

Yeah, what a year. We've been remiss in writing this year's missive until now for a number of reasons, which may become apparent when the tip-of-the-iceberg is revealed, and eluded to in the postcard that sent you to this URL and link to this .pdf file. If you're not a fan of Lucy Ellmann-style or prose, following her Booker Prize long-listed 2019 nomination for *Ducks, Newburyport*, the following letter can be summarized as: we are healthy, although a bit insane, as 2020 has been a steel-framed roller coaster, rather than the usual wooden roller-coaster ride, of a year. For those of you who may be more adventurous or a pseudo-fan of angst-ridden rant and ADD-style (not additive, but Attention-Deficit Disorder) of writing in this recent classic, said to rival James Joyce's *Ulysses*, of which we all know few have ever managed to complete, or feel the same angst as we present, below, here's a brief, and very brief, part of our 2020 ride. For those of you who would rather go with Vanilla, because the following may look daunting, use the other download link on the holiday site **now** to the Vanilla\_style summary! Otherwise, take a deep breath and hold on:

We're now living in a flat in Portland, Maine, on the Eastern Promenade overlooking Casco Bay, since the first of October, after having sold our home in Winslow following purchasing property in Falmouth, Maine, which was originally Falmouth, Massachusetts, before Maine became its own state on 15 March 1820 and part of the latter became Portland, Maine, earlier this year where we submitted plans to build our home on that property before putting down some cold, hard, cash to pay for it and after having gotten approval by the seller, who also is the only individual controlling and approving home design and site plan by the one-person Home Owners Association, which now consists of 21 built homes with only 3 lots remaining, one of which is ours, in a process that began over a year ago and continues as we type this yearly correspondence because "no one expects the Spanish Inquisition" especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, except for the fact that the way 2020 has impacted everyone's lives, it's no surprise that there wouldn't be unforeseen and unexpected twists-and-turns as part of what others rightly call first-world problems, even after having spent months and a chunk-of-change crossing the t's and dotting the i's completing an arduous, due-diligence process attempting to satisfy 38 pages of covenants such that we could absolutely, positively, without-a-doubt guarantee construction before signing on the dotted line and transferring funds to the seller; (breathe) the fact that our central Maine home, which had been undergoing upgrades and room renovations during the springtime when contractors were few and far between because they, too, were hesitant of human contact, which left me some time to finish chapter-and-line editing of a textbook published by Springer, *Nature Through Time*, with two European co-editors whose first language isn't English, along with 93 other contributing authors, ranging from Japanese, Brazilian, Australian, African, and many European colleagues, with the Estonians having the best command of English grammar and syntax to, well, I won't rank other contributor's needs for copy-and-line editing although there were several lead authors whose chapters required significant work, along with several chapter revisions before the text was intelligible, similar to what you now are attempting to read, went on the market the day after we signed the final sales agreement for the Falmouth lot in late June for which we hoped to begin the build during the summer before winter had come, but were forced to postpone construction until after 1 September because the seller requested that we delay it for whatever reason because, as the covenants dictate, he, and he, alone, has the authority to make decisions about anything and everything that is approved in the subdivision and, for which he does not have to provide any reason for his decision, is irrelevant; (breathe) and the fact that the couple who bought our Winslow home wanted a decision on their offer within one day over a weekend, after having toured the home on Friday, making an offer on Saturday, and wanting an answer on their offer by Sunday noon, which didn't allow us any time to attempt to find either a moving company or future accommodation, and when we pointed out this obvious problem, they kindly agreed to an extension of 48 hours for us to make our decision to accept their offer during which time a miracle occurred, and we were able to find both a mover and the flat in which we currently reside, and signed the sales contract which required us to be out of the house by early September, except for the fact that they had to sell their home first, which wasn't disclosed to us by their agent at the time of contract signing and who said that the buyer's purchase of our place wasn't contingent on

anything, which turned out to be an alternative fact, something that seems to be pervasive in our greatest nation, although the buyers insisted on penalizing us \$1000 per day if we didn't close when they wanted the closing in early September, even though the fact is that they couldn't close on the date they demanded because they had to close on their Masshole house before they could obtain their Veterans Administration loan on the Maine property, which could have been part of Massachusetts if Maine hadn't received its own statehood two hundred years ago, meant that we were postponed in closing even though our household items already had been taken to storage and the lease we signed for the flat began on 1 October, which meant that we spent a year, one month, with Michael and his family in Yarmouth after which we moved into this place, the view of Casco Bay you saw on the postcard from 218 Eastern Promenade Apartment 1, with the anticipation of beginning the Falmouth build by early October, only to have the seller, who agreed to the site plan and house design, first in May and followed by his "Who Wants to be a Millionaire" final decision in June, slap a Temporary Restraining Order (TRO) and Build Injunction against us in late October because the adjacent lot owner, who bought the property after we had a Sales & Purchase Agreement on our lot in March and after having received preliminary approval for our house and site design, didn't like where we had put our new house, relative to the setback-covenant rules, which none of the 21 other houses in the subdivision conform to, and we note, here, that we are forever grateful to our surveyor who overlaid the surveyed subdivision plat on an orthophotorectified aerial image and plotted the setback covenants against each build beginning in 2009 until 2018, which is the most recent aerial images of the subdivision, demonstrating that only one homeowner has conformed to those particular covenants, although the non-existent HOA did draft, but didn't send us, a letter noting their dismay that we were not playing well in the sandbox by violating the setback covenants; (breathe) we settled earlier in December during mediation, because the adjacent lot owner is a real estate agent and knew that the seller, Roth Rogers Realty LLC, whom we do not recommend because he's a lying, unethical weasel, had breached his sales contract with us, pursued their demands that resulted in our having to hire high-priced lawyers and head to mediation where we ended up compromising on our part about the house design and site placement, because the only compromise that the seller was willing to accept was to let us build our pre-approved house in another location on the property, only to learn just before Christmas that the lawsuit filed by the seller against us, because, did we mention the fact that the adjacent lot owners didn't want to spend their money or put any skin in this game, the Temporary Restraining Order filed by the seller was denied by the courts; (breathe) this, in effect, now has placed significant additional costs on the project that we now anticipate to begin this month, and invite y'all to visit if it ever gets completed without future interference by either the adjacent lot owners or the seller, with an occupancy date of September 2021 rather than an occupancy date of June 2021, which means that our short-term, eight month lease in Portland overlooking Casco Bay will require us to find another short-term place to rent during a Maine summer when tourist season jacks up the prices because, you know it's tourist season, and the cost of our flat per month goes to Air B-n-B exorbitant prices, during a time in 2020 that we missed because, a year ago New Years Eve, Elvira wrenched her knee on the stairs and ended up being one of the last outpatient surgeries at Maine Medical Center in Augusta in late February, before all elective surgeries were cancelled due to the corona virus, to undergo a snip-and-tuck repair of a torn cartilage which had resulted in her knee remaining in a state equivalent to that of a small, round-and-ripe watermelon, which are available in Maine during season, for months prior to and, as a consequence of her stopping physical therapy due to some alterative fact about an increase in global pandemic-related issues, following surgery, which despite the fact that Maine, until recently, hadn't been that affected by the nanometer-scaled virus, but had to have the knee drained of fluid on several occasions by her orthopedic surgeon while we were packing our house of 47 years of marriage and worldly accumulations, traipsing up-and-down the stairs to her sewing room and making those hard, emotional and heart-wrenching decisions about what to keep, what to donate, what to sell for pennies-on-the-dollar during an economic downturn, and what to bring to the dump, besides the nearly 2.5 tons of professional library journals, which were donated to museums in Canada, because no institutional library in the United States has much use for paper anymore, or boxed and shipped to Kunming, China, to assist a young colleague, who joined us during the 2019 field season in Xinjiang Province in far western China, where you likely continue to hear about the burdens having been placed on the Uighars, in establishing a research library in his paleobotany laboratory, before having United Van Lines haul off what remained, which we deemed would fit into the down-

sized house we designed for the Falmouth lot, to a storage unit in Portland, Maine, not Oregon although not having access to our belongings, other than the little we have stored in Michael & Kristen's basement, could well as be Oregon, until we thought we could move into our new home next June but, it looks more realistic that we won't have a home until September, and unpack what remains which no longer includes Joseph's worldly possessions; (breathe) Joseph moved out of the house in March to establish and grow Mighty Viking Gummies, check his Facebook page, in Mount Vernon, Maine, not in George Washington's estate, Virginia, and collected the last of his belongings on the final day when the moving company departed with the last of our boxes and furniture, took some of the stress out of our lives after having his presence in the house over the past four years which, in retrospect, was a very long four years of our lives, after which we were looking forward to a semi-peaceful and quiet retirement as I moved from the classroom to an 'active' retired status at the end of August, the fact of which required me to clean out most of my departmental space and distribute teaching-and-research collections to various colleagues and institutions, or not, also this year because some are still boxed and waiting to be hand delivered to the Smithsonian and elsewhere, because I've now been allocated a small desk area in the basement of the Mudd building on campus, not even equivalent to the very small space at Auburn which was converted from the Geology Department's mimeograph room to my office in 1978 next to the secretary's desks where we shared a departmental telephone and I began my career, even though I've got two continuing NSF grants that are international, one in Maritime Canada and the other continuing in far western China, but aren't functional because of that pesky nano-meter sized bag-o-chemicals, which some knuckleheads have called the "Kung flu," but neither I nor my US colleagues brought to this continent after our fieldwork in 2019, and WHO abdicated their public-health responsibilities, resulting in the death of more 'Mericans per day than the 911 death toll of 2,996 and, to date, more US citizens, native peoples, and non-citizen immigrants who died over the span of nearly six years of our involvement in WWII, the big one, where only 291,557 soldiers were killed in combat as opposed the current death toll, that is causing havoc on a global scale and restricting travel and collaboration, and who we occasionally see only after he's been rapid antigen-tested negative but, otherwise, has been building his business such that, now, he's near or over capacity for what he and his workforce can produce on a weekly basis, as demand grows in the state, although Mighty Viking is still only supplying to the medical side of the equation where he has a license, rather than the recreational side of the equation, where he, currently, doesn't have a license but became legal earlier this year, for which he doesn't have the production capacity in a renovated, approved kitchen space in his rental property, although there's the possibility of expansion if there was a sufficient workforce to be had in the rural part of the state; (breathe) similar to other states in the Union, Maine closed its school systems earlier in the year which resulted in one of those difficult decisions about whether to homeschool Riley for his Kindergarten year or have him attend a hybrid educational model at his Yarmouth elementary school, both of which were chosen by Michael and Kristen, moving from the former to the latter soon after the 2020 school year began as it became increasingly clear that socialization is a large part of Kindergarten interactions and personal growth, after Riley had been enrolled in a pre-school setting since their move to Yarmouth nearly two years ago, and finding that parents generally aren't good substitutes for elementary school teachers, who may not be athletic coaches for various junior varsity or varsity teams but coaches, none-the-less, because of the conflicts between parenting and educating which appear to be inherent in who has authority over what and how a child reacts, or doesn't react, to one or both authority roles when played by the same or different parent, regardless of whether the homework assignments are to be completed on an iPad with flashy colored graphics and repetitive iterations or on good, old fashioned paper with a pencil or crayon, because this is about the only way one can learn how to write, which a younger sibling thinks, without the maturity of the parent, should be part of her in-the-moment routine because big brother can color with the bright red crayon or pencil and Emily can't do the same thing at the same time on the same page which, for one who is not yet two years old, but certainly has a two-year old attitude and sass, can precipitate blood-curdling screams that make the hair on the back of anyone's neck stand-on-end and exacerbate any tense situation as the negative feedback loop and child's response raises the household decibel-and-amplitude level without predictability, where tensions already are on the slightly high side, as in many other two-working parent, white-collar households, attempting to work-from-home on different daily schedules, particularly as Kristen's company is headquartered in Europe, with satellite offices on both the East and West coasts of this continent, and Michael's

company, although Portland, Maine, based, has been undergoing several structural reorganizations in response to shareholders expectations after acquiring a European pharmaceutical company that tailors prescriptions to individual pets, a year ago and finding its integration more difficult than imagined, which we've yet to see, physically, but do visit with them as part of our small family bubble knowing that we all are absolutely positively negative, as I've now had 24 PCR-based COVID nasal swabs done since early August at Colby if I had ever wanted to step back on campus for any reason this academic year and, potentially, during summer 2021, and knowing that both Michael and Kristen have been antigen-based tested and also continue to be negative, which has made isolation somewhat more bearable for us all since we moved to Portland and isolated ourselves across from Casco Bay, even though our help could have been used in Ashburn, Virginia, during the latter part of 2020; (breathe) although direct flights from Portland to Dulles airport near Ashburn are scheduled, since earlier this year on a reduced number of trips, daily, the idea of getting into a narrow and confined cylinder in which re-circulated air was flowing from overhead nozzles with others who, until recently, were not required to demonstrate their negativity, other than the usual attitude about having their freedoms assaulted, certainly was not in the cards, and the idea of a non-stop drive from Maine to Virginia for Elvira with her swollen knee, with the possibility of sleeping in the car, was a non-starter, even though Becca could have used some help with Roman's daily routine because, as one might expect, demands being placed by current and new clients on her clinical practice increased significantly in both in-person, danger masked or unmasked stranger, and virtual sessions as a consequence of school closures, increased child-parent interactions, on several levels, and both latent and developing psychoses, as her increased workload and parenting duties were coupled with Marc's departure in early August, originally scheduled for the Spring, postponed until Summer, and then realized in late Summer, for a five-month sequestered-training course at Quantico, only 56.9 miles and an hour away from Ashburn, which could have been on another planet with his inability to leave and risk returning with a case of COVID that would have jeopardized his dreams, towards which he has been working since graduating from PennState in 2006, and graduating from Quantico in early December, some 14 years later, to begin his new role that keeps him in the Washington, DC, area, and, paraphrasing the words of Randy California, keeps the family playing together staying together, although we've not been able to play with Roman, other than in the virtual world that makes it very difficult unless you're one of the new breed of magicians who can materialize objects from a digital screen into reality, for the past year, lessening the stress and anxiety of a one-parent household and bringing a new sense of normalcy to a set of circumstances that will require us, all, to reflect and revisit how we'll go about our interactions over the next few years until we balance the COVID stranger dangers similar to how we have balanced the polio, measles, mumps, rubella, herpes for which we'll not provide any explanation, pneumonia, HPV, West Nile fever, dengue fever which, yes, is viral, and a continuing threat to spread towards the poles concurrent with increasing hemispherical temperatures, along with malaria parasites which, too, will become more common on a planet with increasing mean annual temperatures, although malaria was common in the Mobile, Alabama, region until about 1910, SARS, typhoid, as well as those pesky bacteria responsible for tetanus, brucellosis, leptospirosis, melioidosis which also is known as Whitmore's disease, and vibriosis, to name but a few, that humanity has found solutions, some better some worse, to live with them, recalling that we homo sapiens evolved into *their* world rather than either the bag-o-chemical viruses, which many biologists consider as non-living, or living prokaryotic Bacteria and Archaea evolved into our world that, if we accept the interpretation of when evidence of our *Homo sapien* ancestor appeared, if we truly are a smart and intelligent species and don't "see" ourselves as direct descendants of a Biblical Adam, who gave his rib to, and Eve, despite the fact that we all have the same number of bones in our rib cages, some 310 thousand years ago in a Moroccan Pleistocene deposit at Jebel Irhoud, 75 kilometers from Morocco's west coast, if not a few, maybe, tens of thousands of years prior to the fossilization of that skull (final breath).

Stay safe, stay healthy, stay sane.

Maybe two masked desperados in Portland, Maine?