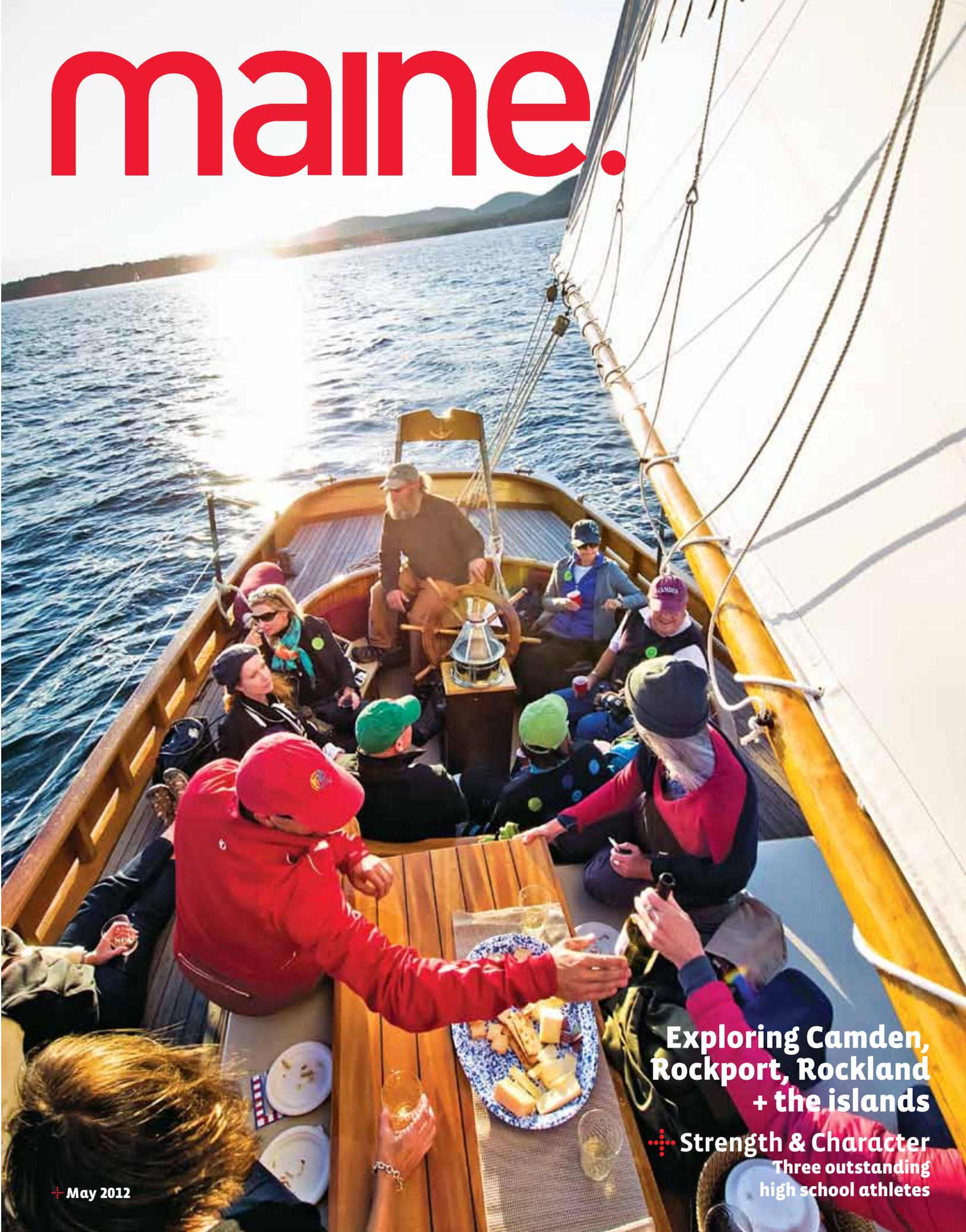


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The Telling Room Young Writers Contest

With the support of Longfellow Books, *Maine* magazine, the Maine Writers and Publishers Alliance, and the Southern Maine Writing Project, the Telling Room received hundreds of submissions for its writing contest this year. Middle and high school students from all over the state wrote poems and stories under the theme “Searching for Maine, Searching for ME.” They described their favorite haunts, what it means to be from here and away, and where they find their own Maine. For more information, visit ► tellingroom.org



Noah Williams

Fiction winner, overall winner

Just Cold Enough for Comfort

In Maine, there is an old adage: If you don't like the weather, wait five minutes. I've been waiting for three hours, and it's still freezing cold out here. It's so cold, in fact, that every time I exhale, a little puff of steam comes out of my mouth and floats down on to the gun cradled in my lap. It stains a small patch of the barrel black with condensation. I'm breathing through my mouth because it's quieter, or at least seems quieter, than when I breathe through my nose. Deer are sensitive about these things.

When people ask me where I'm from I usually get one of three answers:

“Oh, you live in Maine? Lobsters, right?”

“Do you live in a lighthouse?”

“Maine? That's Canada, right?”

Of course, I have to clear up these misconceptions every time with: yes, we eat lots of lobster; no, I don't live in a lighthouse, and no, you stupid flatlander. Where else can you climb a mountain, hike a trail, visit a farm, and lay on the beach in a day? In my opinion, we have just about everything we need right here.

The tiny beads of water on my rifle have frozen into hard little droplets. This is where moisture comes to die. It's an old gun, with lots of dings, and nicks, and scratches to prove that this isn't its first day

afield. My grandfather carried it for some 60 years with him before me, and it killed lots of deer. Old guns are always better for days like these, especially when your spit freezes before it hits the ground.

I've met lots of real Maine people during my 16 years here. Not like the way a politician meets “real people” though. I know farmers and lobstermen, carpenters and heating techs, and lots and lots of teachers. Maine farmers do not wear overalls, chew straw, and smile as they drive by on their shiny green tractor. They are tough men, and even tougher women. They work longer and harder in a day than most people do in a week. Their tractors are not gleaming mounds of GPS-guided steal, but a clunky old Oliver held together with baling twine and patch welds. Lobstermen and fishermen are equally as tough, and maybe twice as hardy. They must run in sync with the weather, the tides, and work in blistering sun and bone-chilling fog.

Speaking of cold, the nine-hour hand-warmers have tapped out at four, and I'm starting to lose feeling in my fingers. My toes are long gone. As the sun comes up, the complete and utter silence changes to just plain silence. The movement of a small bird hopping through the pine tree overhead punctuates the nothingness.

To be a Mainer (and not the kind who descends in June and then beats a hasty retreat back to Florida come September) you have to be tough. You need this tolerance and stamina that I've yet to see anywhere else. It's not determined by race, or gender, occupation, or religion. The term “Mainer” is its own demographic group.

I pack it in. I can't take this any longer. Any exposed flesh on my body has gone from painfully cold to pleasantly warm and tingly. The sun creeps toward the treetops as I push through the dense grove of hemlocks, into scattered second-year beach cuts, and back onto the old logging road. As I come around the bend, another hunter hiking in waves to me.

"Any luck?" he says, huffing and puffing. I look at his fancy sunglasses, immaculate blaze-orange parka with a black camouflage print, the glittering rifle in his right hand, and then back to my beat up old 30-30 and I think of the two pairs of pants I'm wearing. For a split second, I wish we could trade places.

"Nothing yet, but I'm hopeful." I say.

The man shivers, "Jesus, it's cold out. I'm glad I wasn't here any earlier."

I just smile, and am grateful for this morning, for the cold, and for this meeting. More than anything I'm grateful for the place I am right here and now.



Laura Holt

Poetry winner

My Real Maine

My real Maine is countless twelve-ounce coffee cups
in the backseat of my mother's station wagon.
It's cheap cars, but mostly trucks on our dirt and tarred, pot-holed roads.
It's me at fifteen driving down the back roads
and my sister screaming "Brake, hit the brakes!"
It's every kindergartener learning how to plant a tree in the schoolyard.
It's diner food, pot roasts, and Kool-Aid stands.
Maine is the place with sweet elder neighbors with kind hearts and antique tea kettles.
It's seeing your friend's parent can their garden-grown tomatoes
in holey jeans and a stained white t-shirt that has "UPTA camp" printed on the front.
It's pointless trips to Wal-Mart in thirty-five degree weather
just to get a thing or two.
It's standing by the window in a dim-lit room feeling the sunlight.
Maine is walking past houses and seeing smoke flow from old chimneys.
Real Maine is close and distant but strong.
Real Maine is pure and sweet maple syrup over Sunday morning pancakes.
Real Maine is having your own ice skating rink in your backyard.
It's a place where you wander into the woods
and taste, look, and listen.

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