saw his son's election as vindication. The Presidency would repay the insult of John Adams's rejection (of our first five Presidents, he alone was denied a second term). It would answer those Protestants who sneered that an Irish Catholic was not good enough to be President.

JQA and JFK both retreated to books. Books are a place boys can hide from fierce fathers. When Johnny is studying, he cannot be catechized. "Leave him alone, can't you? He's *reading*."

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JQA and JFK were both dapper, self-assured. Favored sons swagger. They are protected by a giant. The giant may die, but he survives in his son's consciousness. Favored sons seem brave, with their father's courage. They play their hands as if aces were available for the asking.

JQA and JFK were both audacious. Adams was the last President to insist that the job wasn't political. The idea of partisanship enraged him, as it had his father. One's loyalty was to nation, not faction. Some see such purity as nobility, others as folly. John Quincy Adams set forth an ambitious program for America—and no one listened. It's not concepts that convince but clout.

The Kennedys understood clout. An Irish immigrant alone might be despised and impotent but he was mighty in mass. John F. Kennedy's grandfather, "Sunny Fitz," could be elected Mayor of Boston while in jail—that's how little the individual mattered if he represented the tribe. When John Quincy Adams advocated a national astronomical observatory, he was laughed at: his head was in the clouds. When Kennedy pointed us to the moon, he was cheered because he had the votes.

Both JQA and JFK became President after a long stretch of peace and prosperity. (The Eisenhower years, like the Monroe years, might have been dubbed "the era of good feelings.") Both tried to rouse the nation from its complacent torpor to a higher, more stirring prospect. Adams, because he failed to understand politics, failed: his words were just words. Kennedy's cadences reeled us starward. It is astonishing how Kennedy's Inaugural Address still echoes—more powerfully than any Presidential oratory in the intervening decades.

Both JQA and JFK grew greater after their Presidencies. Adams, returned to Congress by his neighbors, could advocate the right without worrying how to achieve it. He could rant like a prophet about slavery. A prophet does not require partisans; he needs only truth.

JFK grew in the glow of martyrdom. No matter his mistakes, his promiscuity, the brevity of his tenure or meagerness of his attainments; no matter the evidence of sly deals and deceptions, he glows. That smile, those words, that wife! We have had many capable Presidents, but few luminous: Kennedy, Reagan, and the Roosevelts in the twentieth century; Lincoln, Jackson, Jefferson, and Washington before. It's a mystery—like beauty—what makes a Presidency glow. You can analyze the elements—the man, the moment, the message—but their sum does not explain.

John Quincy Adams's birthplace in Quincy, Massachusetts, and John Fitzgerald Kennedy's in Brookline are a few miles apart. The houses impress

by their modesty. It is a recurring shock that our rulers rise from averageness. The houses are nice enough—comfortable, upper-middle-class dwellings of their day—but we'd expected more.

Royal dynasties are predicated on an ordained order. God makes kings, kings princes, princes lords, lords serfs, and so forth. In America, anything can happen. Rich become poor, poor rich, the obscure famous, the mighty mites—in an eyeblink. The diceyness of destiny makes Americans edgy, as de Tocqueville noted a century and a half ago. Success, even if it comes, can't be counted on.

John Adams and Joseph Kennedy, Sr., envisioned dynasties, and raised their sons accordingly. It seemed for a time as if their dreams might be realized. But then bad things started happening. Of John Quincy Adams's three sons, one was an alcoholic, one a suicide, and the third, Charles Francis Adams, while distinguished in public service, felt a piker by comparison to his forbears. Charles Francis's son, Henry, by writing memorable books, may prove the most durable of the clan; even so, a sour wistfulness wafts through his prose, as if he were but the shadow of a shadow of a noble house.

The almost macabre decline of the Kennedy clan is too familiar to recall. Assassins' bullets, deadly frolics, accidents, drowned airplanes—all the Furies, it seems, conspire to frustrate their promise.

In JQA and JFK I feel the mystery of history. It is with me this rainy night in Foxboro, as acorns rat-a-tat—and I think of home.