

"This is the most wonderful country ever modeled by the hand of the master architect. The island is only a mile wide and two miles long, but it looks as large as the Rocky Mountains."

— Artist George Bellows, in 1911, after visiting Monhegan Island

A man flees from his life and loss in the Midwest to Monhegan Island, a remote Maine enclave 10 miles off the coast — a quiet lobstering community during the cold months that becomes a summertime artists' colony, hiking paradise, birdwatching mecca, and vacation destination. The perfect place to lose himself and his pain.

On the island, he meets several characters who transform his image of the island and himself. As the summer progresses, a mysterious writer anonymously posts chapters of a novel around the island about . . . a man who flees from his life and loss in the Midwest and comes to Monhegan Island, where . . .

Monhegan Windows is a novel about loss, transition, healing and the magic of art and storytelling, presented in two interlaced stories.

Matthew Kiell begins with a simple summer read, then adds layers with each passing page until the reader comfortably inhabits, through a subtle Escher-like twist, an island where metafiction and magic realism, imagination and illusion are as natural as the forest trees, the wildflowers and the surf crashing on the picture-postcard cliffs.

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RIDGEWOOD PUBLICATIONS
Forest Park, Illinois

Cover photo:
Matthew Kiell

Monhegan Windows

Matthew Kiell

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Monhegan Windows

Matthew Kiell

a novel

Monhegan Windows

a novel in two entwined threads

Matthew Kiell



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Also by Matthew Kiell:

Incognito

This edition of *Monhegan Windows* is
a revised & updated limited author's edition.

Set for print on 12 September 2012.

Visit the Facebook.com “Monhegan Windows” Group
to share reviews and comments with other readers
and to interact with the author.

All photos are available for viewing in their original color versions
on Facebook; see the “Monhegan Windows” Group.

Design Note: The Tyler story (numbered chapters) is set in
ITC Stone Sans medium type, 9.2 on 14.2; the Jonah story
(titled chapters with art) is set in Berkeley Oldstyle Bold, 10 on 14.2.
The book design, cover design and typesetting were by the author.

The use of maps, art, photography and quotations is granted by numerous sources
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A Thank-You to Monhegan's Year-Rounders and Summer Residents

First, I must thank the 14 Monhegan painters and one photographer who have allowed me to reproduce 25 works that layer an added artistic dimension and texture to my own words and photographs.

Most of all, this is a thank-you to the year-rounders and summer residents of Monhegan Island, a very real island 10 miles off the midcoast of Maine south of Penobscot Bay. To anyone who has visited Monhegan, it is clear that this story is set in a very specific place. The entire geography — every store and restaurant, every village road, almost every public building, every trail, every cliff, every vista, every island and crag of rock that surrounds the main island — springs from reality.

That said, although one may spy the spirit of the population in this tale, I have fabricated the characters of this story almost entirely or created composites and individual people out of those I've known off-island. Only two characters are based on real people (both dead now more than 30 years) and named — Rockwell Kent and Ray Phillips — along with a few mentions of other historical people — the Wyeths and Zero Mostel.

Therefore, I beg the indulgence of those living on the island, who are rightfully possessive and protective of this special domain, for letting me borrow — perhaps some might say steal — their home and inhabit it with the creatures of my imagination.

1

I had been winding around the country for weeks. Alone in my car, just trying to get away. Following Route 1 north along the coast of Maine and possibly beyond. I'd hit more than a half dozen presidential birthplaces and homes in my travels. This morning, I navigated a narrow, twisting road that passed by the Bush compound on the ocean in Kennebunkport. Thought I might make my way to Campobello.

For lunch, I stopped at a roadside fish house past Portland. I sat alone at a large booth in a porch extension of the restaurant. At this point, I was poking at the last of a lobster roll, sipping my third cup of coffee. Eavesdropping on an extended family that had sat down in the next booth soon after I arrived.

The group had just left a place I'd never heard of — Monhegan Island — where they'd enjoyed an idyllic reunion. I was entranced. They reminisced about their new family memories, about hiking in the woods. They praised the two young girls for conquering the rocky, steep trails along the island's cliffs. As they ate their lunch, they relived the feasts they enjoyed each evening in a rustic rented house at a spot called Fish Beach. The adults talked about artists' studios they visited and which artists they liked the most.

It sounded more like a fantasy than a real place. A small island with magical woods, high and dangerous cliffs, marshes and meadows, harbors and coves, shipwrecks, seabirds and whales, lobstermen and artists.

— You know what I liked most, Mommy? the younger girl said. She must have been 5 or 6. The age my son was at the time of his accident.

— What, sweetheart?

— The deer we saw walking across the yard on the road to Lobster Cove.

— Did you know the islanders want to get rid of the deer? her father said. They consider them pests. They cause a bad disease.

— Oh, don't say that, Daddy!

— I liked the cats, the other girl said, glossing over her father's foray into harsh realities. Especially the one on the far side of the island. Do you think he was lost?

— He looked healthy, honey, her grandmother commented. I'm sure he had a home he went back to.

— I wish we could have gotten across to find Decision Rock, the older

sister added.

— It's not easy to get across the harbor, the mother said. And we don't really know if that rock even exists.

— Still, I wish we would have gone to find it.

She went on for a while remembering what some kids she played with on the village green had told her. An old Indian legend of young braves sent to the uninhabited island across the harbor. The large rock shaped like a seat. Writings, which some said were Norse runes, carved into another rock nearby. The long hours, three long days spent alone, thinking. Deciding what course they would take in life when they survived the ordeal and left the island.

— I doubt it's real, the grandfather said.

After a bite of lobster roll, he mentioned the lobster buoys. Coded with each lobsterman's colors, all clustered like giant bunches of fruit. And the thousands of metal lobster traps that sat, piled high, everywhere throughout the village.

The little girls continued to talk, remembering something they referred to as "fairy houses." From what I could tell, they built little shelters for some sort of sprites living in a place called the Cathedral Woods. When the girls talked about their fairy houses, the adults stopped talking and just listened. For minutes on end, the younger child described how she built her house. In such detail it was as if she was still standing in front of it.

As she finished, the conversation shifted again. They all insisted that they had to return to the island.

I turned my attention from them. Lifted my coffee to take a sip. Closed my eyes for a minute to enjoy the warmth and rich taste. When I opened my eyes, the older girl was standing next to my table. She was an elfish little blonde, about 7, the age my son was when he died.

— Hi! she said. Are you going to Monhegan?

— I wasn't planning on it, I replied. But I heard you talking about it. It sounds like a wonderful place.

— Oh, it is. You should go. Are you here with your family?

— No, I'm alone.

— You don't have a family?

I paused.

— I do . . . but they aren't here.

— Why?

Such a simple question. I wanted to say something to her. But the answer

stuck in my throat. Then her family was standing up to leave.

— Don't bother the man, sweetie, the girl's father told her gently as they walked by. We have to go. She talks to everyone.

Just like my son, I thought. So unlike his parents.

They were all on their way to points south, heading in the opposite direction from me. I realized that, with this meal ending, they were separating. Their reunion was ending. Yet I saw little sadness in the fact that these were their final moments together for a long time.

In three cars, they'd disperse to different home destinations. The grandparents for Connecticut. The grown sons and their girlfriends first to Portland. One pair would take a plane to Philadelphia. The other pair would take their time driving to Princeton. And the couple with their two daughters were driving all the way to Chicago. I'm sure they'd follow a more direct route than I'd taken leaving there.

Their lives were so simple and happy. No hint of tension in their expressions or voices. Uncontaminated by trauma and hospitals, by lawsuits and lawyers. I wished they were my wife and children, my in-laws. I wished those were my memories they had discussed. Instead, I'm stuck with fractured dreams and lost opportunities.

I charged my meal and climbed into my Carrera. Drove a few more miles up Route 1 and turned off at Henry Knox's restored colonial mansion on the hill, onto one of the many Maine peninsulas. Then I just followed the rural road, through several picturesque villages, until I slid into Port Clyde, at the end of the road.

I found my way to the dock with the ferry to Monhegan Island. A stocky boat called the Laura B., no more than 60 feet long. I parked my car in the lot and stopped in the general store. Next door, in the ticket office and gift shop, I put a roundtrip ticket on my credit card, coming back in a few days. The ticket to get across to the island went into my shirt pocket. I put the return ticket in the red nylon wallet I'd bought at L.L. Bean about an hour before lunch. I'd ruined my sharkskin wallet the day before. Dropped in a particularly sticky mud puddle. The ticket nestled next to seven \$100 bills. Then I walked the long pier out to the boat.

2

Until this moment waiting for the Monhegan Island ferry, I've felt aimless. Directionless. Didn't matter whether speeding over highways to cover ground or ambling along a country road. Often I left the interstates to drive on minor byways, looking for something soothing, or looking for something unique. I saw dozens, hundreds of sites on my quest. But I felt unsatisfied. The next site, not the one I was seeing, was the one I was always seeking. When I was younger, I read about the Holy Grail, Utopia, Shangri-La. That was the story of the past weeks.

With a yellow highlighter I marked scenic routes in the road atlas. Along the Ohio River west of Cincinnati. The length of Skyline Drive in Virginia. Several hundred serpentine miles through the Adirondack Forest in New York. Along the Connecticut River in Vermont. Saw them all. And dozens of others. Those presidential sites. Lots of Civil War battlefields and memorials. Down to Shiloh and Chickamauga. Appomattox and Antietam and Gettysburg. Remembering the Civil War board game my friends and I played all Saturday long on so many weekends. Conquering each other and learning some history, too.

Each day I drove. Often I retraced the same path I'd taken the day before. Of course, the view was different driving in the opposite direction.

And I constantly scanned the radio dial, searching for new stations. Maybe the next station would satisfy me. And perhaps it did. For one song or a few minutes of conversation. I caught the finale from "Tommy," drawing me back to when I was 11. I sat in my brother's room, darkened to midnight by black paper taped over the window panes. He was turning the dials on a strange homemade radio he'd assembled himself. Moments later, we were hearing that tune blare forth for the first time.

Then I scanned farther. A talk-radio psychologist talking to someone with a vexing personal problem. I could laugh at it in relief. A crisis that wasn't mine.

Then I was scanning the stations again. Maybe one more jump and that next signal would be what I sought.

I talked to few people along the way. Not especially comfortable with people these days. Just listened in on conversations. And I daydreamed: Why had I left? Where and when would I find the will to go back . . . or the will to not go back?

I never thought that our love, our connection, was so fragile. Over several years, I felt the slow stretching of the thread between us. The fiber thinning, losing its strength and resilience. Yet, at the same time, I couldn't imagine that one day it would snap. And we would be two untethered entities.

Of course, most people would say we had good reason for the strain. Our lives were shipwrecked five years ago with our younger child's accident. We were picnicking near Lake Michigan. A big gathering for my son's soccer team. I look away from him for a minute, and he's choking on a large bite of hot dog. Next we know, a whirlwind of confusion. We're standing in shock in an ICU. Our child in a coma. Hooked up to a strange device that has taken over for most of his organs. The doctors tell us it took too long to get him to the hospital. I blame myself. I tried to dislodge the food. But in my panic I couldn't get the technique right. I may have even wedged it in farther.

Two months later he came out of his coma. A different boy. He couldn't talk. He couldn't walk or feed himself. He kept getting infections that no one could explain. Back to the hospital almost every month. Worst of all, I don't think he even recognized us.

We were overwhelmed. Our older child, just starting high school, was sent to boarding school, where she could focus on her studies.

Then a nurse who was fired from the emergency room came to our house. Our son *had* gotten to the hospital in time, she told us. The medics had stabilized him in the ambulance. But things had gone terribly wrong in the E.R. Eighteen months after the accident, we had the hospital in court. We were nearing trial, hoping our case, built on a disgruntled ex-employee's word, would succeed. Then our son died. The hospital lawyers saw the emotional tide shifting in our direction. They settled for \$8 million.

In ways the trauma drew us together. We worked well in a crisis, focused on the mission of our son. But when he died, emptiness took over.

Before the accident, we were a couple who could think of nothing but one another. We couldn't imagine a day apart. We would come home from mere hours of separation wanting to share every thought. Every unusual thing we saw or heard we wanted to mention.

We emerged, saying we were still strong. Still bound tight, inseparable. But we weren't. Often we were away on our separate missions. When we were both home, we lived in the same house, but I felt that she had abandoned me. I wanted to walk her into our bedroom and close out the world. Create

a warm, nurturing world of our own. But all she asked of me, all she wanted, was a colleague in her causes.

So I bought a Harley. Rode the Interstates in black leather for a few months. One of those overweight guys approaching middle age who you see on the highways. And while I did that, my wife flew to medical and patient advocacy conventions in New York, L.A. and D.C. Building an impressive resume and a wardrobe of smart tailored suits and outfits.

I turned in the bike for a vintage Mustang. Took it to a few conventions. Down in Texas, in Ohio, in Michigan. During this time, my wife worked with our financial advisor to set up the foundation, and flew to more meetings and conventions to establish her credentials. She improved her public-speaking skills and started giving talks at hospitals and to civic organizations and meeting with lobbyists and legislators.

I traded the Mustang up for the Carrera. You meet a higher class of people driving a top-of-the-line Porsche. Silly, though. I keep quiet, don't talk to people much, don't feel all that comfortable around them. So I can do without the socializing and focus on the road.

How long had I been on the road? Weeks . . . sometimes it felt like months. I'd skittered across two dozen states. I'd aimlessly driven thousands of miles. I was more than a thousand miles from home. And the tether was frayed to almost nothing. I was homeless.

In the months before I left, I told myself, over and over, "I can't imagine staying. But I can't imagine leaving her." A constant tug-of-war between two opposite thoughts. Both were negative, both built on inaction. Then one day I got up and left.

What prompts a man to leave? He may consider it endlessly. He might daydream and imagine a dozen scenarios. He might even make real plans. Yet the actual departure is sudden. This is anything but some academic point, however. I actually did it. I actually wrote a note and left it on the kitchen counter. "I'm going for awhile." Then I walked out of my home on an early spring day. I had a hastily packed Coach suitcase, my Mac laptop, my red sharkskin wallet, credit cards, an envelope with several thousand dollars in \$100 bills, my keys . . . and a plan that didn't extend past the intersection a block from my home. Once in the Carrera, I gunned the engine. I glanced back. An empty house my wife would return to in a few hours. And I headed out of the city.

How did I get here? Physically, it was too easy. Just continue driving until you reach the end of the road. And that end I found here. At the far point of St. George's Peninsula in Maine.

I didn't mean to keep going. At least I don't think I did. When I walked out the door and got into my car, weeks ago, I drove in the other direction. I would drive north into Wisconsin a few hours. Find a place to reflect and collect my thoughts for a day, maybe two or three. After that, I'd come back. I had done this twice before. But this time, as I neared my home exit on I-94, I didn't downshift and slide over into the exit lane. I just continued to fly south. Then I meandered over much of the eastern half of the country. And eventually I headed north along the east coast.

Each night I lay in a hotel bed. The road would rush by whenever I closed my eyes. Dreamt of interstates whenever I slipped into sleep. And of encounters with a woman like the wife I knew almost 20 years ago. Each night, I would desire her, finally get to meet her, and settle into a happy homelife that felt like it would last forever. Yet the dreams always ended in storylines that left me alone and searching. Confused and wondering about the home that I left.

3

Now, the sun is shining and a few clouds drift through the sky. The Laura B. pulls away from Port Clyde. The afternoon is windy, and the stout boat bobs about as it cuts through the water.

We clear the inlet. Emerge into open water. The waves are peaking at three to four feet, rocking us forward and back. Just as I get at all used to that motion, they begin rolling us side to side. Some of the passengers have ascended to the top deck. I join a few who huddle on the front deck. They're among crates of supplies for the island, getting sprayed occasionally by the waves. Smiling and talking. They seem unfazed by the ride or the wind or the cold. After a few minutes, I seek the protection and warmth of the cabin at the back of the boat.

The only other person in the cabin is a young woman. She's sitting on a hatch, up against the cabin wall. The motion doesn't bother her. She's completely at ease with the tossing boat as she reads a copy of *The Perfect Storm*. Watching her read makes me queasy, and the thought of the topic of her book churns my stomach still further. She looks up.

— You don't look so hot, she notes.

— Good observation, I reply.

I'm not in the mood to talk.

— You should get outside.

— It's cold outside, I tell her.

— You'll change your mind, she says.

Each minute in that cabin stretches itself out, longer than the one before it. The trip is only 75 minutes, but I can't think of anything except getting off the boat. And that just seems to slow the time further.

I'll try to distract myself with a brochure about the island. But, though I'm reading the words, I can't focus on their meaning. In fact, this attempt at diversion is just ratcheting up my queasiness. My head is a dulling ache. The wave of discomfort is climbing up toward my throat.

I don't want to look at my watch. It's going to tell me far too little time has passed. And the island on the horizon is growing larger at a painfully slow pace.

Now, the thought invades my mind as my nausea builds: I have to make this trip back. Dizziness is enveloping me. Where's my wallet? I have to look at that

return ticket. What day do I have to come back on this boat? My concentration is waning. And when I find the ticket, do I hope the return date is sooner or later? I don't know. I continue to fumble with the unfamiliar wallet in my hands.

We're nearing the island. Perhaps I can hold out. Then the boat lurches on a particularly big broadside wave. "You'll change your mind." I hear the girl's voice in my mind as I run to escape the cabin. I hope I reach the railing in time. Pushing through the swinging door. Grabbing the polished wood rail with both hands.

What follows provides enough relief to cut the nausea until we're dockside in a few minutes. But just barely. I stay leaning over the rail, catch the spray and biting wind . . . and watch a little patch of red in the water. My wallet! It bobs on the wake of the *Laura B*. Small flecks of color emerge. Money, old receipts, my return boat ticket, the photo of my wife and me soon after we met. Terrible late '70s styles. My dark brown hair, long, almost to my shoulders. I cut it short within a year, before entering the business world. Almost lanky, before family life added the pounds. Probably 160 then. Tipping more than 200 now. She has her arms wrapped around me, her head leaning against my shoulder. A photo of me and my son. The life of Tyler Smith floating away on a few crests of waves. Thank god, at least I have all that money in my suitcase.

Now that we're docking, all I want to do is get off the boat. But I find the captain first and tell him what happened. Can my wallet somehow be retrieved? He listens, but he's just humoring me. Then I cross the gangplank onto the dock.

On the map, Monhegan Island looks so isolated and tiny. Like a grain of rice surrounded by the blue of the ocean. Even as we chugged across the 10 miles of water, the strip of land interrupting the horizon resembled a huge whale coming out from the sea, ready to slip again under the ocean's surface. But now it feels so firm and established and secure.

4

I stand still on the dock, comforted by the ground under my feet. But my mind's hazy, and nausea still envelopes me. One of the crew unloads my suitcase. I lug it to one side of the dock, away from the confusion. I watch the stir of activity. The wind is chillier than on the mainland. Yet the biting breeze doesn't bother me. It's soothing.

The passengers are all off the Laura B. They're standing among luggage and mounds of supplies labeled "Port Clyde" ready for the return trip. Many have island friends awaiting them. Suddenly, three or four reunions are bursting forth. Hugs and kisses, spirited conversation, every voice filled with joy and eagerness. Little children, shy or confused by the commotion, hold close to their parents.

Young men and women in dusty work clothes are jumping from several pickup trucks parked on the dock. The vehicles create a partial wall between the crowd and the island on the other side. They help load luggage from the ferry onto the open truck beds. Soon the engines start up. As the reunions continue, some of the passengers take their bags and trudge up the steep dirt road leading from the dock. And the trucks roll off slowly, raising dust in their wake.

A crowd is still on the dock. The people taking the boat back to Port Clyde, and friends bidding them goodbye. The road up from the dock is now empty of people climbing it, but others walk down the hill. More passengers for the boat to the mainland.

Slowly, my legs are regaining their balance. My stomach is settling and the spinning of my head is ceasing. Deep breaths of the chilly ocean air calm me further. But the dullness brought on by the boat passage remains. I look at the sailboats and lobster boats in the harbor. Why would anyone want to go on the ocean for *more* than 75 minutes? What would possess anyone to sail beyond the coastline and out into open ocean?

The captain walks past me, smiling and calm. He's made two crossings already today, and there are two more. Obviously, he likes the ocean.

— Think you might find the wallet? I ask again.

— Feeling better, Mr. Smith? You looked pretty worse for wear out there.

— Yes. Thanks.

— I wouldn't keep my hopes up about that wallet. You're asking for a

miracle, if you ask me. Why don't you stop in and have a Coke at the Barnacle, he adds, pointing to the old building to the left of the dock. Settle your stomach, maybe have something to eat.

— Thanks.

Still, I don't want to move.

The captain strolls over to a clutch of islanders. Soon they're laughing, though it dies down as I pass them. The captain must be regaling them with the story of my misfortunes. Then he walks down the gangway onto the *Laura B.* Minutes later it has been untied from the dock, made a smart turning maneuver in the tight harbor, and chugged out to open water. Glad I'm not on that boat anymore.

The scene has turned quiet. For a long time, I watch the boats lolling in the harbor. The fishermen's houses nestled along the rocky shore. The homes of gray and white scattered haphazardly into a sleepy community. With the activity of the ferry over, the placidity of the entire scene is overwhelming.

I sling my laptop case over my shoulder. Lift my large suitcase and walk over to the Barnacle Café.

After the bright afternoon, the inside of the Barnacle is dark and cozy. The huge wooden support beams on the ceiling dominate the century-old room. It must have been a workshop or warehouse in an earlier time. The length of the long room, past the service counter and the shelves of snacks and small souvenirs, there are beverage coolers. I pull out a Coke. Then I return near the entrance and put the can on the counter by the register.

— That'll be a dollar.

— Hold on a second, I say. I lost my wallet on the boatride over. I have to get into my suitcase and find my cash.

I put down my laptop, kneel over my suitcase and unzip a side compartment.

— Can you take a twenty? That's the smallest I have.

— I can handle that.

I keep rummaging through the large pocket. It's in here somewhere.

I know that I placed it at the top, but I guess it must have settled down farther. . . . But it's not to be found. Just dirty socks and underwear.

— Goddamn!

— Problem? the counter man asks.

— I had several thousand dollars in cash in an envelope, and it's gone. A hotel maid must have stolen it.

But it wasn't stolen. I took it out a couple of nights ago, counted the

Matthew Kiell — *Monhegan Windows*



money in the envelope and moved eight new hundred-dollar bills into my wallet, then dropped the envelope on the dresser top.

— You're broke?

— Totally.

On the surface I'm drawing back to calm, but I want to clear off the counter with my forearm and punch my fist through the display case.

— So I guess all you can do is wander around the island for a bit and take the boat back to Port Clyde in an hour.

— My ticket was in my wallet.

— Hmmm. You do have a problem there, don't you? Here.

He hands me the Coke I've put on the counter and a big, heavy glass.

— On the house. Straws are over there on the table.

— Thanks.

— There's a phone outside the Island Inn, he says. You can call your bank and get a replacement credit card sent here in an emergency in a day or two.

I pop the can open and pour some of it into the glass.

I know he's right. That would be easy enough. But maybe not having my credit cards anymore would be a good thing. It would make it easier to disappear. So is this an emergency? Or my chance to really evaporate?

I sip the Coke.

— Good advice, I say. But where do I stay in the meantime?

— Not sure I can tell you if you have no money. Maybe check the Rope Shed.

— The Rope Shed?

— It's an old shed on the Meadow Road, the main road. The side of it is Monhegan's main public bulletin board. Maybe you'll find some ideas there. Just go up the hill, when you get to the Lupine Gallery go right.

I go to one of the wood tables by a window. I drop into a chair, pour more of the soda into the glass and take a long draw of the drink through the straw. Damn, it tastes wonderful. The tingle of carbonation fills my mouth. Then the wash of sweetness follows. Enjoy this; it may be the last you eat for a while. And I stare out the window at another ferry tethered to the moorings. It's bobbing on the waves as the crew prepares for the return trip across to the mainland. I dread that boatride back, but then again I don't even have the money to buy a ticket.

In the background, past the boat, is the island across the harbor. Decision Rock somewhere over on the other side of it? I imagine trudging up and over the crest. Finding the stone. Settling into it and coming to some decisions.

A crinkling sound when I touch my pants pocket. I can't remember what it might be. So it's a surprise to stick my hand in and find a \$5 bill and a one.

I get up and walk over to the counter.

— Seems I have a little money after all. Can I have a tuna-salad sandwich?

— Sure can. White, wheat, healthy nut, bavarian black or a croissant?

A couple of minutes later he places a plate on the counter with a large, flaky croissant. It's split and slathered with Dijon mustard, then filled with frilly dark green lettuce, sprouts, big slices of bright ripe tomato and a mound of tuna salad. I was expecting some basic sandwich.

— Didn't expect a gourmet production.

— We may be a dozen miles out in the ocean, but it isn't like it isn't civilization. Half the people here are yuppies who escaped.

He rings it up.

— Five for the sandwich. . . . And one dollar for the Coke. Plus tax.

— Afraid I only have six.

Guess he's decided to forget the free Coke.

— Six will be fine, he says as he takes the bills.

I return to my table. Sip some more Coke. No reason to rush finishing this sandwich. Best to savor every bite, every tart clover sprout, every swallow of the Coke. Out the window, the ferry, the pier, the rocks and waves.

Finished with the sandwich, I return the plate to the counter, throw the can into the recycling bin, and think about that payphone just up the hill at the Island Inn. Do I go to it, or do I walk past it and find that Rope Shed?

Keep walking. Disappear.

— There anyplace safe I could put my suitcase for a while? I ask. Lugging it up that hill and around the village isn't my idea of fun.

— Just leave it on the porch outside. No one will touch it.

— You're kidding.

— No. It'll be fine.

— Guess I should keep my laptop with me, though.

— No. You can leave it here, too.

— Well, I don't know if I'm ready for that.

I sling the laptop case over my shoulder, lift the suitcase and exit the front door. Out of the warm coziness into the bright, crisp Monhegan afternoon. It would be just my luck to lose the bag, too. But my suitcase goes in a corner of the porch. I adjust my laptop carrier on my shoulder, and up the dirt road I go.

I. *The Rope Shed*



Pamela Simpson Lussier, "The Rope Shed," oil on linen (2007)

Someone was turning Monhegan life into fiction. It appeared, a few sheets at a time, irregularly every few days, on the side the Rope Shed, the Village's large public bulletin board. The first four short chapters — telling of a Midwesterner arriving and getting stranded on Monhegan — were posted without fanfare on successive days back in early July on the building's shingled side. Then further chapters appeared every few days on the Rope Shed other places in the Village — on a table in the Library, in the sitting rooms at the Island Inn and Monhegan House, on a pew in the Church, on the counter at the Lupine Gallery, on a student desk in the Schoolhouse.

Residents — summer and year-round — saw their acquaintances, and themselves, appear thinly veiled or even undisguised as bit players in the story. A few were upset, seeing it an invasion of their privacy. But most of the year-rounders didn't care much — the year-rounders, that is, who stayed for the summer. Many of them, when Monhegan's winter lobstering season

ended in early May, abandoned the Island before the artists and other summer people, and especially the tourists and day-trippers, invaded the Island until early fall. All that was left of the lobstermen were the vast stacks of traps, the mounds of buoys in huge clusters of different color schemes, and the piles of colored nylon ropes — picturesque paraphernalia to add to the Island's appeal.

The summer people, however, as their livelihoods were tied to artists or summer tourism and commerce, thrived on the Island's long tradition of welcoming or at least tolerating artists, photographers and writers. Throughout the season, people filtered through for an afternoon, a day, a week, a month, to take inspiration from Monhegan, or to sample the inspiration of others. Some just came for the quiet and solitude beyond the Village. One lure of Monhegan was the artists' studios, where you could not only see and buy finished art but talk to the artists and, if the artist was not self-conscious, watch the artist at work.

Naturally, the artists painted scenes of Island life — Village scenes, mountains of dormant lobster traps and buoys, summer gardens, fishing and pleasure boats on the water, cliffs and rocky shores, the vast sky, birds and seals and other Island wildlife. With their canvases, they transformed and commented on Monhegan, sometimes with a critical eye. So what was the harm in someone doing so in words instead of paint?

Some thought Saskia Burrows might be annoyed. The Island artist in the story was clearly modeled on her, at least in part. Like the story's artist, she owned a four-season cottage beyond the Ice Pond and, like her counterpart, inhabited her art to the exclusion of much else. Her canvases were ubiquitous at the Lupine and in the hotels. But Saskia didn't seem to mind the parallels.

However, Hannah Murphy, who married into a long-established Island family, wondered if Saskia might be concealing an interest or concern. She was sure she saw Saskia walking near several of the locations where chapters were soon found. She mentioned this to George Wetherall, the Lupine's owner, who said he thought he'd seen Saskia, too. She had been standing in front of one of those new postings, staring at it for many minutes, flipping the sheets. But then Hannah stopped Saskia one afternoon to talk about the upcoming Chowderfest. When Hannah mentioned to Saskia how interested she was in the story, Saskia expressed only mild interest, though she admitted to reading it.

"It doesn't irk you to be used like that?" Hannah asked. "You're a complex woman and you've been turned into a selfish lover."

"Used?" Saskia replied. "Artists need to express themselves, Hannah. And

it's just fiction, after all. I'm not worried." At which point, she gestured in departure, but stopped. "You really think she's selfish?" and she left on that note.

By the third week of postings, the story was becoming a fairly long piece. The Island librarian was assembling copies, especially once visitors showed interest in the unfolding tale. She kept one copy in the Library and copies in each of the hotels and guest houses. So the Rope Shed — already well-visited and well-read — became more popular. And each week people would augment the summer reading they brought with them with these installments, knowing that somewhere on the Island someone was weaving the chapters yet to come.

Long-time residents knew the writer wasn't one of them. Art Royal owned Carina, a shop on the main street, a pink-painted storefront with a storybook aura that served as a small grocery, wine and beer emporium and meeting place. Each summer he gave two artists a residency in apartments upstairs. He knew all the artists, all the year-rounders, and came in contact with almost every Island visitor. The tone of the story, he thought, was of someone just learning the Island. "It isn't a story of Islander life. It's a visitor's story."

It had to be a newcomer, but one visiting for an extended stay. Little facts were off — such as the Laura B. running at the wrong time of day — though some credited the mistakes to fictional distortions conflated from different years on the Island. The Island Inn was painted yellow, as it had been years earlier, but the Monhegan Store was shuttered, which came after the Inn was repainted. And the bakery and several other stores didn't even exist until the present year, when the long-closed Monhegan Store was gone, the space now occupied by the Black Duck Emporium. Was the writer confused, or sewing confusing?

Still, the consensus leaned toward a newcomer who looked at paintings and old photos, and listened to the tales of Island life. If so, the candidates were few.

A natural choice was a loquacious little man in his 60s or early 70s who insinuated himself into conversations with everyone. He introduced himself as Clement Samuelson, a freelance magazine and story writer seeking inspiration. Some said he was all the more likely the author since a similarly named character appeared in the story. But they wondered whether such a talkative man could harness the artistic spirit to pursue the solitary craft of novel writing. The Islanders were savvy in judging artists after many years of living among them every summer. Others, though, thought his pseudonym was a literary joke, and that he might be a famous writer on their island incognito for the summer season. The Island was noted for giving celebrated people a respite from the limelight,

whether Rockwell Kent and other painters in the early part of the century or several generations of Wyeths or someone like Zero Mostel, or friends of his such as Clifford Odets and Karl Malden, who could step from Broadway and Hollywood and be one more artist enjoying the scenery and one more member of the summer social scene that casual visitors barely knew existed.

Laura Murphy, Hannah's niece, said she had met Samuelson. Laura was a scrappy 14-year-old who clearly served as the basis for the character Nora, in Chapter 38. She had rowed Samuelson across to Manana one day in July, and he had badgered her with questions about living on Monhegan year-round. Unlike the character in the story who was also rowed across to Manana, her passenger did meet her just a few minutes after the appointed time, and she'd waited responsibly for him, returning him to the Village. Of the character with a name similar to Samuelson's, Laura mused, "I thought it meant he had to be the writer, but I'm not so sure now." She couldn't understand why the Samson in the story was younger, better looking and taller than Samuelson.

Barbara Hill was a Monhegan native attending Amherst. She was back for the summer as a Monhegan House waitress and sometime counter girl at the Black Duck and suggested a more likely second candidate. When she took the Elizabeth Ann on returning home as the season started, she had been reading a book in the cabin, and a man sat across from her, a man who, like Samuelson, had remained on Monhegan. This second candidate was a very different sort. Jonah Landry didn't say much; many Islanders hadn't even heard him speak. He seemed caught in a fog. Not like one of those fogs that cover the Island for a morning and burn off with the noontime sun, but a deep fog that doesn't lift.

He had come to the Island right after Memorial Day, when the season started, without advance reservations, staying in the Island Inn for three weeks, then relocating several times in the weeks after when visitors with reservations forced him out again. In his first weeks, looking gaunt and frail, Jonah was seen mostly sitting on the Island Inn Verandah, looking out at the Wharf and the Harbor. Then people saw him everywhere, wandering, visiting the artists' studios, taking photos with a sophisticated camera and tripod, sitting with a laptop computer, sitting and observing — back in a rocking chair on the Island Inn Verandah, on the wooden-plank walkway crossing the marsh by the Ice Pond, on the Wharf as a ferry arrived or departed, on the Island's cliff side atop White Head and Black Head, on the bench up by the Lighthouse overlooking the Cemetery and the Meadow and the entire Village and Manana beyond.

II. A Safe Harbor



Alison Hill, "Monhegan Harbor," oil

Time after time, Cassandra, Jonah's wife, had talked about Monhegan Island over the years. Her family had come often when she was young. Cassie loved boats and waves and water as much as Jonah, despite his name, held them in suspicion. Almost every summer, her family would rent a house for a week or two, and settle into a different rhythm. They had no TV, usually not even a radio or phone, nor even electricity. They would hike the Island, covering every trail. They would scale the Lighthouse Hill and sit on the bench that overlooked everything that mattered — the Cemetery, the large marshy Meadow where the Island's summer water supply collected, the entire Village, the Harbor, and Manana Island. When Cassie was young, a hermit still lived there on Manana, on the otherwise uninhabited barren rock. She would talk about his cluster of shacks. She said she had even rowed over several times with her brothers and met the old man.

But she hadn't returned in 20 years. In three years of courtship and 14 years of marriage, immersed in Midwestern city life, this had always been her dream

— when they could afford a real vacation and find the time. Cassie had finally convinced Jonah, and they planned to come with the children. A reservation had even been made at the Shining Sails for a week in August.

Now Jonah was on the Monhegan ferry alone . . . in late May. He didn't know how long he would stay — perhaps a few days, perhaps a few weeks, perhaps longer. Then again, he could stay forever. There was nothing to go back to.

He and his wife had been practical. They made sure that, if one of them died, the children and the surviving spouse would be well cared for. Both of them had well-paying careers and substantial life insurance.

He had daydreamed about it often over the years. Or perhaps it was more accurate to call them waking nightmares. Every time his wife would drive somewhere, especially if accompanied by their two children, he would spend the hours while she was gone imagining, worrying that the telephone would ring and he would learn they were killed in an accident. But he had never really believed that such a thing could actually happen. He knew it was obsessive, that he shouldn't waste his energy by letting his mind dwell on such an unlikelihood.

Then came that one day seven months earlier. He got home from work late, expecting to find her, and the children, and dinner ready. But the house was empty. And the phone rang. It was the call he knew in his heart he would never receive. He had all that money now, and they were *all* gone.

He wasn't even sure why he was on Monhegan. This place had been Cassie's obsession, Cassie's dream. When they had made the plans to come, he had felt dragged into doing it. Jonah felt shaky after stepping from the ferry onto the Wharf. But it could have been worse. He had huddled in the cabin's warmth and security, thinking it the best place to weather the crossing. But once the boat negotiated the long inlet leaving Port Clyde and reached open water, Jonah felt his stomach unsettle and feared he would be ill long before his ferry, the *Elizabeth Ann*, completed its hourlong crossing.

"Are you feeling ill?" a man's voice asked Jonah as he sat with his head bent almost over to his knees.

Jonah wasn't in the mood to respond, doubly burdened by his nausea and his depression. But he answered feebly, "Yes."

The man convinced Jonah to ascend to the front of the top deck. There, Jonah learned to keep his eye on the horizon and on the sight of Monhegan Island slowly emerging from the sea. The biting air, the sun, the firm point of reference in the distance, the conversation all minimized his discomfort, and

by the time the ferry paralleled the northern point of Monhegan, the nausea was abating and he was beginning to find the experience bearable.

As they approached the Harbor, the man introduced himself as Jim Theodore, a perennial summer resident, the husband of an artist. He was 15 or 20 years older than Jonah, a few years to one side or the other of 60. He commented that the seas were slightly choppy that day. It wasn't surprising a landlubber like Jonah would be affected. But he insisted the Elizabeth Ann — a 75-foot modern ferry — was a steady vessel and a bit boring compared with the other boat that ran daily between Port Clyde and the Island.

"The Laura B.'s the proper way to get to Monhegan," he said. It was smaller, a converted Army vessel that moved lower in the water, stolidly through the waves, half again as slow as the Elizabeth Ann. "It's a real ride on her when the waves get to be four or five feet," he added. "Gives you a real feel for the sea."

Jonah conceded the merit in the experience, but said he'd avoid it at all costs.

"Perhaps you'll change your mind and give it a try." They shook hands as they parted, Theodore's grip large and firm. "Come visit Eileen's studio and have a drink with us."

After Jonah's stomach settled, he stopped in the Barnacle, a cozy snack and gift shop in an old Wharf-side building. He ate a sandwich, sipped some pop, and took in simultaneously the rough-hewn pillars, ceiling joists and floor planks of the interior and the view outside framed by the white sash window. The brightness of the water and rocks in the noon sun vividly contrasted the shadowed, rustic interior.

He got up to leave and asked where he might find a room. Perhaps, so early in the season, something was available. The man behind the counter said he could find a room at the Island Inn.

"You're sure?" Jonah asked.

"Oh, yes," the man said, swinging the countertop up and coming from behind the counter. "I'm the co-owner of the hotel, so I should know. Follow me."

He led Jonah up the short hill from the Wharf to a lamppost planted in a small roadside garden. "The Island Inn, c. 1907" declared a sign swinging from the post. They entered the hotel, then walked up a couple of stairways with low ceilings that forced them, though both of average height, to tip their heads at a few points, up to the third floor, the top floor, to a room tucked in a nook at the far end of the corridor. It was snug and atmospheric, spartan yet comforting. The furniture was all in a simplified early American style. And

everything was moistened and bleached slightly by the ever-present sea air.

The proprietor placed the key on a crocheted doily atop the painted dresser, along with a booklet on the Inn and the Island. Then he retired quietly, sensing his guest's pall.

Jonah stood paralyzed holding the bedpost, his suitcases, unopened, on the bed. He didn't want to open them. They contained more than just clothes. They were suitcases of memories, every shirt, every pair of pants a gift from Cassie, that she would iron and fold so carefully, that she would select for him the night before and set on the chair in the corner of their bedroom, along with his entire ensemble. She was the fastidious one, the one with style; he was the one who could mismatch his socks, pair unsuitable combinations, and wear the same tie for 10 years without any concern for evolving styles. "I'm lost without you," he whispered, leaving the suitcases untouched.

Tiring where he stood, Jonah sat back in a wicker chair by the door and looked across the room. A small framed painting hung on the far wall. But what caught his eye was the window next to it, giving him a view toward the Harbor.

He stared, immobile for many minutes, looking through the window edged with translucent lace at a narrow and proscribed scene — a few rooftops, several pleasure boats and fishing boats bobbing in the Harbor, a seagull gliding by, then another, a wall of rocks on the far side of the Harbor. Then his focus shifted to that wall of rocks, fixing on a decaying huddle of shacks in a crevice. Were these the remnants of the Hermit's house about which Cassie had told him? He wondered if his camera could capture the layers he saw, all caught simultaneously. Structure, freedom, solitude in series coexisting.

But he was unable to gather his strength or determination to get his camera from its case, set up the camera and tripod, adjust all the meters and settings and create an image. All he could do was sit.

Finally he did move. But it was merely to sit on the corner of the bed within an arm's length of the windowsill, where he continued to observe the same layered scene. The world outside had altered, the window frame now holding a widened tableau. Proportions had changed. A field of green, the lawn bursting into springtime, was added along the base of the frame. Yet it was intimately linked to that first-glanced scene. Structure, freedom, solitude.

Jonah hadn't found happiness anywhere in the past months. But he had finally come to Maine and across to Monhegan. Now, still sad, utterly confused, he wondered if it might be possible to untangle the knot of thoughts in his mind.

5

All that I have left are the clothes I'm wearing, the laptop in my case and that suitcase. I've left the suitcase where anyone can take it, and I'm climbing up a hill away from the dock and the Barnacle. What am I trying to prove?

At least it's easy to find the Rope Shed. The road up from the dock ends at the Meadow Road. The Lupine Gallery is right there where they meet, as the man at the Barnacle said. A right turn and a brief walk and the Rope Shed is there. A tall, gangly man in a turquoise cap is perusing the gray-shingled wall. He fiddles with his dark beard flecked with gray. His other hand is in a pocket of his chinos. He inspects the several dozen flyers, posters and notices.

— Who'd have thought so much would be going on here? he says half to himself, half to me.

I don't respond. But he's right. A few notices are set in permanent wooden frameworks, slid behind glass, such as this week's menu at the Monhegan House. Wonder where that is? Several are wood plaques etched and permanently painted. Artists, galleries, a bakery, restaurants and cafés, cruises. Some are peeling, surely nailed to the Rope Shed for years. Several look crisp and bright, possibly attached to the wall in the last few days. Other signs are slipped into plastic sleeves, fading but holding on. All of Monhegan Island culture conveyed on the side of a shed. Flyers for at least a dozen artists and their studios. A recital by a visiting guitarist. A poetry reading. Something called "Tea by the Sea." Boat tours circling the island. A list of the guest ministers coming to the Monhegan church each Sunday through the summer.

The man in the turquoise cap strolls around to the other side of me. He pulls a sheet out of a box like a mailbox. It has an island map on one side and a list of two dozen artists' studios on the other. In the box is a small metal coin box with a note taped to it: *Maps 25¢*. He fishes into his pocket, finds a few coins and drops them through the coin slot.

— And here I thought I was coming to a sleepy lobster village with nature trails, he says, and getting away from all this art. Guess this won't necessarily be the escape I was expecting.

I'm tempted to talk to him, but I really don't want to bother.

I see a small handwritten posting on a 3x5 card:

*Skilled handyman,
through July 4th (maybe longer).
Inquire with Travis Woodard
at Island Inn or Barnacle.*

I rip the card off the shed, leaving the staples in the shingle. They join dozens of other obsolete staples that will rust until someone pulls them out. I start back the dirt road the way I came.

— Good luck, the guy in the cap says.

I turn around. Give him a bit of a look.

— Good luck getting that job, he explains.

— Thanks.

I'll go all the way back down to the Barnacle to inquire so that I can check on my suitcase.

— You're back, the man at the counter says as I come through the door.

— And my suitcase is still there, I say.

I've left it out on the porch, now unconcerned about it.

— Of course. . . . Can I help you with something else?

— I'm looking for Mr. Woodard about this job.

I toss the 3x5 card onto the counter.

— I'm Travis Woodard.

— *You are?*

He smiles.

— I seem to be working in tight circles here, I say.

— There's a tendency to do that on an island like this, he says. You have carpentry skills? You strike me more as a white-collar professional.

Time to pause. What am I going to tell him? That I *was* on the paint crew one summer at college, painting dorm rooms and a few exteriors. In fact, I got pretty good. But that was more than 20 years ago, and a pretty narrow skill. I can tell him I spent a lot of time with my grandfather when I was a kid. He was a great carpenter, a magician with tools. But other than that, the extent of my resumé is a two-decade habit of watching "This Old House" and "The New Yankee Workshop." Best not to tell him I know full well that I don't have the temperament for working with my hands and tools. Too bad they aren't looking for a communications manager or a lapsed poet.

— As a matter of fact, I respond, I know a fair bit about carpentry. In my

spare time I'm a p.r. manager in a Chicago firm.

— Then I'm pleased to meet you, he says, extending his hand across the table. I co-own the Barnacle and the Island Inn.

— I'm Tyler Smith. It's good to meet you . . . again, Mr. Woodard.

— In April, I hired a handyman for the summer. But he left me high and dry a couple of weeks ago. Went back to the mainland for a better job offer in Camden. I might have a replacement in a month or six weeks. But finding a temporary fill-in has been tough, and in the next few weeks, before the heart of the season arrives, we have a lot of projects that need finishing. I need whoever's willing and able.

Is willing enough? I think.

— I'd be glad to take it, I say. The only problem is I have nowhere to stay and, as you know, no money.

— That's no problem, Mr. Smith. I own the Inn, remember? You can have one of the rooms you'll be working on, up on the third floor. And you can eat in our restaurant kitchen. . . . Let's go up to the inn now, and I'll introduce you to my partner.

Out from behind the counter, I can see he's larger than I'd thought. About my height, maybe 5 foot 10. But he's fit and far lighter, probably 170, like I used to be. There's something "proper" about him. A politeness not only in how he talks but in his gestures. I can't figure out his age though. He may be five years older than me, pushing 50. But if he told me he's 35, I'd believe that, too.

This walk is already starting to feel familiar. We climb the rutted road up from the Barnacle. In a minute we approach the top of the hill. Everything is on such a small scale on Monhegan. We're next to the Island Inn. The building is like a long, turn-of-the-century wooden boat. It's painted a buttercup yellow and quietly settled into its safe harbor. Flowers are just emerging in the beds that edge the hotel grounds. The island is still dominated by a gray-tinged greenness. More a reminder of winter than an announcement of spring.

— Ethan?

— Travis, out here.

A lounge lies just ahead. The entrance to the diningroom is at its far side. An open door to the right leads outside, but I don't see any people.

— He must have just stepped out onto the porch, Woodard says.

A man is cleaning off a sturdy, whitewashed-wood rocking chair. It's one

of a dozen in a line along a long sheltered porch. The view looks out on the whole harbor and that big, barren island across the water. He stops, looks up.

— Ethan, this is Tyler Smith. Looks like we may have our new handyman.

— I wondered if we'd ever find one. Luck's been pretty bad.

Woodard's partner is small, wiry, about five inches shorter than me.

He's young, perhaps 30, but balding. His hair is shaved almost to his scalp.

That minimizes the effect of the baldness. Everything about him is taut. His movements, his clipped manner of speech, his facial features. In the business world, he's the sort I suspect. They tend to be aggressive. Like a yapping chihuahua. Here, though, in this relaxed atmosphere, he's just humorously wound up.

— Ethan Falcone, he says, extending his hand.

I shake his small hand. On my skin his feels like sandpaper.

— How long you staying on Monhegan?

— I really can't say. Four hours ago I didn't even know Monhegan existed.

And an hour ago, I had money. Now I don't have a penny.

— Spent the last of it on a tuna-salad croissant and a Coke, Woodard says.

— And here you are, Falcone replies with a chuckle.

— Yeah. Here I am.

I wonder if he can hear the doubt tinging my voice.

— Tyler, I'm going to give Andy in Port Clyde a call, Woodard adds as we walk back inside, so your car will be taken care of. What kind of car do you have?

— A Porsche. Red.

— Boxster? Falcone asks.

— Carrera.

— A pretty penny.

— Carrera GT.

My bragging pride in my toy is coming out. It gets the right reaction.

Falcone's eyes open wide.

— Twenty million pretty pennies, he says.

— More like 25, I correct him. And it was previously owned.

— Tell Andy to put his silk gloves on before he touches that car, Falcone says to Woodard.

Woodard salutes and walks down the porch steps to return to the Barnacle.

— Follow me, Falcone instructs. He leads me across the lounge to a stairway. We go up a couple of flights of stairs. The low ceilings force me to tip

Matthew Kiell — *Monhegan Windows*



my head briefly to continue up. Falcone doesn't have to adjust. We reach the third floor, the top floor. He leads me around to the end of a hallway, to the last door. The room is tucked in a far corner. It's in pretty bad shape.

— Guess you heard about Archie.

— Archie?

— Your predecessor. Quit all of a sudden 10 days ago. This is where he lived since early April. Your room now.

The room is chilly. The cross draft between two windows makes it colder. Once refinished, this room should be popular. But it's anything but finished now. Archie had stripped the finish from the wood floor, stripped several layers of paint from the moldings and window. And these curtains. He must have sewed them in a few minutes to make the room less sparse for himself while he had to live here. Also two basic wooden chairs. One sits by the harbor window, the other should be next to the small writing desk. But it's turned upside down on the desk. One of its front legs is detached and lying to the side, awaiting repair. I guess I'll be doing that.

I can tell. Falcone is disgusted at the room's condition.

— It should have been ready for guests by now.

6

Do people really see a handyman when they look at me here on this step? A simple first task. Thank god. Replace a few planks on the porch steps that started rotting away over the winter. But I wish it wasn't quite so public. The front steps of Pierce Cottage, the Island Inn's annex, down the hill behind the Inn. I'm just a few feet from the Meadow Road. Almost every visitor to Monhegan walks up past the Lupine Gallery and turns right. Moments later, you're walking past the porch. And if they aren't doing that, they're going into Carina, next door, to buy groceries, or a newspaper, or some wine or beer.

That gangly man with the turquoise cap is sitting on the porch, looking across the road at the island lighthouse sitting atop the hill. The cemetery is down the slope. Along a long wooded hill to the right, a couple dozen houses dot the landscape. Almost every house is the same stormy-day gray with white trim. But each has a different roof line, a different set of large picture windows. Just one home, a dull canary yellow, varies the color. The homes and the trees, though, stop before the flat green expanse in front of us.

There's no one in the field. No buildings, no roads or paths. At a couple of points, boardwalks extend out into the grass a short distance. It's impossible to tell if the grass is a foot deep or five or ten. When I first saw it, it seemed strange to see so much choice land lying undeveloped right there in the middle of the village. Why had they not at least made a park? But someone explained to me this morning. As the name of the road suggests, that's "The Meadow" — not a grazing meadow, but a reservoir and natural filter. It's the main source of the island's water from mid-spring through mid-fall. At the far side of the Meadow, a quarter of a mile away, a few pipes project out from the woods into the middle of the marshy field. Hidden in behind a few trees at the end of the pipes is the pumping station. The pumps are turned off in early November, not long after the season ends, Columbus Day weekend. But I'll be long gone by then.

— Shouldn't you be fixing the steps, not sitting on them? turquoise cap says. Like it's his business.

— Tough to avoid, though, isn't it? he adds.

— Very tough. But I guess I don't have time at the moment to think about water supplies, and meadows, and pumping stations. Someone's going to

break through these steps if I don't get working.

— You got the job on the notice off the Rope Shed?

— Yep.

I open the big tool chest, take out a claw hammer, and proceed to try to pry the old board off. It slips and the claw scrapes across my arm.

— Wrong tool, he says.

I ignore him and continue to attack the board with the hammer claw. I just miss my arm again with the errant claw.

He stands up from his rocker and comes over to me.

— This is what you need, he says.

He lifts a long, straight piece of metal out of the toolbox. It's flat, slightly curved and sharp-edged. I don't even know what you'd call it. A chisel?

A moment later, he wedges the sharp edge into the seam below the rotten board. Pushes down on the metal rod, loosening the board. Wedges the rod farther in, pushes again. The board lifts with a sliding sound of nails disengaging from wood. Now he's on the other end of the rotting plank, lifting it away from the stairway frame. He wiggles the board a bit and hands it to me.

— Watch out for the nails.

Despite his warning, I scratch my hand on one of them.

— Sort of surprised you got this job.

— Surprised?

— You don't strike me as the handyman type, he laughs. . . . Especially after watching you at work.

— I'm not.

— Then how did you get the job?

— They were desperate, and I talked like Norm and Steve on "This Old House." . . . So what do you think I look like?

— An office worker, a bureaucrat. Maybe a frustrated . . .

— Office seeker?

— No, that's a disgruntled office seeker. . . . A frustrated artist or writer.

— Perhaps you have that right. But isn't that a fairly easy guess, especially if you're talking to someone on Monhegan Island?

I like this guy. Brash, a bit too forward and familiar. But I feel comfortable with him. Can't say the same about most other people. They seem nice enough. But they all seem wrapped in their own worlds. And I'm not comfortable wiggling in. Especially now that I'm a handyman.

I put my tools down and sit on the step.

— A nice view, don't you think? I say.

— It's not the harbor. That's what the visitors want. But I love looking at the meadow, with the cemetery and the lighthouse on the hill behind it. And wait until the lupines bloom at the end of June. Guess you're going to be here then.

— Don't know. Suspect I may be. They were looking for someone at least through July 4th. . . . Join me for lunch? My employers gave me twice as much as I can eat.

I pull a wrapped object from a paper bag, unveil it. It's a huge sandwich, two big slices of bavarian black bread stuffed high with several sliced meats, cheese, that curly dark lettuce, and a mound of sprouts.

— Something Dagwood's health-conscious cousin would relish, he says.

It's cut neatly in half. I tear the outside wrapping in two. Place half of the sandwich on it.

— Here.

He lifts it to his mouth and takes a huge bite. Then he suddenly stands up.

— Leaving me?

He's shaking his head. His mouth is too full to utter a sound. He gestures that he'll be back in a moment, and runs next door, up the steps into Carina.

He reappears with two bottles of beer in hand. He places the bottles on the step next to me, delves into his pants pocket and pulls out a Swiss army knife.

— A nice dark beer. Seemed like the perfect match to me.

Have to agree. We each bite again into our sandwich. Then a swig of beer.

— I don't even know your name.

— Samson. Glen Samson.

— Tyler Smith. . . . And you're a frustrated artist or a frustrated writer?

— Neither. A happy writer.

— Wish I could say the same.

— Happy, or writer? he asks.

— Either. Way back I did some writing. But it's been years. The sort of writing I do now doesn't qualify in my book as "writing." And as to happy . . .

— It's a long story? Glen says.

— Well, yeah.

— It's never a short story. But is either of us going anywhere soon? You just got yourself a job putzing around this island for the next four to six weeks. And I'm here until the money runs out and I've shaken my marriage.

Matthew Kiell — *Monhegan Windows*



— When does the money run out?

— It doesn't. I'd have to be on an island with a casino to worry about that.

— And the marriage? Or is that a long story?

— As I said, neither of us is going anywhere soon.

Time for another few bites of my sandwich. Do I really want to get into talking to this guy? But there *is* something very comfortable about him.

Annoying . . . overconfident . . . but comfortable.

— I left my wife, I tell him as I finish the bites.

— That's obvious. But why?

— I don't know.

— You don't know?

— I don't. I didn't even mean to leave, just get away briefly. But I kept going.

— And here you are.

Echoes of Ethan. Why do people keep saying that?

— And you left? I ask, turning the attention from me.

— We left each other, parted company. It got old.

— After how long?

— Three years. The fire was gone.

— You married for the fire?

— Doesn't everyone? he says.

— I thought it mellows into something deeper, a simmer or glowing embers.

— Ah! metaphors. I've gotten hitched each time for the fire. When it burns out, we split or I leave. I'll bet you've been married for, what, 15 years?

— 19.

— You don't even remember what the fire is. You know you felt it once, but it's so long ago it's like reading the story of another person's life. When I get to that point, that's when I jump off the cliff. I keep looking for someone who keeps the passion burning, but until then . . .

— You keep marrying them.

— You got it.

— How many times?

— I made it official three times . . . plus two I lived with for two years each.

At this point, I just hope I find the perfect mate before the engine breaks down.

III. Woodland Paths



Joan Harlow, "Requiem," oil (c. 2002)

Past noon, Jonah lay in his bed in the Island Inn, unable to move, not by some physical paralysis but by a wash of memories pressing him down. It was an effort even to turn his head to look out that lace-curtained window, and when he did he saw nothing but sky, slowly mutating clouds and swaths of blue. Lying paralyzed in his bed he heard the clock tick and thought of Cassie, thought of those moments every morning, when he would awaken by his own mysterious internal clock before the alarm would sound, and hear the soothing, even clicks of the clock. Then he would snuggle up against his wife nestling his head between her arm and chest, press his ear to her warm skin and hear the lush, slow pounding of her heart in restful rhythm.

He had to find a way to move on, but he felt himself caught in circles,

tight ringlets of memory all revolving around Cassie. And now he was on Monhegan, her island, and everything reminded him of her.

The second hand unwound, pulling him back.

It was about 8 months earlier. The night before it happened. In the children's bedroom, the lights already extinguished for the night, the only illumination a dim nightlight in a far corner, Cassie had just woven the girls a long Monhegan story about the fairies living in the Cathedral Woods. Jonah had sat at the far side of the room, among a sea of pillows, his back against the wall, his eyes closed, listening.

Then, after kisses, he and Cassie had gone downstairs together.

Cassie curled into the loveseat in the livingroom, and Jonah went into the kitchen, filled their copper whistling kettle half full of water and set out two cups, two spoons, a stainless steel tea ball and the small bowl of rough-hewn sugar cubes. Then, as the water approached boiling, he would fill the tea ball from a square tin of loose Earl Grey or green tea or perhaps some exotic aromatic variety and take down the white Japanese teapot with a bamboo handle that she had given him on their first anniversary. He knew just how she liked it prepared, just how long to steep the tea, just how much to swirl the ball around to enrich the brew before removing it.

Jonah placed all of the items of the setting onto a large teak tray and walked out to the livingroom. He placed it on the coffee table. Cassie lifted the teapot's cover and removed the tea ball after a couple of last dunks. She poured steaming tea into the two cups. Jonah dropped a sugar cube into his cup. Cassie held her cube, partially immersing it. The sugar began to crumble away into her cup. When half the cube was gone, the other half moistened with the liquor of the tea, she lifted it to her lips, tasted a bit of the flavored sugar, and placed the rest of the cube in Jonah's mouth. Then the two, cups in hand, curled together into the loveseat.

"Tell me about those fairies, Cassie," Jonah remembered whispering. "What was it like the first time you went to the Cathedral Woods?"

She was quiet for a long time, but Jonah didn't rush her. He knew there was plenty of time to hear the story. "They could not actually have been as small as I remember them," Cassie finally said. The transition out of the silence was so smooth, it simply felt like another caress. "They have become smaller and smaller in my memory and everything else larger and larger, as time has passed. . . ."

They? he thought. Did she mean the fairies? Or the houses? Or perhaps she meant herself and her brothers. And where did she come up with this strange, incantatory way of introducing her memory? Jonah never said a word at such moments. This confusion isn't new, he thought. But he knew that, where it was needed, the ambiguity would resolve; and where it wasn't . . .

“My brothers and I had been so rambunctious when we awoke that morning. We had arrived on Monhegan a few days before. The first afternoon we explored the Village, running up and down the dirt paths. The next day, the family assembled early, equipped with canteens and provisions for a picnic lunch, and set out south with the plan to circumnavigate the Island counterclockwise along the No. 1 Trail, the Cliff Trail. We were young, though, and we spent so much time and energy at Lobster Cove around the wreck of the Sheridan. Then the Cliff Trail was often treacherous as we started up the east side of the Island. We wanted to stop everywhere, and we did. I could tell you about our adventures that day, but I would never get us to the Cathedral Woods.”

Jonah smiled at this point. This was so typical of Cassie, not just weaving a story but setting up a dozen, a hundred, yes a thousand more, like Scheherazade. “Another night,” Jonah whispered.

“By the time we climbed up to White Head,” she continued, “it was so late for lunch. We spread out the picnic there on a rock ledge, stayed for hours, and we were pleased to cut quickly across the center of the Island, past the Lighthouse and be back to the Village.

“But the next morning, we wanted to see the north end of the Island, where we hadn't reached the day before, and we clamored to go there.

“‘The Cliff Trail is even harder in the northern half,’ my mother told us, ‘and I know you're all tired from yesterday's hike. But I know the perfect place.’ And off we went.

“‘There are many special places on Monhegan,’ she told us in a conspiratorial tone, as if she wanted no one else to hear, ‘but one place is magical.’

“We pleaded to know where, but she wasn't going to tell us too quickly. She would let us know bit by bit as we walked the road north out of the Village toward the head of the trail.”

Then Cassie recalled to Jonah how her mother told the children of the Island's fairies — spirits that frequented the rocky shore at Lobster Cove, playing among the stone cairns erected for them, then skirting the shore, their bright flitting presence, like tiny sparks over the water, mistaken by humans

for the sun glinting on the peaks of waves, then skittering into the forest north of Deadman's Cove and to their homes in the Cathedral Woods. She explained that she learned that the fairies lived long ago in the recesses of dead logs and in little shelters created by small mounds of rocks near the creek bed. But their lives took a turn for the better when people came, especially children, and built them tiny homes at the foot of trees.

By the time the children reached the entrance to the trail, they were filled with the excitement their mother instilled in them. But also, they felt an awe for the forest, for every leaf, every piece of bark. They realized they had a big responsibility, to remove an old house that was falling to ruin and replace it with one that the fairies would treasure.

Cassie described every aspect of the house she created, remembered how she built it. It was as if she had created it that morning. She recalled a sense of concentration she had never felt before and rarely felt again. And her wonder when she stood up from the forest floor and admired her work and her brothers'.

“Now stand with your fairy house between you and the bright sun,’ my mother told us. We looked at her quizzically, but we each found a spot some steps away from the homes we had just finished. ‘Now squint, so that the sun filters through your eyelashes, and don’t stop looking.’

“What are we looking for, Mommy?’ I asked.

“Keep looking, sweetie. If the fairies choose to inhabit your house, you’ll be able to see them fly in.”

This is where her story ended, interrupted, Jonah thought only momentarily, by a phone call. But they never got back to the story.

Jonah felt his paralysis ease as the daydream ebbed away. He lifted himself from the bed and sat in the chair by the sill. Watching through the window, he wondered if she was okay. Was her spirit at peace while his spirit was roiled like a tempest? He even squinted his eyes to filter the sunlight, and stared at the sparkles of sunshine glinting off the gentle early-afternoon waves in the Harbor.

IV. The Artist's Easel



Bradley Hendershot, "Study for Sunday Hat, II," watercolor (2002)

Another late afternoon, late June. The lawns were a rich moist green, the flower beds were awash in lush displays of color like a painter's palette. The full light of early summer bathed the Island and caused the water to glisten, like peaks of fire. Most wondrous, lupines were shooting up everywhere, in gardens and in untended plots, in a display the Islanders said hadn't been seen in a decade.

Jonah walked through the gallery beyond the reception area, exited the hotel and walked around onto the Island Inn lawn, past the flower beds accenting the path up to the door and this corner of the Inn. This was as far as he got beyond the confines of the hotel, except for one walk.

As he came around to the wide grass slope facing the Harbor, he saw an artist's easel, unattended, planted on a small rock plateau. Its three spindly wooden legs spread out broadly. Geometrically, it created a firm footing,

but its balance, in appearance, was tenuous, waiting to be blown over in the lightest wind. A flat white box with a sandy red top sat closed on the stand, and in front of it a frame rested, stretching a primed canvas. Draped over the top and hanging to one side was a rough, wine-red painter's smock. And the easel was topped by a straw hat with a wide brim and a shallow, rounded bowl circled by an orange ribbon with ends fluttering in the wind. It was like something from a Cézanne portrait. All of it — easel, paints, canvas, smock, hat — casually placed yet perfectly composed.

Down the hill, two weathered gray-shingle houses rested near the water's edge. The white paint of the door and window frames was beginning to peel, relatively new but already getting etched away by the elements. And in front of the houses were dozens of lupine blossoms, bursting forth in a violet-blue display.

He ascended the stairs to the unpopulated Verandah, relieved to see no one there, settled into the familiar contours of a rocking chair, and released a deep sigh.

He remembered that easel, clothed in that same smock and a similar straw hat, solitary and expectant, several days before. He had taken a walk that day — his only walk beyond the Inn — over to the Island's other side. He labored up the Lighthouse Hill, considered going to the Lighthouse and the Museum attached to it, but saw people standing up at the lookout spot and, preferring solitude, continued beyond those buildings across an empty field.

He recognized the playing field as the one where the children played softball in *Island Rescue*, a children's book Cassie read to the kids so many times. He felt a twinge of danger as he walked across the field toward Trail No. 7, hearing Cassie's voice reading in a hushed bedtime-story tone, knowing that as he started along this trail, he would be walking the same path that Mae, the child in the story, had walked, until she slipped along the edge of a small cliff and broke her leg. It was a story with a safe ending, but from the tales of the Island that Cassie told, Jonah knew that not all such stories ended safely. In particular, he thought of one of Monhegan's saddest true tales, back in the '20s, when two children playing on the cliffs below White Head, the very destination this trail led to, died in the sea. Only the girl had fallen into the water, unable to climb the slippery rocks to safety and unable to swim; the boy with her, an expert swimmer, had dived in to save her, but the cold water took him, too.

These were the stories that had infused Monhegan with an air of danger in his mind before he came to the Island. But by the time he had walked the quarter of an hour along Trail No. 7 to reach White Head, the crystal clear day had filtered those thoughts away.

He stepped up onto the light-colored rocks of the bluff. He looked north to crashing waves at the base of high cliffs stretching up to Black Head, and south to a series of landmarks — Gull Cove, down the steep drop from White Head; Gull Pond, a still pool green with algae in the rocky shore a few feet above the high-tide level; and Burnt Head and Gull Rock farther in the distance. And there, on one of the rocks of White Head, as if it had come to admire the spectacular coastline of Monhegan's eastern side, sat the solitary easel.

He placed himself on the rock at White Head's highest point, relieved to get off his feet, looking out to the south at the terrain and the ocean. But he was captivated more by the gulls that would swoop about, hanging immobile on an air current just yards from him, yet a hundred fifty feet over the rocks below, then disappearing and reappearing.

He couldn't imagine how long he sat on the rock. The vistas were magnificent, but they had the opposite effect to what he had hoped, flooding his mind with more memories of Cassie, reminding him of that last night, when she recounted her first hike with her family to this perch. It was late, and the sun was behind the trees. He was getting cold and knew he needed to return to the hotel. Finally, when the cold turned to shivers, he pulled himself up and turned to leave. The easel was gone.

Now he sat on the Island Inn Verandah, that same easel a short distance away on the lawn. He had been resting quietly for a long time, yet he still felt short of breath. He sighed deeply again, remembering happier times. Happier. What did that mean?

The breeze should have been calming, the sun's warmth on his face rejuvenating. He closed his eyes, so that his vision filled with the haze of reddish yellow that filtered through his eyelids. *He* should have been peaceful. But he wasn't. He had his wife's image in his mind. He wanted to reach out to her and whisper, "Cassandra, I'm home," and take her in his arms as he had each day for years.

He saw her face, the expression on it when he looked back as they separated at the train station. She was so peaceful. She knew that life was going to be

long and wonderful for the two of them and he saw that in her eyes. It gave him confidence to go on each day, but that was the last time.

“The last time I saw you I was happier.”

“Excuse me.” A voice — not annoyed but soothing, concerned.

He looked over. He had said it out loud.

A woman had settled into the chair a few feet to Jonah’s right. She wore a large, floppy straw hat, with an artfully bent brim that allowed her visibility yet shaded her fair skin from the sun. He couldn’t see her hair or clearly see her eyes, shielded behind sunglasses.

“I’m sorry. I was just thinking.”

“About who?”

“Excuse me?” he asked.

“You said, ‘The last time I saw you I was happier.’”

“My wife,” he replied.

“She’s gone,” the woman said. Not a question. She knew.

“Yes. The last time I saw her, I was happier.” But he could say no more.

Jonah thought the woman would stand up and leave him. He hoped she would stay. But he couldn’t be pleasant company. His sadness was covering him — like a warm wool blanket, at moments comforting and at the next smothering him, robbing him of his breath, so overwhelming that he felt a pressure on his chest that could almost crush him.

“The last time I saw you I was happier,” he continued to hear, sometimes in his voice, sometimes in Cassie’s voice, sometimes almost a harmony between the two of them. He was a thousand miles from where he had last seen her, more than nine months now since that day, yet she seemed to be closer to him than ever, not receding.

“Have you been to the Island before?” the woman said after a few minutes. He was so buried in his thoughts that he wasn’t sure at first that it was her voice or his own mind. But he was glad she was still there a few feet away.

“It’s my first time on the Island.”

“Yet you seem to know it well.”

“I guess I do. My wife came here every summer for years as a child. So every summer that I knew her, when it came around to when her family would take their Monhegan vacation, she would flow with stories. They wouldn’t ebb away until early autumn. And once we had our kids, the stories she would tell them at bedtime during the summer were all Monhegan stories. I must

admit, I grew impatient with them at times, but I wish I could hear every one of them again.”

“Are you staying long?”

“I’ve been here almost four weeks. I don’t know how long I’ll stay. . . . You?”

“I’m here every year as long as I can. . . . You’re alone?”

“Yes, but not in spirit.”

“Your wife was supposed to be here with you?”

“Not right now. We were supposed to come here, the entire family, in late August. And stay at the Shining Sails.”

“I know Shining Sails well,” she said. “The garden’s wonderful, and about this time of year, the sun sets, as far north as it ever reaches, between the trees when you sit on the back porches. It’s a wonderful way to end the day.”

The sun lowered in the sky. The light bathing the Verandah was almost blinding, coming directly from behind Manana, making the big rock a study in shadows and black and white. Likewise the boats in the Harbor and the Wharf and houses down the hill from the Inn.

“I’ve seen you here often in the last few days,” she said.

“I especially like this spot. So many different aspects to see in the one view.” The lawns and houses and Wharf, then the Harbor and the water, then Manana — structure, freedom, solitude, he thought, all aligned with one another.

“That’s how it is from many spots around the Island. That’s why the artists have been drawn here all these years. Do you get out and see much of it?”

“In my mind, it’s all I do,” Jonah said. “Wander, and stare out wondering. But in reality, I sit here paralyzed.”

The sun was so intense, he closed his eyes again. He felt her hand draping over his. His thoughts drifted and the blanketing hand soothed him in a way he hadn’t felt in months. But eventually he realized her hand wasn’t touching him anymore. He opened his eyes, and her chair was empty and still. And the easel was gone.

7

The Lupine Gallery sits on a strip of land along the Meadow Road with the Meadow right behind it. It's more than just a gallery. Like many things on Monhegan Island, it plays several roles. The hotel is an art gallery, a restaurant, a meeting hall, an observation deck. The wine shop is a grocery store . . . and a card room. The lighthouse is a museum. The summer shopkeeper is a winter lobsterman, a writer at night, a tour guide on weekends.

The Lupine is an art gallery. An artists' supply store. And a framing shop. And an art-book, poster and postcard shop. And a meeting spot for artists and art lovers. I look through volumes on Andrew Wyeth and Rockwell Kent. Kent was a painter. I knew that. Now I learn he was a carpenter. He made or repaired many of the houses and porches I'm working on.

So I pretend to be a handyman . . . long enough until I actually become one. And am I a writer? Glen claims I can be one again. Am I a coward for having disappeared? for having given up?

It's funny when I stand here leafing through a book on Kent and his work on the island. I look at the paintings and I see the man who worked with wood, with tools. He lived to breathe in nature and live it with every fiber. His art reflects that. The simple almost fairy-tale use of color. No crowds of people. It's rocks and green hills. Not individual trees and bushes, but green hills. Expanses of water. Houses that are geometric expressions. Uninhabited landscapes. Uninhabited villages. An occasional soul working with nature, or struggling against it.

I pulled some boards from a window sill yesterday. I could tell by the shape and color of the nails I pulled out that they were old, close to a century old. Nails Kent likely drove into the wood when that house was built in 1907. The sudden rush of connection. An anticipation about taking my tools in hand for the next project.

I put the Kent book down. Back home I would have bought it for my library. Been pleased to own it, but likely never look at it again. At the moment, though, I don't have a penny to spare. Anyway, I can come back to look at the book. Every day if I want. I wander throughout the ground-floor room, looking at paintings framed on the walls and unframed, amassed in racks. I've seen little of the island at this point. Yet already I'm starting to know it. The

rocks of Pebble Beach. The winter surf slamming into the rocks on the far side of the island near Squeaker's Cove. The shape of the cliffs looking from White Head. The surf cracking over seaweed-choked rocks and over the wreck of the old boat at the south end of the island. The mossy trees of the Cathedral Woods. Is this what Monhegan really looks like, though?

I should get back to the project I have for today. But life here isn't Chicago. It isn't on a strict time clock. Since arriving here, I've been looking at my watch less and less. I used to glance at it every few minutes, worry about timing everything. This morning I didn't look at it once until almost noon.

As I decide to go out the door, I see a sign at the far corner of the gallery by a stairway. "Four Island Artists." An arrow points up the flight. The wooden steps are a bit perilous. They lead from the cozy, sectioned-off first floor to a single high loft. It's dominated by a huge, north-facing window with 48 panes of glass. Six high and eight across.

First, in front of me, an abstract painter's work. His large canvases are on the far side of the room. But they catch my eye before all else. Bold displays of melding colors, swaths of paint that intersect and transform. Each of his half-dozen works looks similar to the next, with slight differences in color and tone. And each is named with a different Monhegan locale, such as "Sunrise over Lobster Cove."

In contrast is the artist on the wall next to me as I walk from the top of the stairs. Her work is more intimate. Tight, tiny constructions in deep square compartments. I have to stand right in front of each one and inspect it closely. They're assemblages of sea glass, shells, island stones polished, shards of wood faded like driftwood. They're labeled "Fairy House 1," "Fairy House 2" and so on. Eight of them. They don't really resemble houses.

The next artist presents village scenes in a rough, primitive style. It rubs me the wrong way immediately. I don't even know why.

Time to go. Enough. But didn't that sign say four artists? I've only seen three. I stand in my place and slowly rotate around to find what I've missed. Four paintings over there. In the corner of the room around from the stairway. An artist named Arden Morrow.

Each is small, a square canvas no more than 20 inches in either dimension. Two on one wall, the other two on a facing wall a dozen feet away. You can't easily see them unless you place yourself in front of one pair looking at the others. Set midway between them is a pair of antique piano stools a couple

Matthew Kiell — *Monhegan Windows*



of feet apart. Each work is in a different medium. Colored pencils, pastel, watercolor, oil. But you can immediately tell. Unmistakably. The same hand created all of them.

As I stand as far from them as I can, detail is hard to make out. I step nearer. It's coming into focus, now, at the midpoint between the pairs of works. Coalescing into a scene of a trail through the woods. Of rocks overlooking Monhegan's eastern cliffs. Of a jetty by the harbor. Of a grassy spot near a cove. A figure inhabits each picture! I didn't notice him before. A man, head bowed as if standing or walking and deep in his own thought. He looks like me. I move closer to get a clearer sense of his features. But the impression is disappearing into meaningless lines and spots of color.

The piano stools are perfectly located, and I sit on one of them. I swivel to look at each picture. At least for the moment, I'll accept that I can only get more from each painting by staring at it longer, not by trying to get too close or by moving away.

The artist is tantalizing me, controlling me. I want each scene to become clearer. I want the man in the pictures to turn toward me or to walk nearer. But he stays at a distance. Close enough for an impression but too far to identify. There is only so much clarity I can get.