Everyone has a story—especially on islands. Maybe this has something to do with the persistence of oral traditions in island communities. Storytelling is, after all, the original Internet—the way we reinforced our community bonds before texting, Tweeting and Facebooking made it all easier . . . and vastly bigger. Every picture also tells a story. A beached dory, gone to seed; a face etched in granite; the arc of a bird’s wing; the 360-degree sweep of a lighthouse beacon. Images reflecting words reinforcing new views and voices—welcome to another edition of Island Journal.

The stories and images in this year’s Island Journal are as eclectic as Maine’s islands and islanders themselves: young men choosing to stay in the lobster fishery, with the help of a little ancestral wisdom and some fresh ideas. A farming project of surprising vigor sprouting up on a rocky island. The care that islanders provided to the poor and disabled among them before Social Security. An island community demanding clean energy from an industrial wind farm in the waters nearby.

Though the stories emerge from different periods of time and from disparate places, near and far, they all underscore the gritty self-reliance of island communities. The constant need to address conflict, whether from internal disagreement or external threat, is an inherent quality of island life. The interdependent nature of island life can engender a spirit of pragmatism and compromise, while at the same time, familiarity can breed contempt. These forces are all constantly at work in island communities, testing the resolve of people to stick together and mending their inevitable wounds.

The past 30 years have seen remarkable change for Maine’s islands, and for ourselves. As we reflect on those changes, it is tempting to admire the past at the expense of the present. But what gets us out of bed is not the world as it was yesterday, or even the work we face today. It is what we hope to find tomorrow. With three decades behind us, we are no less inspired by the people of these islands than we were at the outset. The future is messy, impenetrably complicated, and bright.

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There is an invitation, of sorts; word out on the street among a certain demographic. Within days, they coalesce. There might be a gentle haze in the sunlight of some of those early midsummer mornings as they gather. They look like they’ve arrived on gossamer wings, the way they have alighted on the rocks surrounding a quarry pool in the middle of the woods. In combination, there’s an otherworldly, primal feeling to this verdant place. The laughter, goofiness, and feigned British accents suggest they are there to make merry, delaying for the moment any claim their jobs and other commitments may have on them. Like naiads, these women rule the quarry—temporarily, at least. Female spirits in Greek mythology, naiads preside over bodies of freshwater. Known for their singing and dancing, they are worshipped by humans because they make the water they inhabit come to life, even imparting healing properties. These naiads at this quarry will cavort in the water, animating that aqueous place as they collaboratively create scenarios with their photographer, Michael Seif.

“Once we’re all there on the big rock, Mike describes his plan for the photo shoot, which usually works with the idea of re-creating a school of fish using a school of humans. We’ll undress, making a big show of all of us in unison jumping off the cliff and splashing into the water. Mike positions himself to shoot from a cliff, aiming the camera down at our little school of fish. We have to time it just right in order for all of us to be underwater at the same time, so there is always a countdown and then a mass submersion. Underwater, we swim, crisscrossing each other, trying for the school-of-fish effect. When we can’t hold our collective breath any longer, we pop to the surface and erupt in giggles, recounting what our faces looked like underwater and which leg kicked whose stomach in the effort to be fishlike. Sometimes we laugh so hard, with our affected British accents, it can take several minutes to get back to the task at hand.”

“We come up with all sorts of harebrained ideas, but also some good ones that end up creating great images. Mike puts up with our silliness and realizes that some of the best shots
come out of that kind of energy and enthusiasm. We, very simply, have fun. Many of us were quite comfortable with each other already. It’s fun to swim, fun to play as adults, fun to hang out with your friends.”

“Watching Mike’s work evolve over the past few years and knowing that we’ve all been a part of it is humbling and exciting. He’s a true artist. In some of his photographs, you don’t know what the heck is going on in them, and in others, there may just be a hint—a hand or a foot in exquisite focus that is completely mesmerizing. Those are my favorites: where you’re not sure if the form is human, but then, bam—there’s undeniable proof that, somehow, what you’re looking at is a person.”

“What I find so interesting about his photos is that the nude becomes a part of nature, which it really ultimately is. It’s as though he is able to capture the human form as nature rather than the human form in nature.”

“Some of my favorite summer memories are in Mike’s photographs. It’s a true pleasure to work with him and with all the other models. As much as we may grumble about having to wake up early to go jump in the water, it’s always, always worth it.”

An academic background in zoology led Michael Seif to begin his work in photography by looking at fish. On the advice of one of his photography teachers, Lisette Model, he changed his focus: “You should be doing flesh,” she said. He discovered that human models moving in water created interesting effects: ripples, bubbles, distortions, fractured light, transformed features, and mysterious textures. But these quarry photographs are about more than just flesh; there’s also an implicit sense of these women’s expressive personalities, their embodiment of both innocence and sensuality. Seif has an attitude toward his models that seems almost worshipful at times, and that seems wholly deserving. After all, these naiads are quasi-deities of the quarry.

Seif’s photographs have been exhibited across the United States in solo and group shows. In 2011, he won a Juror’s Choice Award from noted photographer Joel Meyerowitz at the Copley Society of Art in Boston show, “Then and Now: The Enduring Allure of Light in Photography.” His first book, The Fluid Figure, was published in 2011.
Migration West
Coming Up

Exhalation
The Descent
using my heart as bait.
It is just before dawn,
The slightest hint of
pink bleeds into the
night sky. I use my
pen knife to cut the
hole in my chest,
reaching behind the
pocket of my shirt.

What a tough muscle
to pull through.
The heart is astonished
to be in this other world
and trembles and shivers like
a moth discovered in daylight.

I try to calm it by stroking it
by telling it that it will be
ok, but what do I know.

The breeze picks up and chills the cavern
in my chest. It feels good
to be empty at last. I cast my heart

across the water. I cast it again
and again. Sometimes it floats on
the surface, other times it sinks
below. Something will strike at it
that I can't see. I pray
I am using the right bait.

The tough outer layers
soften in the water. The heart grows
smaller, more pliant.

It has become a beautiful
blue jewel. I begin
not to recognize it.

Was this me?
It was. I wait.
The boat rocks

slightly in the breeze
lifted and lowered
by the tide.

STUART KESTENBAUM

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