

Home, eternal

by David Ackley

We came into the same city, a place given; you my uncle Philip first, me, twenty three years later. I was the round-faced curly-locked little zombie-walker, bumping my way around and between the tree-trunk legs of the other grownups at your 'going away party.' Of course, I don't remember the occasion, but you would have. You knew me first.

That was in the old, original home on Columbia Avenue, of the dark unpainted cedar shingles, the screened front porch and Lela's trellised roses. Images, occasions, faces, family legends, the resinous scent of cedar shakes baking in the sun stake me there. My grandfather dandles me on his lap, my father at his side. That's a wicker rocking chair, dark green, like the one just outside our back door. The rose trellis like that white one against the unpainted back of our barn. Where the clapboards have fallen off, the old, rough pine boards have darkened with age to deep hues of bronze, and slate, and chestnut, which Ann always wants to cover and paint, and I want to keep through all their turnings.

For my first two years my parents and I lived in an apartment on Dunstable Road, easy minutes from the other family members, all of whom either still lived, like you and Olive and sometimes Jeanette at home with their parents, Fred and Lela, or like my parents and I, within the city's boundaries ... A place embeds itself from its air, its singular aura; I remember the petroleum odor baking off the street. And Lela's roses, seeping through the screen on the shadowy porch. And then, the arch of elms, branches nearly intertwined from either side of the street, the shadows of leaves, dappled underfoot.

In 1940, perhaps with a loan from Fred and Lela, Harry and Dot had purchased a cottage on quiet Oak Avenue, just a few miles farther out, across a bridge in Hudson. That seems the last year of our familiar past. You and Olive and Fred and Lela would take one last trip to Cutler, Maine. A year later, you'd enlist. We'd live there

for another six years, through the war, a deceptive run at permanence.

The city, seen through the backseat window, emerged, constructing a first world. When we, Dot, two-year-old Steve and me (Harry then off as well on the war's business) visit my grandparents, landmarks map my life's comings and goings. There was the turn left off Oak Avenue, another left on River Street that led across the immediate bridge from Hudson into Nashua. A long run of factories on the left backed onto the Nashua River, blocking it from view. Whitish fronts, multi-paned dirty windows, row on row, some lighted, some dark. An occasional human figure, moving from one window to the next. Then the sudden falling away of buildings to a parking lot bordered by rail tracks, a low news stand and bus/train station and the peculiar triangular intersection, sloping toward the river, completely paved, whose wide base ran along South Main Street, leaving unguided entry to the north-south traffic, a drivers' challenge. To the right the old forbidding, red brick, Gothic library, a book castle not to be breached by the faint-hearted. And beyond, crowning Crown Hill, the brass dome of the Russian Orthodox Church.

We turn, right every time, to where Main Street splits apart in the branches of a Y, Concord Street north to Concord and beyond, Amherst Street west toward Keene and the Vermont border. At the point of the divide is the small grassy island guarded by a granite Civil War soldier on a pedestal, his bayoneted musket at perennial Parade Rest. Below his feet is an old bronze cannon, muzzle threatening the east approach. Like all those familiar features of our way to Columbia Avenue, he secures me to this place, my life, unchanging except by the smallest pieces, all of a sameness, eternal...

My grandparents, whose 50th Wedding Anniversary Open House is today's destination certify that: a half century, together! Almost ten times my life so far. The war is over, everyone says. Soon you, elected in absentia *my favorite uncle*, will be home from the war and the place, under Grandad's guidance, I point to on his world globe;

France. Our wishes all mingle, wanting your homecoming. Surely,
we'll all be here, in this, our city, from now on...

