Paul,

Michele wanted to give this to you personally, but here it is!

Regards,

Stephen Innes
The Old School Baptist Meeting House, Warwick NY

Dairy farming on rolling hills, onion fields in flat rich black dirt, a village with the character of a singular place: small town America. When you have a green, you’re thinking the future. Every year it seems the acceptable circle of commuting to New York expands by five minutes. It caught up to Warwick awhile back and now as a community we buy up development rights to keep the open space around us. Too attractive to resist, newcomers undo what they come for, squeezing out the old-timers. It’s a familiar story, though we’re trying to re-write the ending.
Schoharie County in upstate New York. The southern portion lies within the Catskill Mountains, while the northern section is high plateau, with rolling hills and valleys. It lies west of Albany and during the Revolutionary War was frontier country and so liable to devastating raids by the British Tories and the fearsome Iroquois leader, Joseph Brant (whose portrait was painted by George Romney in London).

Schoharie (which is Mohawk for “floating driftwood”) is a rural county, with one of the smallest populations in the state. It is laced with numerous streams and one major tributary of the Mohawk River, the Schoharie Creek (pronounced “crick” by the locals). I was born and raised there in the village of Cobleskill. Growing up, you would hear the expression “God willin’ and the creek don’t rise.” But it often did, and the last time, during Hurricane Irene in 2011, whole communities were washed away.
The Warwick Bookstore

I had a bookstore in the village and like bees all the curious folk came, like-minded with differences. I took it on because it was the last thing in the world I would ever think to do: shy, non-numerate, impractical. I became a businessman. I became oleaginous. I knew to quit when one day a customer accused me of displaying an expensive book because I knew he would be unable to resist it. He was right. I became a carpenter instead. It was time to build something else.
The Bull’s Head Inn, 1802

The oldest building in my hometown, the Inn used to be run by our neighbor, Monty Allen. Somehow he had got hold of Whitbread Ale from England so I used to go down to the lower tavern for a pint, served cold in a pewter mug.

I had spent a year in York, at St. Peter’s School, on an ESU fellowship. My last day there, a friend’s father regretted I hadn’t picked up a Yorkshire drawl, but when I traveled south to Sussex I was mistaken for a northerner. And when I got home a boyhood friend laughed when I answered the phone with “hello.” I lost that accent pretty quickly.

That was the summer of Woodstock, in ‘69. A few months later, in Dupont Circle in Washington, I got my first whiff of tear gas.
I had hitchhiked down to Washington with Fred Perloff the day before. That in itself was a story, but come the Revolution that’s how we’d all get around. The Mall was jammed and the speeches and music at a distance, but everywhere there was marching and slogans.

By nightfall I had ended up in DuPont Circle and not for the first time found myself in the midst of a mêlée. A little tear gas goes a long way.
Allen Ginsberg’s East Hill Farm, Cherry Valley, NY

I made contact with Ginsberg through Gordon Ball, who was managing the East Hill Farm near Cherry Valley, not far from Cobleskill in upstate New York. I found out about the place from A. Pennington Whitehead, a patrician New York lawyer who spent summers at his family’s historic home, “Auchinbreck,” a property purchased in 1741. Edmund Wilson, in *Upstate*, has an amusing piece about visiting there in 1970. Whitehead knew of Ginsberg, which seemed oddly anomalous, but then A. Pennington Whitehead knew more than he ever let on.

Entirely off the grid, East Hill Farm was down a dead end dirt road and I drove there one afternoon uninvited. The place was owned ostensibly by the Committee on Poetry and served as a retreat for Ginsberg and a haven for fellow writers and artists. Ginsberg wasn’t home when I arrived and Ball seemed a little surprised to see me. I was treated graciously, however, and Ball must have told Ginsberg about the incident since he seemed to know who I was when I met him the following spring in New Haven.

Early American settlers in Schoharie would not share our idealizing of Joseph Brant (or Thayendanegea). To them he was “Monster Brant,” a murderous and sinister figure responsible for the mayhem visited upon them by Tories and Indians during the Revolutionary War. Like most of the Iroquois, the Mohawks eventually sided with the British, their long-time allies. “Brant’s Volunteers,” a mix of Indians and Tories, carried out terrifying guerrilla warfare but were also present at the larger battles in the region. Some say Brant was a restraining force on his brutal troops, but that assuredly was not his reputation at the time.

Although not a hereditary sachem (which run matrilineally among the Mohawks), his intelligence, education and astute political instincts made him a central player in the complex transactions between the Iroquois, the British, French, and Americans. A fierce and brilliant fighter (eventually commissioned a Colonel by the British), Brant was also an effective diplomat. He travelled to London, where he was interviewed by Boswell and received by George III, and he later met with George Washington (whom Gilbert Stuart painted so often). Most of what Brant tried to accomplish for his people was thwarted by American expansion, but the Iroquois survive (mainly in Canada) owing in part to his efforts.
Jasper Cropsey, *The Valley of Wyoming* (1865)

Joseph Brant seems never far from where I live and roam. He was with Howe when the British retook New York; he attacked Cobleskill and masterminded the Cherry Valley Massacre; he soundly defeated the militia sent against him at Minisink, not far from Warwick. And he was credited (falseely) with the slaughter at the Battle of Wyoming, recounted by Thomas Campbell in his popular poem, “Gertrude of Wyoming,” quoted on the frame of Jasper Cropsey’s *The Valley of Wyoming*, at the Metropolitan Museum. Cropsey, who lived in Warwick, in a house he named “Alladin,” was one of the painters of the magical Hudson River School, founded by Thomas Cole.

It’s a painting I take my students to see. The wide peaceful expanse is an expression of hope and healing after the bloodbath of the Civil War. There’s nothing in the painting itself that suggests that it was the scene of horrific fighting earlier during the Revolution, but the quotation from Campbell reminds us: yes, there was fratricide here, too, and we came through it. But the optimism of antebellum America could not be sustained and soon it was the solitary figures of Winslow Homer and Thomas Eakins that spoke to our condition most acutely.

And yet it was Cole who expressed a fundamental uneasiness about the trajectory of U.S. culture in his heroic series, *The Course of Empire* (1833-36), with its cyclical view of history: *The Savage State; The Arcadian or Pastoral State; The Consummation of Empire; Destruction; Desolation.*
Thomas Cole, that most American of early 19th century painters, did four illustrative scenes from James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, the most dramatic of his Leatherstocking Tales. One of them hangs in the Fenimore Art Museum in Cooperstown, forty minutes from where I grew up (and home of the more famous Baseball Hall of Fame). Cooperstown is lovely and remote, hemmed in by high hills and situated at the foot of beautiful Otsego Lake (called “Glimmerglass” in Cooper’s novels). It’s the source of the Susquehanna River, which flows through three states and empties into Chesapeake Bay; there’s a little park in Cooperstown overlooking the place where the river begins, which is also the site of Council Rock, a traditional meeting place for the Mohawks.

Cooperstown was founded by the novelist’s father, Judge Cooper, in 1766, and as a boy Cooper heard many stories of Indian depredations. Not many readers have the patience now for Cooper’s languid style of narrative, but his action scenes can be riveting. In this painting, the novel reaches a climax as the doomed heroine Cora pleads her case before the Delaware sachem Tamunund. Looking carefully, you can make out the main characters in the circle of Indians (Cora and her sister, Alice, are in white). The great rock above them is a threatening presence but the landscape, so vast and wild and sublime, seems indifferent to the human drama enacted in the clearing.
"James Fenimore Cooper," by John Wesley Jarvis, 1822.

Cooper's complete works run to 48 volumes. As an American writer he had a lot of "firsts":

1st novel of the sea (The Pilot)
1st American historical romance (The Spy)
1st fully researched novel (Lionel Lincoln)
1st novel of the frontier (The Pioneers)
1st historian of the US Navy
1st writer of a trilogy (Satanstoe series)
1st to write a family saga
1st to make Puritan morality a theme
1st (and only) to take Christianity seriously
1st utopian novel (The Crater)
1st international novel (Homeward Bound)
1st to treat Tories sympathetically
1st professional man of letters

Cooper had a lively imagination: as an undergraduate at Yale he was expelled for blowing up a classmate’s door with gunpowder—at least that’s the family’s version. Another is that he trained a donkey to sit in a professor’s chair.

In the welter of events surrounding Mayday the real struggle was between conflicting agendas. The Black Panthers wanted Bobby Seale out of jail; the radicals wanted a riot; the university wanted calm; the police to control the National Guard, who wanted to assert law and order; the students control of their lives; and the locals, including the black community, wanted everyone to go away. None of them got what they wanted.

Cooptation was in the air. Everyone tried to pick the others’ pockets. In the end, despite the provocative timing of Nixon’s invasion of Cambodia two days prior—and the even more provocative rhetoric from platforms and podiums—peace prevailed. Yes, there was a bombing, some fires, sporadic violence and a lot of tear gas, but no one died.

That was not the case four days later at Kent State.
Genet at Yale

Jean Genet was denied a visa to the U.S. but got across the Canadian border by deftly substituting his companion’s passport for his own while the Immigration officer was distractedly humming “La Marseillaise.” Genet was always a cunning thief.

On stage that day, he read the first few lines of his address in French and then the Minister of Information for the Black Panthers, “Big Man” Howard, read the rest in an English translation. At one point Genet says:

Black people are right to accuse whites as a whole of this oppression, and they are right to speak of fascism. As for us, perhaps we live in a liberal democracy, but blacks live, really and truly, under an authoritarian, imperialist regime of domination.

The manuscript of the speech is in the archives at Yale. Allen Ginsberg, who was present, later urged Lawrence Ferlinghetti at City Lights Books in San Francisco to publish it and contributed an introduction.
Ginsberg finished his poem for Mayday at noon and read it out at 4:00 pm.

May King's Prophecy

Spring green buddings, white blossoming trees, Mayday picnic
O Maypole Kings 0 Krishnaic Springtime
O holy Yale Panther Pacifist
Conscious populace awake alert sensitive tender children's bodies—and a ring of quiet Armies round the town—planet students cooking brown rice for scared multitudes—Oh Souls all springtime prays your bodies quietly pass mantric peace Fest grass freedom thru our nation thru your holy voices' prayers your bodies here so tender & so wounded with Fear Metal gas fear, the same fear Whales tremble war consciousness—
Smog City—Riot court paranoia—

-Judges, tremble, Armies weep your fear—
O President guard thy sanity Attorneys General & Courts obey the Law and end your violent War Assemblage
O Legislatures pass your Creeds of order & end by proper law illegal war!
Now man sits Acme Conscious over his gas machine covered Planet-Springtime's on, for all your sacred & Satanic Magic!
Ponds gleam heaven, Black voices chant their ecstasy on car radio
Oh who has heard the scream of death in Jail?
Who has heard the quiet Om under Wheel-whine and drumbeat outside rallyards on wire tower'd outroads from New Haven?
An Ordinary Evening with Ginsberg

After the afternoon speeches and harangues on the New Haven Green, I went back to the Old Campus and ran into Ginsberg, who was planning to chant that evening on a stage set up in the large courtyard. We agreed to meet afterwards, as he wanted help in finding a friend on campus (I don’t remember who).

By nightfall, when he began his long rolling OMs, tear gas from the National Guard outside the walls was flowing in. Students mopped his face with wet towels as he continued imperturbable.

Afterwards, we searched for a restroom but old Connecticut Hall was locked. “Never mind,” he said, “I’ll just piss over here by this statue.”

It was of Nathan Hale, the Revolutionary patriot who declared, before his hanging by the British as a spy, “I only regret that I have but one life to give for my country.”

It was a deeply iconic moment.

We parted later, forehead pressed to forehead, in Maori fashion.
The Elizabethan Club at Yale: the back garden.

Meanwhile, as the streets and the courtyards filled with demonstrators, the more genteel members of the Elizabethan Club partook of tea and watercress sandwiches whilst playing croquet in the garden.
Student Strike

I was on the Student Strike Committee at Yale and took to wearing a red armband. I recall how it bothered "Sam" Chauncy, the President's Advisor, in our meeting with him. He kept glancing at it as if a bad omen. The real radical, though, was a willowy blond kid from California, a seasoned protestor, steely and strategic. He played for keeps.

For my friends, pictured in front of the Beinecke Rare Book Library, it became a lark. I'm third from the right, looking away.
One evening, during a meeting of the Strike Committee, we received an urgent call from the headquarters of the Black Panthers in New Haven. New Haven police were about to conduct a bust and the Panthers wanted support. Almost without thinking—or so it seemed to me—we got into cars and drove down to a part of the city I’d never been to before. The idea was to force the police to arrest Yale students along with the Panthers, something we knew they were reluctant to do. The ploy worked. The police backed off and we eventually went back to our gated community, the neo-gothic Yale campus.
First Time in Paris

In December of ’68, the “Year of the Barricades,” I headed to Paris to meet up with my friend Dick Schiffer, who was also on an ESU fellowship in England. Arriving on the evening of the 18th, I emerged unwittingly from the Metro stop at Saint-Germain into the midst of a full-blown student riot. The Minister of Education, Edgar Faure, had been countering striking students at Nanterre and the Sorbonne with police and the CRS (Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité) and it was these who were running towards me with truncheons. For solidarité, there’s nothing like fear. I turned and ran with the other students.

That was my introduction to Paris.
The Exchange Rate in Tunis

Schiffer and I were sick of the cold, gray weather of northern Europe and decided, on the basis of a tiny map in the back of my travel journal, that we could just as easily get to Rome (where I was to meet Terry McGiver after Christmas) by going south to Spain, across to North Africa and then up the Italian peninsula. Surely it would be warm in the desert! It all looked so sensible and inviting.

Of course we had not counted on the Atlas Mountains in Morocco and Algeria and ended up trading articles of clothing for food with the Berbers in villages along the way. The children were delighted by our strangeness and gathered round us wherever we went. The Algerian visa officers were less pleased. Upon entry, one wrote a long note in Arabic in my passport that later startled and then incensed a government inspector who chanced to see it in a small town: from what I could tell, we had been set up for detainment at the next border crossing.

As it turned out, the only problem crossing the border into Tunisia was discovering that our Algerian money would be worthless outside the country. The guards smugly offered us cigarettes and candy at outrageous prices. It was my turn to be incensed and I refused. This angered the guards but they let us cross into Tunisia anyway.

In Tunis, there happened to be a World Cup match between the Tunisians and Algerians. I afterwards found the bus for the Algerian players and went aboard. They were happy to exchange Tunisian dinars for Algerians ones and I came away with only this souvenir note left over. I don’t recall who won the match that night.
The Grand Tour 1968

The first Aussie I ever met quit the youth hostel in Tunis the night we boarded the ferry bound for Naples on New Year’s Eve. She was blonde, pretty and tanned and laughed a lot after bottles of champers on the tipsy boat. Hooked up with a fellow from upstate New York—who feigned annoyance at her fawning and favors—the three of us headed straight for Rome and thence to the Alps in a car that got stuck in a snow bank at moonrise. The funniest thing she’d ever seen—having never seen snow before—we pushed the car and slipped and fell, and all she could do was lie there and laugh and laugh as if life were a joyful absurdity.
Mt Glasgow: First View

The poet Les Murray refers to my wife, Tina, as “an American from Melbourne.” When she was seven, she moved to Australia with her mother, Chris Nicholson, and then went back to the States for university at seventeen. Later, when she and I got together, we visited her mother in Melbourne’s eastern suburbs. That was 1979—my first time in Australia—and I quickly became enamored of the place and the poets. In 1984 we came for an extended period—I had a Fulbright grant to Melbourne University—and after that Australia became our second home. It was all possible because our second home was actually Chris’s house.

When she died in 2002, we didn’t know if we would continue coming back: the center was gone, though everything that circled around it was still intact. It occurred to us that we would need a new center to draw us back. Chris had left a modest inheritance, saved up diligently at a cost to herself, so we decided to see if we might buy some land with it, something to call our own—something she would approve.

After several days of discouraged looking, and shortly before we had to return to New York, we found this property: ten acres on top of an old volcano in central Victoria called Mt Glasgow by Major Mitchell and Tout Boonray by the local Aborigines. It was highly impractical but we were stunned by the prospect.
House Building

Our plan was to build a house on the property eventually but the Department of the Treasury in Canberra informed us that we were “foreign investors” and had to begin building a residence within one year, with four years to complete it. Long term became short term in a flash.

I had building experience, having worked as a carpenter for construction companies in the past, and obtained a license as an “owner-builder.” We decided to construct the house in stages, coming over every six months for three or four weeks at a time, and several friends—crucially—agreed to help. We were now like people possessed. As one friend, the painter Mark Fox, said, “It’s not the hard work, it’s the pace!”

First things first: a shed. When I brought out a shovel the first day to dig footings, my friends laughed. This wasn’t the soft loam of upstate New York, this was iron hard red earth laced with rock. My spade just bounced off the ground. In the end, I had to hire a jackhammer just to dig holes.
The Shed

It's the most Australian of domestic buildings but out here it's a necessity: a staging ground for everything else and a catchment for rain water, the only source of water we have.

I hadn't worked in steel before, so this was all new. In fact, none of us had experience with steel frames. We just figured it out as we went along, correcting one mistake after another.

The local backhoe operator, Bruce Adams—small, wiry and affable, whose favorite expression was “Yeaaah!”—had leveled a space for us and put in a road. Within two weeks a flatbed truck lumbered up with a water tank lashed to it and we pushed it off the truck right where we wanted it. Soon it was filling with sweet water from the sky.
Meanwhile, the local Council was trying to understand what I was doing up there on that windswept mountain. I submitted a plan based on an idea derived from building practices on the east coast of the U.S. Instead of having a forest of small stumps for a foundation, I decided to pour two rows of reinforced concrete piers. Unbeknownst to me, this caused considerable consternation at the building inspector’s office and they delayed approval. I, however, couldn’t wait, as I was on a very tight schedule, so I went ahead and arranged for Guy Blanch, a local digger, to come and drill ten holes a metre deep.

Guy was taciturn. He had never been up on Mt Glasgow before and when he got out of his truck he took one look at the view and said, “Shit!” Then he glanced around at the all the outcropping rock everywhere and said “Shit!” “Look, mate,” he said, “I can’t do this job. You need the power & light people with their big rigs to drill into this rock.” I convinced him to try a test hole, leading him to one spot where I was certain there was more soil than rock, and sure enough, his auger sunk down easily. “OK,” he said. It was the only hole that went well.

Drill, dig, pry, jackhammer, dig, pry, drill. Over and over, hour after hour. At one point we stopped for a break and Guy turned to me and asked, “Did I give you my card?” Perplexed at the odd question, I said, yes, he had. “Tear it up,” he replied, and went back to work.
Stumped Again

The next day Tom Denault at the Council in Maryborough called me in and, with the engineer at hand, laid out our plans. "Look," he said, "we don’t know what you’re doing. We don’t even know if you know what you’re doing." I asked what it would take to convince him. First, they needed a proper technical drawing of the foundation. Second, there were too few stump holes and I had to add more before they could approve the design. I blithely assured them this was no problem and I would be back the next morning with revised plans.

In fact, I was in a pickle. I rushed over to Russ’s house in Castlemaine and told his son, who had done half an AutoCAD training course, what I needed pronto. He stayed up all night doing it, but it came out perfect. Next, Guy had already dug the (unauthorized) holes and the spacing couldn’t be changed; adding new holes in each row was out of the question. I decided to add a third row instead.

The next morning I showed up with the new plans and they were approved on the spot. Now all I had to do was call Guy and give him the bad news: we had to dig five more holes. "Shit!" But he did it.

Once the holes were dug; the sonotubes in place (actually drainage pipe made of recycled plastic bags); the concrete poured; the girders laid (and chained down); the joists set in place and the platform built, it was time to go. We wrapped it all in black plastic—giving it a space-age weirdness—and hoped it would still be there, and dry, when we came back six months later.
The Poet-Carpenter
Framing

Now we were building in earnest. Framing is the fun part: it goes quickly and dramatically, creating spaces and perspectives that didn’t exist before. Per Henningsgaard, a former student from Vassar, came to help for a couple of weeks. With Jack, Russ, and Mark, along with Tina, Mary Rose, Sue and Olga, we made progress quickly. We used a diesel generator for power.

The main difficulty we faced was the wind. Atop of Mt Glasgow, it could get up to gale force and the wind chill in winter was fierce. At times, it seemed as if we were located in the jet stream, but it was simply the unimpeded wind blowing across the ancient volcanic plain. You worked to stay warm.

These were among my happiest of days.
Raising the Roof

With the house framed (three rooms on a long axis), it was time to cut the rafters. Everything changes when there's a roof.

Here Jack and I are gazing southwest, calculating how long it will be before the storm in the distance will hit. Do we have time to set some rafters or should we wait? Time is short. We go ahead and work regardless of the weather.
Wrapping it Up

Rhino warp. Blue and tough. A moisture barrier and an insulating factor. We wrap the house in it and then begin nailing up the Shadowclad exterior plywood, which will be the finished look. Cheap and strong. There’s plywood on the roof, too, which is also the ceiling, with exposed rafters. The whole is super-insulated, in the American fashion.

I was surprised to learn that plumbers were the only ones allowed to do roofs. I went ahead and did it anyway. Later, when Gaven the plumber came by, I asked him what he thought and he nodded, saying “whoever” had done the roof did a good job and he’d sign off on it. I dropped by his house the next day with a slab of beer.

Suddenly, it’s time to go again. We leave behind a wooden box perched on top of a windy mountain.
The Test

On the next trip back we add windows and doors and iron on the side and front entrances. Except for the stairs, and interior work, we’re done.

One afternoon, while working alone, a storm blew in. I took this shot of the house just before it hit. It was the most powerful storm yet and pummeled the house with hail and punched at the windows with ferocious winds. Then it suddenly went still. I looked out to the southwest and the darkest cloud I’d ever seen was coming our way. The barometric pressure must have plummeted because I felt dizzy and the hairs on the back of my neck rose.

I understood what would happen next and ran around cracking open the windows to equalize the pressure. I didn’t want the windows to blow out. Then I stopped. I wouldn’t always be here to do this and I had better see whether the house could withstand the sort of blow it was about to receive. This was the ultimate test. I closed the windows, went to a part of the house away from any glass and held my breath.

The house shivered, sang and shook. I felt as if I were in a ship on rough seas. But the windows held, the chains kept the house bolted down and we weathered the storm like seasoned sailors.

Later, I heard those were the strongest winds the locals had ever seen. I’ve never worried about the house in a storm since then.
Interiors

A house is all about what goes on inside it. Here are a couple of interior views.

The place is compact but all the decisions we made luckily turned out well and it all feels spacious, especially with the high ceilings and the windows framing spectacular views.

Sometimes we just stand at the windows almost mesmerized by the subtly shifting patterns of light and shadow in the complex foreground and on the hills and mountains in the far distances.

Interiors make way for another sort of interior.
Winter is our favorite time here. Often, in the morning, fog settles among the hills and it can look like a seascape. Our only neighbor on the mountain, Ben Sierra, took this photograph of Mount Cameron with a telephoto lens. The one below is the same scene from a different perspective.

In the pre-dawn light, all the little dams—and sometimes the Merrin Merrin Swamp—are lit up as the only shining things visible, aside from the fading stars.

We got stuck in the swamp once, but that's another story.
Stuck to the axles
  in the Merrim Merrim Swamp,
Hooper, my neighbor,
pulled me out ("Happens a lot").
  Short cuts are a waste of time.

But first, stepping through
  snakes grass, I walked a long way,
skirting a farmer’s
  Rottweilers, with no one home.
  Predicaments bear patience.

Only mad dogs and
  an American out here
in the midday heat,
  with cockatoos and galahs,
    pairs of kites and a wedgetail.

Everywhere you look
  is on the bright side at noon,
with the only shade
  under your hat and sore feet.
  Common sense is just spare change.

The day before we
  arrived, one of the other
Hoopers lost their roof,
  and in Talbot, trees came down.
    I’d chained our house to the ground.

Which all goes to show
  what’s wild is never far off
the mark, and safety
  is another word for luck
    in a country’s country.
Sunset on Mt Glasgow

The house, you could say, is exposed up on the mountain. We’ve planted over a hundred trees now, including an olive orchard, so it’s much less barren than before. Still, when the wind howls, the house responds.

A wood frame is forgiving, it can bend where metal might snap. But for all that, metal is as responsible for the house’s mettle as is the virtuous wood.

I’d rather not take too many chances in the goldfields of Victoria.
Talbot

The nearest settlement to us is Talbot. It was transformed from a quiet pastoral area to a boom town by the discovery of fabulous amounts of gold. At one point, in 1859, there were about 15,000 miners there and the town grew apace to service them.

Like a number of picturesque towns in the goldfields, once the gold ran out and the Great War drained the population, there wasn’t enough money around to tear down the old buildings and put up “improvements.” It’s like walking back in time.

The many empty Victorian buildings can give it a ghostly appearance, but there are plenty of people and activities in town and a certain civic pride that gives it a peculiar character all its own. Heather and Greg at the Post Office handle our mail for us all year round, and Helen Green, of Slightly Bent Books in the middle of town, always welcomes us as Talbot residents just back from overseas.

Helen’s husband, the late novelist Bill Green, wrote up an event a few years back that earned me the moniker the “Talbot Survivor.”
The village of Talbot once began its Winter celebration with several historical monologues from characters who visited the village in the mid-1800's. A cannon was to be cued and fired at an appropriate point in the actor's dialogue. That point came and passed, and the cannon was cued and fired from the Quince Café.

The problem was the cannoneer's cigarette lighter wouldn't give flame. He dropped the lighter, while directing the closest observer to fall down a flight of stairs. The cannon gave a mighty whump and blew apart. The matches. The cannon gave a mighty whump and blew apart. The nearby observer, a local trader in antique junk, had fallen down a flight of stairs. The cannon gave a mighty whump and blew apart. The matches. The cannon gave a mighty whump and blew apart. The matches. The cannon gave a mighty whump and blew apart. The matches. The cannon gave a mighty whump and blew apart. The matches.

A piece of the barrel flew several centimetres above the head of New York poet, Paul Kane (he spends 2 months a year in Talbot) whose most recent book was launched by Helen Garner. "I thought New York was a dangerous place to live," he commented coolly. Meanwhile the cannoneer fell. He had received a bloodied hand and a severe shock. Shit," he said. Meanwhile Doug Cullaty, being a barista and former undertaker, and having been present at many catastrophes, continued reading unfazed.

A chunk of barrel that missed the poet came to rest fifty metres away, cutting through the fence of a local bed and breakfast. The seventy people assembled for the reading all escaped injury, the metal debris sailing over their heads. The cannon firing had been permitted by the local council and the local police. The police car, travelling slowly, had only minutes before been stationary where the road was gouged by another piece of cannon.

Observer, Dean Homicki, saw the action in slow motion. He saw a piece of the barrel spinning slowly to one side of him and heard Doug's voice drag like an out-of-time recording. Going by was a vehicle pulling an ancient horse float. The float was a wreck with holes through the wooden sides. Many imagined it had taken a cannon ball, but it too had escaped the explosion. The holes were from the cannon. It had been parked in a community garage sale site for months. The buyer had left a $20 deposit and taken the wheels to be fitted with some rarely used tyres from the 1940's. He had promised to return in a week. Several months later, on the day of the cannon event, he had returned, only to discover the float had been sold on. The antique junk trader who had fallen to the ground in front of the cannon had conducted both float sales and had a weird association with the event linking the circumstances surrounding the float to the pontaneous combustion of the cannon, for negotiations between the two purchasing parties had been fierce and had been concluded on the eve of the cannon's decimation.

As these thoughts swirled through the minds of the witnesses, small pieces of metal that had been catapulted high into the air landed on roofs to the north of the town. Those residents imagined the hot wattle of the refurbished lodge had exploded.

The cannoneer stood up. Blood dripping from his hand, and looked down at a small piece of metal that remained in front of him. "Oh Shit! I was the f...n' replica," he exclaimed. But it wasn't the replica. The eason for the destruction was the gun powder used for the sound effects. The cannoneer had purchased white gun powder, for the traditional black powder was too expensive. Imagine a that cost was 50 per cent of that of black powder. Not every a kilo of white powder was used to compensate. Unfortunately the white powder was far more powerful than the black powder of which only two tablespoons were recommended.

The poet's wife summed it all up marvellously. "If this had happened in Central Park," she said, "it would be all over the front page of the New York Times." The event didn't make any pages of any Victorian paper, but it caused much hilarity as locals surfing themselves on the 6000 photos of Café de Verses discuss the event that could have been responsible for many deaths.
STRANGE DAYS IN TALBOT by Bill Green

The village of Talbot once began its Words in Winter celebration with several historical monologues from characters who visited the village in the mid-1800's. A cannon was to be cued and fired at an appropriate point in the actor’s dialogue. That point came and passed despite much cueing from the performer, Doug Gellatly, the former coffee maker from the Quince Café.

Problem was the cannoneer’s cigarette lighter wouldn’t give flame. He dropped the lighter, while directing the closest observer to fall down to give the cannon blast more drama, and fumbled successfully with matches. The cannon gave a mighty whump and blew apart. The closest observer, a local trader in antique junk, had fallen down ahead of time. Metal pieces passed over him to land on the road, and other places far away.

A piece of the barrel flew several centimetres above the head of New York poet, Paul Kane (he spends 2 months a year in Talbot) whose most recent book was launched by Helen Garner. “I thought New York was a dangerous place to live,” he commented coolly. Meanwhile the cannoneer fell. He had received a bloodied hand and severe shock. “Shit,” he said.

Meanwhile Doug Gellatly, being a barista and former undertaker, and therefore witness to many catastrophes, continued reading unfazed.

The chunk of barrel that missed the poet came to rest fifty metres away, cutting through the fence of a local bed and breakfast. The seventy people assembled for the reading all escaped injury, the metal debris sailing over their heads. The cannon firing had been permitted by the local council and the local police. The police car, travelling slowly, had only minutes before been stationary where the road was gouged by another piece of cannon.
Observer, Dean Homicki, saw the action in slow motion. He saw a piece of the barrel spinning slowly to one side of him and heard Doug’s voice drag like an out-of-time recording. Going by was a vehicle pulling an ancient horse float. The float was a wreck with holes through the wooden sides. Many imagined it had taken a cannon hit. However it too had escaped the explosion. The holes were from age. It had been parked in a community garage sale site for months. The buyer had left a $20 deposit and taken the wheels to be fitted with some rarely styled tyres from the 1940’s. He had promised to return in a week. Several months later, on the day of the cannon event, he had returned, only to discover the float had been sold on. The antique junk trader who had fallen to the ground in front of the cannon had conducted both float sales and had a weird association of events linking the circumstances surrounding the float to the spontaneous combustion of the cannon, for negotiations between the two purchasing parties had been fiery and had been concluded on the day of the cannon’s decimation.

As these thoughts swirled through the minds of the witnesses, small pieces of metal that had been catapulted high into the air landed on roofs to the north of the town. Those residents imagined the hot water service of the refurbished lodge had exploded.

The cannoneer stood up. Blood dripping from his hand, and looked down at a small piece of metal that remained in front of him. “Oh Shit, it was the f....n’ replica,” he exclaimed. But it wasn’t the replica. The reason for the destruction was the gun powder used for the sound effects. The cannoneer had purchased white gun powder, for the traditional black powder was too expensive. Imagining that cost equated to blast power and not rarity, a kilo of white powder was used to compensate. Unfortunately the white powder was far more powerful than the black powder of which only two tablespoons were recommended.

The poet’s wife summed it all up marvellously. “If this had happened in Central Park,” she said, “it would be all over the front page of the New York Times.” The event didn’t make any pages of any Victorian papers, but it causes much hilarity as locals sunning themselves on the decking of Café de Veres discuss the event that could have been responsible for many deaths.
Clunes

The other town we frequent is Clunes, about 20 minutes away to the south. As with Talbot, it has wonderfully preserved historic buildings (making it a favorite site for films). Wisely, the town buried its electric wires.

Clunes is now an official booktown and it's hard to go there without coming back with a find. Mostly, though, we pay visits to Jos Konings, the Greengrocer; Andrew Johnstone, the butcher; Ken Gibson, the newsagent; and the folks at Widow Twankey's Confectionary Emporium and Café.

One day last December, Ken was out of newspapers but said he might scrounge one up for us later. While taking our order for lunch outdoors in back of Widow Twankey's, our waiter — new to town — was astonished to see Ken personally deliver a paper to us at our table. We said this would never happen in New York.
I took these photographs from Zuccotti Park on 17 November 2011. The police had recently—and forcibly—cleared out the protesters' encampment, and I joined others in re-occupying it during the day. Police barricaded us in with metal fences, which they moved periodically to shrink the space available. It was a tense atmosphere. "Strange vibe today," one of the veteran protesters remarked. At one point, two undercover police were discovered and "escorted" out of the park by a crowd of chanting protestors.

Then, there was an altercation between a protester and a cop that triggered a raid into the park. Riot police streamed in and shoved us back. They grabbed the protestor and beat him, his blood and one of his shoes visible on the ground as they dragged him away. It felt like a dangerous moment. There was considerable shouting and rushing about and we all shouted "Shame! Shame!" at the police. Fear was in the air.
“Mic check!” someone would shout, and “Mic check!” would be taken up by others until everyone quieted down. Then a speaker would call out a phrase or sentence and it would be repeated by others so everyone could eventually hear what was being said. I gave a short speech later that evening and it was a powerful experience to hear the words echo through the crowd.

In the afternoon, we streamed out of the park and marched uptown to the beat of drums to Union Square, with the police marching alongside us in the street. People cheered as we passed or gestured from the buildings, including a dancer in a studio who raised her leg perpendicular in salute. As we passed his building on Broadway, Peter Carey came out and joined me for several blocks.

Oddly, WikiLeaks had positioned a truck for gathering information.
Mildura

For the last decade or so I’ve served as the Artistic Director of the Mildura Writers Festival, which began in 1994. Tina and I attended that first festival—organized by the poet Philip Hodgins and the cook/impresario Stefano di Pieri—and we’ve been to every one since then. At a certain point, they simply put me to work.

Of course, with Stefano’s involvement, it’s always been as much a culinary festival as a literary one, which is why, I think, so many writers are eager to come. That and the fact that the atmosphere is friendly and—as we like to say—convivial.

Philip Hodgins remains the genius loci of the event, with an annual award given in his honor to an Australian writer who “reflects the high standards and distinguished literary accomplishments that Philip Hodgins consistently advocated and exemplified in his own poetry.”
Heart & Soul of the Festival

Donata Carrazza and Stefano di Pieri imbue the Mildura Writers Festival with liveliness. They supply the ethos: a warmth of fellow feeling and a passion for the pleasures and promptings of good writing. They have that gioia di vivere—or zest for living—that turns the simplest occasion into...well...an occasion.

You can’t be around them without feeling somehow more alive.
I first glimpsed the poet Philip Hodgins as a scowling young man in the back of a seminar room at the University of Melbourne in 1984. I was giving a talk on “The Figure of the Poet,” and he was listening intently, if not perhaps with pleasure. When I then read some poems, he seemed to brighten up. Not long afterwards, I saw him again at Margareta Webber’s Bookshop, where he read from a loose-leaf collection (he hadn’t published a book yet) prior to the launching of Kevin Hart’s *Your Shadow*. I liked the poems very much and was impressed by his demeanor and countenance at the time.

About a week later I saw Philip walking down Toorak Road in South Yarra and went over to invite him for a cup of tea back at our flat in Millswyn Street. He was surprised by this but pleased—and so began a friendship that lasted until his death from leukemia in August, 1995. When we met, he had been given a year to live; he stretched it to eleven.

In June of 1995 I proposed to Peter Rose, then at Oxford University Press, that we establish a book prize in Philip’s honor, along the lines of the Yale Younger Series of Poets, which OUP would publish. What we eventually came up with instead was the Philip Hodgins Memorial Medal for Literature, which was established at Mildura in March, 1996. And because Philip despised the way literary prize panels frequently settled on compromise candidates, we decided there would only ever be one judge for the PHMM.
Our House on Big Island, Warwick NY

Built in 1884, and then added to over the years, our house is a ramshackle place of different levels and odd spaces. Work on it never stops. That’s partly because the seasons are given to extremes and such a climate takes its toll on structures—and frequently on people too.

Out back is a big red barn I renovated where Tina has her textile conservation studio and, downstairs, I have a library and office. I put in a nook with a window seat overlooking a stream and I sit there reading and writing for hours at a time. It’s a space and a place: to be there is to be where I am.

In the late 1980’s, Philip Hodgins visited us twice in Warwick on his travels. We put him in a guest room with an old Royal typewriter, which he banged away at for hours.
The Black Dirt

On old pre-Revolutionary maps, our area is designated as The Drowned Lands. It was mainly underwater until drained in the nineteenth century by Polish and German immigrants. What they found was a deep rich fertile soil, as black as can be. Onions and celery and lettuce are among the main crops. On the higher ground you find dairy farms.

Many of the local families go back to the original settlers, who displaced the Delaware tribes.
Kaaterskill Falls

In the Catskills, you can find the famous Katterskill Falls by parking your car on the road and hiking in for less than a mile. Here it is partly frozen after a spring thaw in early March. The spray freezes on everything it coats, making the whole forest seem like glass.

The falls were painted frequently by the Hudson River School artists, and it shows up in a climatic scene in James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans*. In the nineteenth century there was a famous resort hotel, the Catskill Mountain House, that was built above the falls but it fell on hard times and was eventually burned down.

There’s something about water and mountains together I find compelling.
Kawhia, New Zealand

We go each year to New Zealand to spend a few days with relations: a niece, Sara; her husband, Neil; and their two children, Ryan and Carmen. They live outside Kawhia, on the west coast of the North Island, a few hours from Auckland.

It's a stunningly beautiful place, with the sea and surrounding mountains defining the terrain. There's one road in and out, and sometimes we just have to stop to take in the scenery. Pacific islands are so distinct.

If it weren't for Sara and her family, I doubt we would go to New Zealand on any regular basis, and I certainly wouldn't have found myself at the University of Auckland giving a talk in the English department on Wednesday, August 10, 2011.
How This Happened

This Tapa Notebook is the result of my friendship with Tom Bishop, whom I first met at the University of Melbourne and then got to know while attending Yale Graduate School with him in the late 1980’s. Only one other person gets me laughing as much as Tom does, and that’s also an Australian from Yale, Gordon Turnbull.

Tom left Yale and eventually ended up at the University of Auckland, where he became chair of the English Department. We see each other whenever I’m in town. Through Tom, I met the poet Michele Leggott and it was through her that I received the invitation to give a talk at the University.

The talk was entitled “Leading a Double Life: The Poetics of Home in the U.S. and Australia,” and it was the basis (although I didn’t immediately realize it) for how I put together this notebook. Looking back on the talk, I’m surprised at how much overlap there is, especially in the choice of images.

In a sense, I’ve now come full circle, so this is a good place to stop.
POST CARD

Michele Leggott
The University of Auckland
Auckland, 1142
New Zealand

PAUL KANE 8 BIG ISLAND WARWICK, NY 10990

17 July 2013

Dear Michelle,

Well, here it is at last. I took the Mildura Writers Festival to spur me on to finish the Tape Notebook, but I'm glad to have had the occasion to pull it all together. It's a daunting prospect to fill up a blank notebook, but a dream once you embark. Thanks for that. Best, — Paul