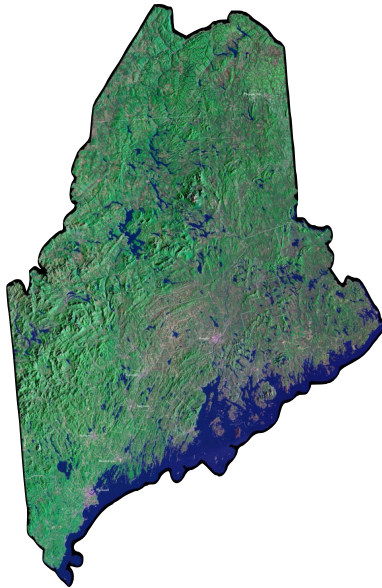


# Place Poetry Workshop — Poetry Across Maine

## Belfast Poetry Festival, 2024

John Reinhart



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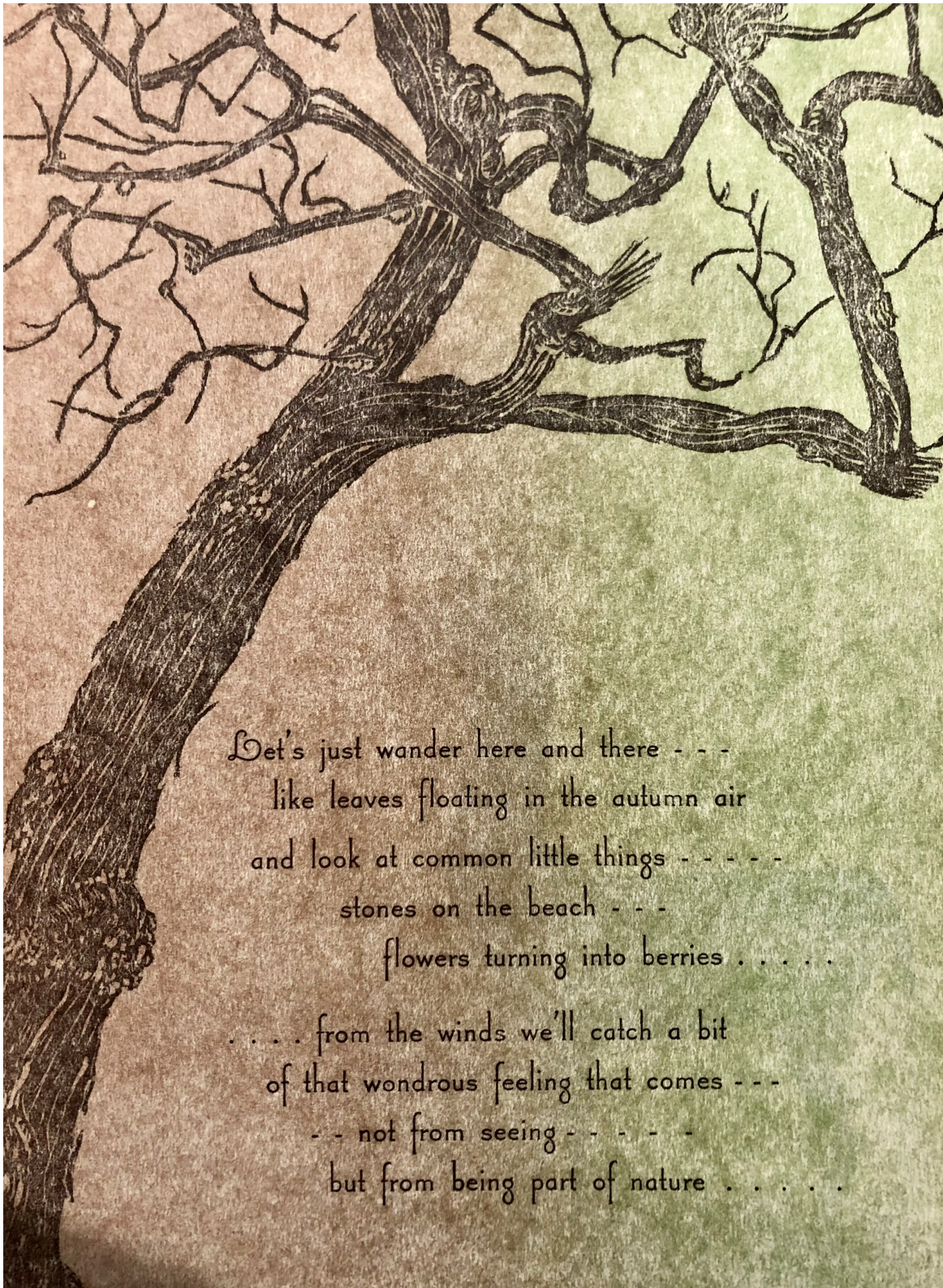
### Lent

#### 1.

The lake has a provisional name. It's been known by other names, and possibly those names were also in some way provisional. The lake may have a name for itself...

*Kate Cayley, from Lent (Book\*hug Press, 2023)*

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Let's just wander here and there - - -  
like leaves floating in the autumn air  
and look at common little things - - - - -  
stones on the beach - - -  
flowers turning into berries . . . . .  
. . . . . from the winds we'll catch a bit  
of that wondrous feeling that comes - - -  
- - not from seeing - - - - -  
but from being part of nature . . . . .

*by Gwen Frostic, from "a walk with me"*

**Poetry Across Maine** — project overview ([poetryacrossmaine.com](http://poetryacrossmaine.com))

**Place** — what is place? finding our place in space and time

- “Negative Capability” (The Poetry Foundation)
- *from The Overstory by Richard Powers, pp. 3-4*

### **Examples**

- “Katahdin” *from Paul Corrigan’s collection At the Grave of the Unknown Riverdriver*

### **On the Map**

- “Ragged Island” *by Edna St. Vincent Millay*
- “The Lighthouse” *by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*
- “Green Boat” *by Murreal Wilmot*
- “The Offshore Islands” *by Ruth Moore*
- “Daily Walk by the Treatment Plant” *by Helene McGlaufflin*

### **Places Near and Far**

- “Eel Grass - Sears Island” *from Gary Lawless’s collection Caribou Planet*
- “Place Name: Oracabessa” *by Kei Miller*

### **Further Reading**

- *The Ecopoetry Anthology*, edited by Ann Fisher-Wirth and Laura-Gray Street  
an extensive 600+ page anthology with poems new and old about nature
- *Words in Place: Reconnecting with nature through creative writing*” by Paul Matthews  
an engaging collection of exercises focused on experiencing nature

## *Negative capability*

A theory first articulated by John Keats about the artist's access to truth without the pressure and framework of logic or science. Contemplating his own craft and the art of others, especially William Shakespeare, in one of his famous letters to relatives Keats supposed that

**a great thinker is**

*“capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts,  
without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.”*

A poet, then, has the power to bury self-consciousness, dwell in a state of openness to all experience, and identify with the object contemplated.

*(<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/education/glossary/negative-capability>)*

If I may put it in my own words, negative capability suggests the poet is able to vacate their own ego and inhabit the inner being of their subject.

*F*irst there was nothing. Then there was everything.

*Then, in a park above a western city after dusk, the air is raining messages.*

*A woman sits on the ground, leaning against a pine. Its bark presses hard against her back, as hard as life. Its needles scent the air and a force hums in the heart of the wood. Her ears tune down to the lowest frequencies. The tree is saying things, in words before words.*

*It says: Sun and water are questions endlessly worth answering.*

*It says: A good answer must be reinvented many times, from scratch.*

*It says: Every piece of earth needs a new way to grip it. There are more ways to branch than any cedar pencil will ever find. A thing can travel everywhere, just by holding still.*

*The woman does exactly that. Signals rain down around her like seeds.*

*Talk runs far afield tonight. The bends in the alders speak of long-ago disasters. Spikes of pale chinquapin flowers shake down their pollen; soon they will turn into spiny fruits. Poplars repeat the wind's gossip. Persimmons and walnuts set out their bribes and rowans their blood-red clusters. Ancient oaks wave prophecies of future weather. The several hundred kinds of hawthorn laugh at the single name they're forced to share. Laurels insist that even death is nothing to lose sleep over.*

*Something in the air's scent commands the woman: Close your eyes and think of willow. The weeping you see will be wrong. Picture an acacia thorn. Nothing in your thought will be sharp enough. What hovers right above you? What floats over your head right now—now?*

*Trees even farther away join in:* All the ways you imagine us—bewitched mangroves up on stilts, a nutmeg's inverted spade, gnarled baja elephant trunks, the straight-up missile of a sal—are always amputations. Your kind never sees us whole. You miss the half of it, and more. There's always as much belowground as above.

*That's the trouble with people, their root problem. Life runs alongside them, unseen. Right here, right next. Creating the soil. Cycling water. Trading in nutrients. Making weather. Building atmosphere. Feeding and curing and sheltering more kinds of creatures than people know how to count.*

*A chorus of living wood sings to the woman:* If your mind were only a slightly greener thing, we'd drown you in meaning.

*The pine she leans against says:* Listen. There's something you need to hear.

from *The Overstory* by Richard Powers

## KATAHDIN

Its serrated ridgeline  
seems out of place here in the east.  
Such a saw-toothed profile belongs in Montana.

Even there it would be conspicuous,  
the traveler's gaze magnetized  
by a mile of soaring granite.

Diminished by its crest are mountains  
that would stand impressively by themselves.  
No wonder first explorers guessed its height

at twice what it is. Emerging from fir forests,  
their sense of scale was knocked awry  
by its sudden wall in the midst of flat country.

Perhaps they expected further ranges.  
Finding none none expressed disappointment.  
It was enough mountain for them.

These days millhands in the milltown  
at its base cool off on screened-in porches  
and still find plenty of peak to stare at.

All the years I lived there, no one  
made even a passing remark of how  
it holds its snow into June and July

like a western mountain.  
But a bum I met in a Boston park  
said he had glimpsed Katahdin one July

through the door of a sweltering boxcar.  
He couldn't imagine a breeze as cool  
as the glistening sight of all that snow

high up in those summer ravines. And though  
he'd passed through 30 years before, the memory  
had stayed with him like the smell of tar in the ties.

by Paul Corrigan

## Place

When we consider the concept of place, we may keep in mind

- physical location: geology, mineralogy, map/boundaries, hydrology, zoology, flora — the ground beneath our feet, the growing world around us, the skies above us, and our place breathing it all in. Think directions and sense impressions.
- temporal location: history of the land/landscape, history of the peoples, place names, changes over time — this place we call Maine, or, even more locally, Belfast has changed in our lifetimes, continues to change. Think climate, think population, think
- personal location: your experiences, your life development, your memories, your feelings, your observations, your sense of belonging or alienation, of familiarity or new discovery. What does a particular location evoke in you?
- urban/rural: there are many beautiful natural places in Maine, but place should not be purely nature-focused. Place should include the bricks along the sidewalk on Main Street, the storefronts owned by familiar faces of bygone days, the new businesses sprung up recently, the changing guard of record stores, video rental stores, to Doordashing hustles of the 21st century



## **Ragged Island**

Edna St. Vincent Millay

There, there where those black spruces crowd  
To the edge of the precipitous cliff,  
Above your boat, under the eastern wall of the island;  
And no wave breaks; as if  
All had been done, and long ago, that needed  
Doing; and the cold tide, unimpeded  
By shoal or shelving ledge, moves up and down,  
Instead of in and out;  
And there is no driftwood there, because there is no beach;  
Clean cliff going down as deep as clear water can reach;

No driftwood, such as abounds on the roaring shingle,  
To be hefted home, for fires in the kitchen stove;  
Barrels, banged ashore about the boiling outer harbor;  
Lobster-buoys, on the eel-grass of the sheltered cove:

There, thought unbraids itself, and the mind becomes single.  
There you row with tranquil oars, and the ocean  
Shows no scar from the cutting of your placid keel;  
Care becomes senseless there; pride and promotion  
Remote; you only look; you scarcely feel.

Even adventure, with its vital uses,  
Is aimless ardour now; and thrift is waste.

Oh, to be there, under the silent spruces,  
Where the wide, quiet evening darkens without haste  
Over a sea with death acquainted, yet forever chaste.

## The Lighthouse

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

The rocky ledge runs far into the sea,  
And on its outer point, some miles away,  
The Lighthouse lifts its massive masonry,  
A pillar of fire by night, of cloud by day.

Even at this distance I can see the tides,  
Upheaving, break unheard along its base,  
A speechless wrath, that rises and subsides  
In the white lip and tremor of the face.

And as the evening darkens, lo! how bright,  
Through the deep purple of the twilight air,  
Beams forth the sudden radiance of its light  
With strange, unearthly splendor in the glare!

Not one alone; from each projecting cape  
And perilous reef along the ocean's verge,  
Starts into life a dim, gigantic shape,  
Holding its lantern o'er the restless surge.

Like the great giant Christopher it stands  
Upon the brink of the tempestuous wave,  
Wading far out among the rocks and sands,  
The night-overtaken mariner to save.

And the great ships sail outward and return,  
Bending and bowing o'er the billowy swells,  
And ever joyful, as they see it burn,  
They wave their silent welcomes and farewell

They come forth from the darkness, and their  
sails  
Gleam for a moment only in the blaze,  
And eager faces, as the light unveils,  
Gaze at the tower, and vanish while they gaze.

The mariner remembers when a child,  
On his first voyage, he saw it fade and sink;  
And when, returning from adventures wild,  
He saw it rise again o'er ocean's brink.

Steadfast, serene, immovable, the same  
Year after year, through all the silent night  
Burns on forevermore that quenchless flame,  
Shines on that inextinguishable light!

It sees the ocean to its bosom clasp  
The rocks and sea-sand with the kiss of peace;  
It sees the wild winds lift it in their grasp,  
And hold it up, and shake it like a fleece.

The startled waves leap over it; the storm  
Smites it with all the scourges of the rain,  
And steadily against its solid form  
Press the great shoulders of the hurricane.

The sea-bird wheeling round it, with the din  
Of wings and winds and solitary cries,  
Blinded and maddened by the light within,  
Dashes himself against the glare, and dies.

A new Prometheus, chained upon the rock,  
Still grasping in his hand the fire of Jove,  
It does not hear the cry, nor heed the shock,  
But hails the mariner with words of love.

"Sail on!" it says, "sail on, ye stately ships!  
And with your floating bridge the ocean span;  
Be mine to guard this light from all eclipse,  
Be yours to bring man nearer unto man!"

## **Green Boat**

Murreal Wilmot

Time slows. You must allow the wind to determine your course,  
when you arrive, and when you depart.

It is a moment to breathe deeply and embrace  
the unknowingness of the journey.

The wind is music enough, no need for Taylor Swift.

Let go, and gulp in the fresh air with no thought of tomorrow

Think only of today at this very moment.

The boom swings, a gull cries, and all of a sudden

A new course is charted.

This tack brings a whole new perspective to life

And so will the next.

Each tack further and further up wind,

is a promise of a long journey back.

With the wind behind you, what else could you ask for?

This is the place to be on a breezy august afternoon.

Escape the the mainland wrapped in a warm summer sweater of sweat  
and smell the green sea for a while.

Let the keel of the boat careen over the swells and feel

the realness of the rough mainsheet in your hand,

that you didn't know that you were clutching like there is

no tomorrow.

*(placed on the map just off Central Landing, Chebeague Island)*

## The Offshore Islands

Ruth Moore

The offshore islands belong to themselves.  
They stand in their own sea.  
They do not inherit; they leave no heirs.  
They are no man's legacy.

Blazing volcanoes, cooled and dead,  
Marked nowhere a boundary line.  
The rise and fall of oceans left  
Not one no trespassing sign.

The money was never minted,  
The clutch of its greed so strong  
It could honor a deed: to have and to hold,  
And keep these wild lands long.

The first summer people were Indians.  
For some five thousand years  
They built up shore-line shell heaps before  
They lost to the pioneers.

The white man took what he wanted.  
He had privilege, laws, and guns.  
He made fast his own boundary lines  
And his property went to his sons.

From the west they sailed in Chebacco boats,  
And the high-sterned pinkys, Essex-made.  
In harbors where water was deep enough  
Their schooners carried a coast-wise trade.

The homesteads they made were sturdy,  
But those who built near the shores  
Had to dig, if they didn't want Indian shells  
All over their cellar floors.

Then time slipped by, as inheritance does.  
They felt the mainland's pull.  
They abandoned their homes to rot away,  
And their cemeteries full.

Theirs was the time of history  
And written records show  
That their hold on the offshore islands began  
Less than four hundred years ago.

Now comes the era of real estate,  
Of the hundred thousand dollar lots,  
Of the condominiums, side by side,  
Along the shoreline choicest spots.

What follows the time of developers  
No human voice can tell.  
But the silent offshore islands know,  
And they handle their mysteries well.

They speak with a voice that is all their own,  
And this is what they say:  
That they talk in terms of a billion years  
That their now is not today.  
And the ghosts they brought along with them  
Have never gone away.

*(placed on the map at Gott's Island, Moore's home)*

## Daily Walk by the Treatment Plant

Helene McGlaulin

The first thing to notice  
is the gray chain link fence topped by barbed wire  
surrounding the plant, which cannot hold the moon  
rising in quiet dignity, whole tonight, on the far side  
of the river. Its reflected presence so compelling  
you might want to close your heart to the honesty of  
sludge, smelly and spewing uninterrupted from a  
rusty curved pipe in clear view. Or you might miss  
the small garden with the miniature red maple encircled  
by yellow marigolds abiding by the pools of waste, planted  
last season by a man in muddy overalls, who I think of now  
with deep respect as my teacher.

Can you love barbs, sludge and smell as you do  
marigolds, maple, moon? I ask myself each day as I walk  
each day as I shudder imagining barbs wounding flesh,  
feel my bowels stir in recognition of sludge. The moon offers  
only its reflected light, shining as it does with equanimity, so  
I turn to my teacher who planted and tends in this wasteland.  
The bittersweet, berries popping, drapes itself hardily over barbs  
and would be all that is left of color on this late November day, except  
that the tiny maple holds its leaves still and those few surrounding  
suns have not quite extinguished their last light.

(from *Solstice* [2024] - on the map at Water Treatment Plant, Front St, Bath, ME)

**eel-grass – Sears Island**

*Gary Lawless*

Hard to be lonely  
in the lushness of  
eel-grass, feeling the ocean's  
ebb and flow —  
hard to know  
want or hurt or  
waste, here below  
the sun, the sky,  
the water's edge of  
grass and mud and  
moving with the moon —  
hard to know  
the hearts of men, those  
who would fill and spill and  
kill all below  
their own shallow depth of heart, their  
line of sight —  
hard to know these hearts,  
hard to be alive,  
hard to survive  
in the face of their  
rush toward riches,  
toward death,  
hard to be alive.

## **Place Name: Oracabessa**

Kei Miller

Oracabessa – origins disputed but most likely leave over from the Spanish. Oracabeza, Golden Head, though what gold was here other than light shining off the bay, other than bananas bursting out from red flowers? But this too is disputed – not the flowers – rather, the origin of bananas; they may have come here with Columbus on a ship that in 1502 slipped into Oracabessa the way grief sometimes slips into a room. In those days the sailor tried to name the island Santa Maria, as if not knowing we already had a name, in another language, a language whose speakers would soon die – though this too is disputed – not the deaths, but the completeness of genocide. Consider, if you will, such leave-over words as barbecue; consider hurricane; consider the word Jamaica, land of wood and water – but not of gold. Could someone please go back in time and tell Columbus, in Taino there is no word for gold. Christopher Columbus, in Italiano Cristoforo Colombo, en español Cristóbal Colón. A teacher once told me ‘Colón’ is root word for colonist, and though I know that was false etymology, there is some truth to it. Oracabessa – place where you might find such tranquil villas as Golden Cove, Golden Clouds or Goldeneye – longtime home of Ian Fleming who sat there on cliff’s edge, the morning’s breakfast brought to him by a woman named Doris, the scent of ackee and crisp-fried breadfruit wafting up to his nostrils while between his teeth he bit a number 2 pencil, all the time looking out to sea as if fishing for a story – maybe a man – an incredible man – let’s call him Bond. James Bond. Who knew 007 wasn’t Scottish, but a barefoot bwoy from St Mary, Jamaica. Like so many others, he too would migrate – the brutish winter cooling his complexion down to white. Such stories! Goldfinger, GoldenEye, The Man with the Golden Gun. Did you never stop to wonder where all this gold came from? Did you never stop to ask, what was found in El Dorado? Well, let me tell you: not a nugget, not an ounce of ore – but light gilding the bay, and perhaps bananas, and perhaps ackee, and such language as could summon wind to capsize Columbus’s ships – and if that’s not gold, then what is?