

# The Vermont Writers' Prize

*This year's literary competition marks the 30th anniversary of the establishment of the award honoring the memory and works of Ralph Nading Hill Jr.*



Ralph Nading Hill Jr.

## Editor's note by Philip R. Jordan

THERE MUST BE SOMETHING IN THE AIR, OR perhaps in the hills and valleys and lakes and rivers of Vermont, that have for many years inspired so many people who live within its boundaries to write so eloquently about the state in which they live. Vermonters are so very fortunate to have had among their number the likes of Frank Howard Mosher, Archer Mayor, and scores of others. Fortunate, too, to have had the likes of those who both write about Vermont and also amply illustrate their works with photography, such as Peter Miller and Karl Decker.

Writing workshops and other venues for budding writers and pros alike abound in the Greens: for one, there is the annual Green Mountain Writers' Conference (which will celebrate its 21st anniversary this year) and, for poets, the Poetry Society of Vermont, founded in 1947, which publishes a journal and holds a spring luncheon and a summer festival each year.

For many Vermont writers (and poets), the Vermont Writers' Prize competition, jointly sponsored by *Vermont Magazine* and Green Mountain Power, has been a noteworthy and prestigious venue for them to showcase their work. This independently judged contest with its \$1,500 cash award was established by the power company 30 years ago and co-sponsored by *Vermont Life* magazine, initially as the Ralph Nading Hill Jr. Literary Prize in honor of its namesake, a historian and prolific writer who served for many years on its board of directors until his death in 1987. In 2013, *Vermont Magazine* joined Green Mountain Power in a new effort to continue the commemoration and renamed it the Vermont Writers' Prize.

In his lifetime, Ralph wrote many books pertaining to Vermont, among them *The Winooski* (1949), *Contrary Country: A Chronicle of Vermont* (1950), and *Sidewheeler Saga* (1953). He was for many years an editor of *Vermont Life* before moving on to a career at National Life Insurance Group, and he was also a trustee of the Shelburne Museum; he is perhaps best known as the person instrumental in saving and preserving the *Ticonderoga*, the last of the side-wheel steamboats to ply Lake Champlain.

The competition for this year's award was judged by a panel consisting of myself, as editor of *Vermont Magazine*; Marisa Crumb, the magazine's executive editor; Anthony Marro, former editor of *Newsday*; Alison Freeland, 1994 winner of the prize; Steve Terry, consultant, former journalist, and Green Mountain Power executive; and Suzanne Loring, a writer at the Stern Center for Language and Learning and a committee member of the Dorothy Canfield Fisher Children's Book Award. Joining us for the upcoming year will be Brian Otley, Green Mountain Power's chief operating officer.

The winning entry in the 2017 competition, "Maybe Lake Carmi" by Frederic Martin, as well as two runners-up, are presented in this special section for your enjoyment. The staff of *Vermont Magazine* is grateful for this opportunity to once again partner with Green Mountain Power and to continue the legacy of Ralph Nading Hill Jr.



Vermont Magazine congratulates Frederic Martin, who was awarded the Vermont Writers' Prize for his short story about an entirely plausible scene any of us could come upon traveling the back roads of the Green Mountain State.

# Maybe Lake Carmi

by Frederic Martin

HE WATCHED AS THE FAMILIAR LANDSCAPE rattled past the window. The undulations of the hills, like waves, forced his aging truck to struggle as it plowed through the fields on the narrow brown gravel road. The morning sky was gray, but not gray enough to suppress the colors of the trees, which lit up the clouds in a long soft horizon of flame. He turned to look ahead from time-to-time, just to make sure he kept the truck on course, but his hands knew this route so well that they didn't need a lot of attention. Instead, he looked out at the fields, the hills, the trees, clean and pristine, interrupted only occasionally by a rundown barn here, a flatlander's country mansion there, a rusty motorcycle standing ridiculously alone out in a field with only a couple of motley sheep grazing silently nearby to keep it company.

A split-rail fence appeared outside his window, adding its staccato rhythm to the scene as it swept by. The fence meant he was halfway home. In a minute or two, the road would plunge into a brightly painted forest and wind its way alongside a rocky, shallow creek. He would have to turn away from the window and put his attention back to driving when he reached it. That was fine. He needed the distraction. It would take his mind off the list of problems that played back in his head like one of those TV jingles that just wouldn't go away. Mortgage, groceries, heating oil, repeat. Mortgage, groceries, heating oil, repeat. Heating oil, heating oil, heating oil...

He dwelled on that a moment. This load of wood might be enough to get them by. That and what they had left in the oil tank.

He looked down the road at the oncoming tree line. Ahead was a car stopped on the shoulder. There was something odd about the posture of the car. It was tilted. There were two women standing next to it. One of them was staring intently at a phone. The other turned to look at the oncoming truck.

He slowed down, maneuvered the truck to the side of the road, and came to a gentle stop a few yards behind them. As he set the brake and killed the motor, his practiced eye took in the situation. A long, deep tire track showed the path of the car as it got too close to the soft shoulder. The mound of gravel piled behind the back tire told him they had spun it trying to get out, causing the back-end of the car to settle itself solidly on the roadbed.

He looked up at the women. The phone-woman was punching her finger on the screen of her phone with a look of exasperation. The other had stepped tentatively toward the truck. He climbed out and walked to the back of their car, squatting down to get a better look. There was no hope of them driving it out. But there was a little clearance in the middle, and there was a trailer hitch. He looked up at the badge on the trunk lid. Mercedes-Benz. A trailer hitch on a Mercedes-Benz. *There was something new*, he thought.

"Uh...hello."

He looked up to see the non-phone woman looking at him with creased brow.

"We went off the road," she said.

"Seems that way," he replied.

"We're having trouble with our phone."

He stood up, slowly, his right knee complaining a bit. "You're in a pocket," he said.

"A pocket?"

"No cell service here. A mile that way," he pointed back from where he came, "three bars, but here, nothing."

The woman's shoulders slumped. It looked like she wasn't looking forward to walking a mile. He glanced at her shoes. He couldn't blame her. The woman with the phone came up.

The first woman said, "He says there's no service here. The closest service is down the road. A mile. He says we're in a pocket."

He turned his attention to the other side of the road where

the fence was. He noticed a section where the top rail had been knocked down. He walked across the road and waded into the rattling ditch weeds and headed to the broken section. He became aware that the women were addressing him again.

“Sir, I don’t suppose you could give us a ride to where there is cell service?” asked the woman with the phone.

He picked up the fallen rail and carried it over to the truck. From the jumble of wood in the back of the truck, he plucked out a short, fat log. With the rail over one shoulder and the log under his arm, he strode to the back of the Mercedes. The women were staring at him.

“Sir, uh, I don’t suppose you could give us a...ride...uh...really, I don’t think you should be doing that.”

He had put the log down on a solid part of the road about a foot behind the trailer hitch. He slid one end of the rail under the trailer hitch and rested the rail on the log.

“Jeremy came by with the grader yesterday,” he said.

He pressed down lightly on the free end of the fence rail, testing the set on the hitch.

“I’m not sure what that means...uh...really, that isn’t necessary, we can just call...is that good for the car...sir...I’ll hold you responsible if...if...oh...” She trailed off.

In a single firm, fluid motion he had pressed straight down on the end of the fence rail and lifted the tail end of the Mercedes up a foot off the road. Then, with most of his weight on the rail, he swung out toward the edge of the road, leveraging the Mercedes the opposite way. When he took his weight off the rail, the car settled gently down with both tires on the solid part of the road. He slid the rail out from under the car.

“Jeremy grades the road in the fall. That makes the shoulders soft for a while. Just stay clear of them and you’ll be all right.”

The woman with the phone didn’t reply. She just stood staring at the car.

“I’ve never seen a trailer hitch on a Mercedes before,” he said. He tossed the log back in the bed of the truck.

The first woman came to her senses before the phone-woman, who was still staring at the car. “Oh, we have this really cute little trailer. It’s called a tear-drop trailer. It has a bed and a kitchen but it’s so small, it doesn’t even come up to here.” She held her hand at chest height. “We’re camping at Lake Carmi. Have you ever seen a tear-drop trailer?”

As she spoke, he walked back to the fence and carefully placed the rail back in its proper place. He saw that the post had gotten cocked sideways. He straightened it, re-setting the rails firmly, and kicked a rock into the posthole to keep it upright.

“Good fishing in Lake Carmi,” he said. He walked back across the road to the cab of his truck.

“How much do we owe you?” blurted the woman with the phone. She had come out of her stupor and joined her companion, still standing at the back of the Mercedes.

“Just drive careful and enjoy the colors.” He climbed back into the cab and started the truck. The phone-woman walked

quickly over and tapped on his window. He rolled it down.

“I want to pay you something. I would have had to pay at least \$60 for a tow truck.” She looked down and started rummaging in her purse. She pulled out a handful of twenties.

He looked at them a moment and said, “You put those away. Just next time you see someone in trouble, stop and give them a hand, and we’ll call it even.”

He put the truck in gear and pulled up and around the Mercedes. As the truck rolled down the road and into the woods, he looked in the rearview mirror and saw them standing by the Mercedes. One of them waved. He held up his hand in reply.

He turned his attention back to the road. With the window still open, the crisp fall air flushed through the musty cab and carried in the aroma of the moist forest floor. The light filtering through the bright leaves and dark branches made a mesmerizing mosaic all around him. He would be home soon. The woodpile would be high enough for the winter after he added the load from the truck. Might be a good day to take Molly and Jake fishing.



Frederic Martin is an amateur writer who lives with his wife in Richmond, Vermont. “Maybe Lake Carmi” is his first published work. Frederic earned his bachelor’s degree at Colby College where he studied literature, creative writing, music, and studio art, and yet somehow graduated with a degree in physics. He is currently the chairman of the Richmond Land Trust and works for LORD Sensing Systems in Williston.

*Northeast Kingdom native and resident Adrian Walther describes a typical meeting and subsequent discussion among friends about their observations.*

# Generally Speaking

by Adrian Walther

THE BELL, WHACKED BY THE WOODEN DOOR, rattles its tune and the three lidded heads in a row all swivel reflexively. The brass of the bell rocks to stillness, tongue creaking on a hinge swung greaseless from use.

“Morning, Ford,” the middle head grunts over steam lifting out of off-white porcelain. “Morning, fellas,” the man responds with a glance. The other two heads nod and sip at the man as he tramps across the worn and rounded floorboards toward the newspaper stand, then turn back to face the picture window and resume their vigilance of the street that lies in front of the store. Eventually the footsteps creak out their egress, two ounces of the daily news heavier, and the bell whacks and rings once again signaling his exit.

The three men sit on their stools, boots stuck on the foot rail, elbows planted on the shine of the lacquered countertop, brims of their hats holding the silky fog of the coffee’s steam in front of their faces, giving them the appearance of wraiths. Bags of chips and peanuts rustle and crinkle as depleted shelves are restocked somewhere behind them. The wind outside leans into the building, and its timbers grumble their wooden commentary on the past century of support and resistance.

On the other side of the glass from the men, light and leaves swirl and cavort atop the pavement as dust rises from the ground and stirs together with the gray veil of clouds overhead. The dried stalks of corn bound tight with twine against the porch roof stanchions rattle and shake righteously in dimensionless, flat light.

“Some fall that was,” says the man on the left, staring through the glass across the street at the duel tombstones of the gas pumps standing idle beneath an awning.

“How’s that?” the one on the right says between sips, watching the same world blow by outside.

“Well, if you weren’t hid away somewheres you’d probably of recognized that it ain’t rained but one drop all last month. That, and it’s been hotter than hell’s beaches.”

“Mm, hm,” the one in the middle asserts, dipping grease-smudged brim in assent.

“I guess I’ve noticed that,” the man farthest right retorts, leaning back, callused hand rubbing and rasping against stubbled chin. “Thought maybe you were pointing out how this week’s the first in a month of Sundays we’ve even been able to get our seats back,” referring to the stools they perched upon, circular disks of wood custom-grooved to fit their backsides by hours logged there contemplating the weather and history. “Or, how rare it is to cross the street today and not get runned over by a pack of christly Frenchies on bikes.”

“Mm, hm,” the middle of the three affirms, head bobbing.

The man on the left takes another sip and wraps both hands around his mug, fingertips sliding around the circumference before joining at the front, as if praying.

“I see, I see,” he says. “You’d ruther all the folks been pourin’ into our corner of the state went and threw their money at some other town?” He tilts his head and raises the eyebrow closest to his partners, gazing sideways at them, grooves above his brow deepening, others below stretched smooth. “That’s economic prosperity you’ve been dodgin’ to get from here to there.”

“Oh, is *that* what that was?” the right of the three asks. “Couda sworn that was the invasion of a spandexed, two-wheeled army.”

“Hm,” the man in the middle says, ambivalently.

“Marie,” calls the man on the outer left over his shoulder, lofting the word toward the sounds of rustling snack packaging. The shuffling stops in anticipation. “How’s business been this season?”

“Kinda fool question is that?!” Marie responds over the backdrop of her resumed work, having decided the exchange undeserving of her full attention. “I’d be tired if there were three of me and 30 hours in the day. Best season since I’ve had the place.”

Satisfied, the man on the left turns back to the window, trying to lock the faintly mirrored eyes of the man he spoke to in triumph, wind pushing against the glass and vibrating their reflections into several iterations.

The man on the right fills his lungs with indignant air and prepares his reply, dutifully marching toward the familiar destination of this dialogue.

“It’s really a paradox, fellers,” the man in the middle says, jolting them from the conversation’s routine rails. He leans his wide frame into the backrest of the stool, the wool of his shirt bunching into folds on his back, stool creaking against the sudden silence.

Both outermost men turn their heads to face the man in the middle.

“Come again, Earl?”

“Well, I been thinking on this one,” Earl continues, arms once charged with turning stones into chimneys crossing against his chest. “Hard to figure it out when the town’s full of folks, but, now that they’ve left out, I think I’ve got it.” He points his chin across the road at the line of stark limbed trees behind the roof of the still market. “It’s like how you can see a pile more views in November you can’t see all summer.”

He turns to the right, eyes brimmed by wisps of blanched eyebrows searching for and finding his friend’s. “You want things the way they were, and I don’t blame ya. Back before this town was on the map, you could park your rig in town anywhere you pleased, leave it there for days. This coffee cost half what it does now. Things was quiet, for sure. And quiet’s nice. But, too quiet ain’t. Both your kids had to shove off to find any kinda work, Chuck. Marie came pret’ near to closing.”

Chuck blinks gray eyes at him, mouth set, fists balled and pressed into jeans stained with the narrative of trees felled, land cleared.

“And you, Steve,” he says, circling around to the man on his left. “I know you’ve noticed it. It’s like this town’s got a different flavor to it. These,” he shoos his hand at the recent memory of the street in front of them lined with out-of-state plates, foreign accents, “people is changing this place. And I don’t necessarily blame them.”

Steve looks down at his hands and they’re still, clasping each other, skin tanned the same brown found with one shovel thrust into the earth outside, veins standing tall and snaking up into his sleeves.

Earl swirls the dregs of his coffee in the bottom of his cup and thoughts in his head before resuming. “Seems it’s human nature to try and find a place that’s beautiful and quiet and fairly unspoilt. And it’s real. None of it’s for show. And the folks livin’ there, they may not even see it for that. But, then someone from elsewhere, they stumble on it. And they’re just blown away and they’re pointin’ at the leaves and the barns and the mountains and the way the sun hits the water just so and they can’t wait to tell it back home, how real it is. So, they go and rave to their buddy and their buddy’s cousin, and so on, and, before you know it, hordes of folks are comin’ to ooh and ahh over it. It’s so much better than what they all get Monday through Friday, they gotta plant a stake in the ground for the weekends. Carve off a little slice for themselves. Meantime, they dump money

around, which helps the folks who’ve always been there. But now, there’s a bunch of people there and it ain’t so unspoilt anymore. Doesn’t feel so real.”

Both men flanking him nod and look again out the window, listen again to Marie’s bustling, remember again the town, aging, and breathing.

“So, what then?” Chuck asks. “How do we survive and keep the real?”

Earl sighs, hitting the release valve and pressure escaping. “We’re old, fellas. Old as dirt. We got most of 300 years living here between us and we’ve seen the best of it. We all love it the same. And it’s hard to watch the center of your universe change. But,” he says, tired now, dropping his feet to the floor and lifting his jacket off the back of his stool, slow as if it were made of lead, “mebbe that’s the cost of survivin’.”

The bell above the door tolls and the two remaining men hunch apart and watch Earl’s figure take shape outside. He pauses to let a semi thunder by, then cuts through the wake of leaves behind it, across the street and beyond the frame of the window.

Inside, the walls of the store shuffle closer to the men, littered with overpriced sweaters, crafts, and syrup, the building constricting as if being squeezed by the outer wind. The coffee cups sit idle now, void of all heat.



Adrian Walther grew up in East Burke and considers growing up there and the love for his hometown one of the biggest influences in his life. He has always loved listening to and telling stories and, not coincidentally, had four inspirational English teachers in high school who helped cultivate that love. He now lives in Burlington and teaches English at Champlain Valley Union High School and hopes to pass on that love of language. The inspiration for “Generally Speaking” comes from his appreciation for the authenticity you can find in every corner of Vermont and the fear that that authenticity is at risk of slowly disappearing.

*Poet Jess Clarke fondly conveys her thoughts about sights around her Burlington neighborhood and offers a visual as well as a conceptual look at why she stays.*

# If you have eaten grapes

by Jess Clarke

picked from your laden backyard vines  
in Vermont, you've savored  
the sharp, sugary scent,  
a fruit sweeter than you've known,  
from simple, umber soil.

The purple skins  
and slippery green pulps  
dissolve on your eager tongue,  
as the sun slides  
down the sky at Lake Champlain  
and disappears.

With other urban farmers on the street,  
you spread straw around peppers and lettuce,  
beside a neighbor who chatters with her chickens  
for eggs, and the beekeeper  
who sells golden jars  
on her porch, an untended  
basket for payment.

After the season's last Concord harvest,  
leaves turn amber,  
a withered strand sways,  
now forlorn,  
but through it the wind  
breathes promise.

That's why you stay,  
planted as the grapes, rooted  
in a place where you can trust  
the Northern winters,  
where rain is really rain,  
and the ground is firm  
beneath your feet.

Jess Clarke, a communications professional, also was a Vermont Writers' Prize finalist in 2017. She hosts a women's poetry group at her home in Burlington, where she and her spouse live. Her poems have appeared in various journals. She is working on poetry chapbooks about her late father's dementia and life in Vermont. For information about the poetry group, e-mail [jcpoet@bellsouth.net](mailto:jcpoet@bellsouth.net).

