River Crossings
Michael Hoberman

The February sun is a source of faint encouragement to New Englanders. I wonder if the tinge of the lengthening day was a balm to the party of several hundred Wampanoag men, women, and children who were fleeing northwestward from the English army in 1676. They arrived at the south bank of what's now the Millers River on a Friday. The westward-flowing river's channel looked barely deep and wide enough to retain all the raging water and ice floes that had to pass through it. The group immediately set to work cutting trees in order to fashion rafts. Two days later all of them had crossed to where the English couldn't reach them. "By the advantage of some brush which they had laid upon the raft [for her] to sit on," their captive, Mary Rowlandson, didn't even get her feet wet.

Thanks to a highway called Route 2, whose winding course I follow in order to get to my workplace, I have been an aspiring witness to this river-crossing several times a week for nearly twenty years now. As I drive along the three mile stretch of the road that hugs the river I take a quick glance to see the place where I have pictured the Wampanoags rafting from bank to bank. A few years ago, a kind and well-informed acquaintance of mine explained to me that the Wampanoag group actually crossed the river a few miles upstream from the section where Route 2 parallels the river. I took the map he gave me, found the Aubuchon Hardware store in Orange, Massachusetts that he proposed I use as a landmark, and made my way down to the river's edge.

For my whole life, I have been on a quest to see things that aren't happening anymore. Even if I go there on a Friday afternoon in February—even I take my shoes off, walk into the startlingly cold Millers River and drown in its rapids—no course of action I take will yield me into closer proximity of King Philips War. William Faulkner was right that the past is not gone, but I will never make my peace with its invisibility.

When I was twelve years old, I encountered "Dolph Heyliger," Washington Irving's ghost story about Dutch New Amsterdam. My mother and I lived on Roosevelt Island, in the middle of the East River between Turtle Bay on the Manhattan side and Long Island City on the Queens side. That Dolph Heyliger resided on Garden Street, at a considerable distance from the midtown Manhattan shore that was visible to me from my junior high school classroom, didn't impede my fancies. That I could see Manhattan at all, that I smelled the East River every day, that the New York City flag incorporated Dutch motifs, spurred my imagination.

The New York Times recently featured an article entitled, "In the Hudson Valley, a Drive Back in Time." Its contents review the vestiges of the Dutch presence in New York. "Remnants of its history are everywhere," the sub-head says, "hiding in plain sight." These remnants persevere both in their ubiquity *and* in their inscrutability, doing exactly what historical landscapes do.

The longing to come into mystical contact with the past has never left me, and my shock of recognition at my inability to do so never fails to shape my perspective. The ground we step on and see might as well be mounted in a museum. Genetic material isn't the only thing that bonds us to our origins and our ancestry. Every inch of the earth bears the memory and the trace of historical occurrences that vanished in the moment of their transpiring. We are constrained

nonetheless to live in the presence of a history that has no interest in making our acquaintance. Our relationship with history will always be unrequited.

At the end of her 1682 *Narrative* Mary Rowlandson reviewed the "remarkable passages of providence" to which she had been a witness during her captivity. The third item on her list was the fact that the Millers River had been "impassable to the English" who were trying to rescue her (and vanquish her Indian captors) in February of 1676. "I can but admire to see the wonderful providence of God in preserving the heathen for further affliction to our poor country," she wrote, concluding that "God had an over-ruling hand in all those things" and wanted her own English to pay for their unspecified sins. Rowlandson read her own past like a book in which things happen for a reason. I, too, read the past like a book. I want the pages I've already read to stay written after I've turned them.

Oceanic Passages

My friend Bill and I went for a ten-mile run a few weeks ago on a beach northeast of Charleston, South Carolina. When I got back to the air-conditioned comfort of my AirBnb, I read that we had done our workout on Sullivan's Island, "the Ellis Island" of the African American experience. Since not a single one of the hundreds of thousands of captured Africans who arrived at Sullivan's Island during the 1700s had chosen to be there in the same way that my grandparents freely chose America over Russia, however, the analogy fails entirely to capture the dreadful truth of the matter. No one will ever call Ellis Island the Sullivan's Island of white people.

Sullivan's Island dooms my attempt to bring historical knowledge into proximity with first-hand experience. Here is a partial list of the things I noticed there: condominiums with green spiky grass in front of them, lawn-sprinklers whose spray didn't quite reach far enough to cool us off, residential streets whose uniform appearance made it difficult for us to remember how to get back to the causeway that we'd crossed in order to get there. I could spend the rest of my life trying to conjure images of slave ships launching hundreds of thousands of captured human beings into their troubled American future, but I am stuck with the spiky grass and piddly lawn-spray.

A week or so after that beach run I participated in a walking tour of a former plantation on James Island, also near Charleston. Our tour guide, a stalwart and admirable devotee of historical accuracy, began his presentation by reminding us that "plantation" is a mint julepy euphemism for "privately-owned forced labor camp." With the big house forming the incidental background view we wended our way between the whitewashed cabins in which generations of enslaved black people had once lived their entire lives. Standing in the dooryard in which black men had heaped wagons with four-hundred pound bags of Sea Island cotton that they had planted, tended, and harvested, we fanned ourselves with our brochures.

Forming a portion of the perimeter of one of these dooryards was a small outbuilding made of brick. Our tour guide explained that the bricks had been made on-site by some of the inmates of the forced labor camp. He told us how bricks are made and explained that the crews

that did the work consisted of six adults and one child. The adults did the digging, placed the mud in the brick-molds, and carted the formed bricks to the kiln in which they were hardened.

The child's job was to expose each side of the bricks to the sun as it was drying and before it went into the kiln. The tour guide walked us over to the wall of the building and pointed to two unmistakably concave and child-sized fingerprints that marked the exposed edge of one of the bricks. One by one, each member of our group walked over to the wall and placed our fingers inside the tiny prints.

What did each of us feel in those little impressions besides a coarse brick surface? Who among us had any thought that the fingerprints would yield anything other than absolute inanimate indifference? The evidence of past events surrounds us everywhere we go, but the moment we try to bring that evidence to life, it goes absolutely mute on us.

What I Am in Search Of

I recently finished reading Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. It took me several years to read those seven books. While I was basking in the afterglow of the final volume, I read a book by Alain de Botton about why people should read Proust. I knew I'd be disappointed by it, but I had no one I could talk to about the experience I'd just had. It made sense to turn to the closest thing I could find to a confidante.

Alain De Botton says that people who visit the various locales that were the basis for the novel's action are wasting their time. "It should not be Iliers-Combray that we visit," he writes, referring to a town that actually changed its name in 1971 to cash in on the enthusiasm of Proustians. "A genuine homage to Proust would be to look at *our* world through his eyes, not look at *his* world through *our* eyes."

Homage is not usually my objective, however, and no matter how smitten I am by something I read, my first impulse has never been to go in search of its *author's* footprints. What I want to do is to come into contact with the place and time that the author has represented. I want to breathe the air in which the past occurred.

I am not talking about a rational impulse. The simple desire to return to the past, or relive the past—which was what Proust was acting upon when he wrote those books—marks us as human. Lovesickness, mourning, nostalgia: they all derive their force and meaning from their incontrovertibly impractical attributes. The day we stop being driven and shaped by those impulses will be the day the robots have taken over. If I ever stop being enchanted by the sight of the Millers River—or of the Brooklyn Bridge, or of the cellar holes I encounter in the woods behind my house—I will have lost my love for the world in which I live and whose physical legacy I share with all the generations of people who have passed through it before I came into it.

The moments themselves escape us and always will, but I consider it to be a miracle that the places where they happened are still accessible to us. Every city, every road, the bank of every river is an artifact that links us to the past. This is true not only in places where the past has been "preserved," but in all the places where its legacy hasn't been guarded. Maybe the places where history has been forgotten or "erased" are even more important than the ones where an illusion has been created that nothing has changed. The museum that interests me is the one that I enter and inhabit on a daily basis.

According to a talk I once heard (or wish I'd heard), gurneys being rolled along one of the corridors at Massachusetts General Hospital are tracing what was once the western edge of the Shawmut Peninsula, the isthmus now known as the City of Boston. A manicured historic site marked by signage abstracts what happened long ago and calls our attention to the distance that lies between us and our inattentive, oblivious lives. A place where we have to go out of our way to be able to picture the events of history, on the other hand, reminds us that no amount of physical change will ever drain the historical meaning out of a place.

Visiting the Dead

Thirty or so years ago when I was a grad student at UMASS Amherst I made my first substantive acquaintance with Emily Dickinson. The person who introduced me to her was not a professor but a friend of mine who had grown up in South Amherst. He had first come to know her the way that a townsperson does—by reputation, more or less. He knew several of her poems by heart, and I think it must have been easy for him to learn them because he had lived his whole life in the place where she had written them:

> How still the bells in steeples
> stand.
> Till, swollen with the sky,
> They leap upon their silver feet
> In frantic melody

When my friend was born, in the 1930s, Emily Dickinson had only been dead for about fifty years.

Before I'd read more than a handful of her poems, I'd gotten into the habit of making afternoon pilgrimages to her grave with Ray, who routinely went there to pour drops of fortified wine at the base of her monument.

If you are in downtown Amherst there a couple of ways to get to Emily Dickinson's grave. One is to walk down North Pleasant to Triangle and turn right: you see a cemetery gate, pass through it, and make for the wrought iron fence of the Dickinson compound. The other route involves cutting to the back of the Mobil station, walking along the cemetery fence and climbing over the part of it that sags.