

## Darby and the Quest for Common Ground

by Ernest Hebert

I'd like to begin by showing you a picture I took in my living room.

I built the table from a piece of wormy butternut I chainsawed out of a stump on some land I owned abutting the Warwick Preserve in Westmoreland. The sides and lower shelf I salvaged from a pine-top bar from the basement of a house my wife Medora and I bought in West Lebanon back in 1988. I hacked out the stool from cherry firewood some thirty



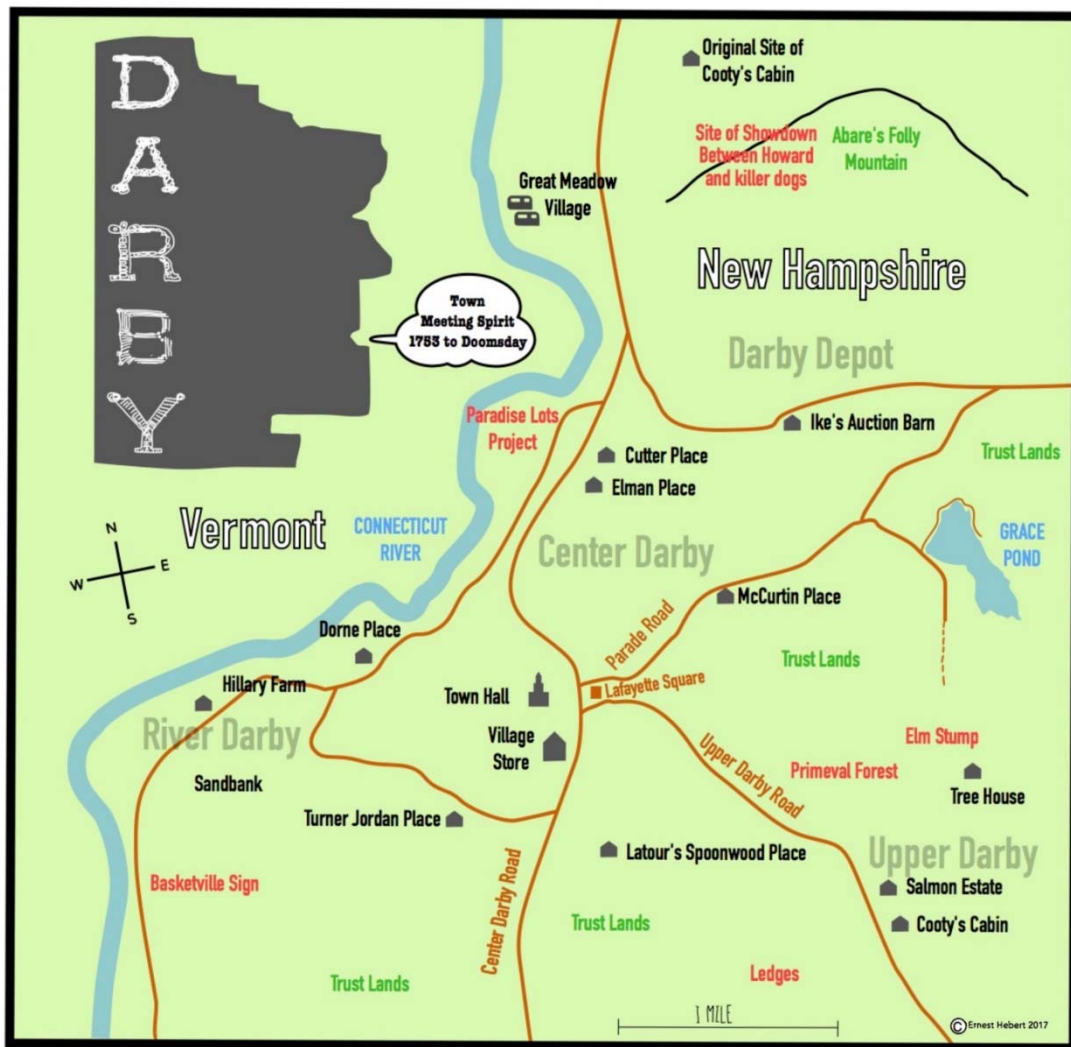
years ago. On top of the real table are three of my books, and on the lower shelf baskets from the Gullah artisans of South Carolina. But what about the retro poster that advertises the NH lottery back when it was called the New Hampshire Sweepstakes? That poster does not exist in the material world and never did. It's a digital drawing I made that exists only in cyber space.

In tech-speak this image is an example of quote unquote "augmented reality," a mixture of the real with the digital. It's the coming thing, says Tim Cook, the CEO of Apple Inc.

I'd like you now to think about the real towns of the Monadnock Region and of an imaginary town designed to represent these real towns. Call it Darby. It appears in what my publisher calls the Darby Chronicles, seven novels of small-town life in New Hampshire from the 1970s to the present. Darby is my augment to reality, its purpose part of a quest. A quest for what? I'll try to provide an answer to the question in this talk that I'm calling the Quest for Common Ground.

When I contemplate the future of my little augmented reality town of Darby, I'm really wondering about the future of the real towns of my personal history: Keene where I was born and grew up, Westmoreland (where I live today), Sullivan (where I built a cabin in the 1970s, my counter culture days), Dublin (where my mom from 1937 to 1940 was a nanny for the Cabot family at the Pumpelly Hill mansion), Nelson (where I lived briefly and where I met my most important mentor, Lael Wertenbaker and where I played for the Munsonville baseball team when I was 19), Stoddard (where my parents had a little place on Granite Lake), Harrisville (where my beloved uncle, the man I'm named after, was pastor of St. Dennis Church), Swanzey (where Medora and I came of age in a kind of commune at the Crossroads Inn at Route 12 and Swanzey Factory road) and all the other towns in our region (whose town meetings I attended in the nine years I was a reporter for the Sentinel).

So, then, Darby is, in general, a composite of all the towns in the Monadnock Region but of three towns in particular: the geography of Westmoreland, a patch of shacks and trailers in Sullivan (which no longer exists), and perhaps the wealthiest neighborhood in the region, estates in Dublin between Mount Monadnock and Dublin Lake.



Darby, like almost all New England towns, consists of villages that often are radically different in geography, demographics, social class, and political will.

Center Darby, corresponding to South Village in Westmoreland, has the largest population base. Some of its inhabitants run local businesses, but most commute to Keene.

River Darby also contains many commuters, but it's dominated by farms. In my Darby world River Road in Walpole, one of my favorite roads, merges with River Road in Westmoreland.

Darby Depot is a run-down part of town with shacks and trailers. It's about where you'd find Route 12 where there are no shacks and trailers.

Upper Darby is the wealthiest part of town. In my imagination you'd find estates and grand views on Glebe Road in Westmoreland.

All the place names on this map are taken from scenes in my books.

Here at the top of the map where Walpole would be in the real world, where we are right at this moment, there's a mountain, a cross between Mount Ascutney and Mount Monadnock that I call Abare's Folly. Abare is the roughly phonetic spelling of the French pronunciation of my name, Hebert H-e-b-e-r-t. In the books, the folly is trying to farm above the 2,000 foot level, but I have my own personal definition. My first agent, Mavis McIntosh (forgive me for name dropping but Mavis was once John Steinbeck's agent) gave me a bit of advice back when I published my first book: "Whatever you do, young man, don't write a series—they'll only read the first one." She was right. The only book of the Darby Chronicles that sold well was the first one, The Dogs

of March. So, Abare's Folly is Ernie Abare's folly for not listening to his agent.

If you'll look at my map of Darby you'll see many areas designated as Trust Lands. I cover the acquisition and disposition of these lands in three of the Darby novels, *Whisper My Name*, *Live Free or Die*, and *Spoonwood*. Establishing the Salmon Land Trust, Darby's conservancy, is a messy process, which I won't go into here. All you have to know is that in the end the conservancy lands will be important not only to the economy of Darby but to its identity.

The usual way to nail people's social class is to pay attention to the way they talk, by the way they dress, and by the way they behave. Here's how I do it when I devise a character. I ask myself: if they fish how would they fish? You can do this stunt yourself. Picture in your mind the guy with the bass boat throwing plugs, the couple with kids fishing with worms from shore or from a bridge for any fish that happens to bite, the night-time hornpout guys in the johnboat on the weedy pond, the fly fisher with the L.L. Bean waders, Orvis rod and pricey English reel fishing local streams for brookies, or off to Canada, for salmon and char.

I didn't find that standard designations for social classes that one learns in Sociology 101 fit my town, so I invented my own sociology for Darby: Locals, Commuters, Disposables, Farmers,

and Gentry. One way to differentiate among these groups is to report their attitudes around a single issue. Let's take zoning, because it touches upon matters in the Darby books and because it remains important to people who live in real rural New England.

### **LOCALS**

Locals can include teachers, lawyers, business men and women and other professional people, but the soul of this class is in those who work with their hands—loggers, restaurant servers, sawmill operators, factory workers, secretaries, truck drivers, heavy-equipment operators, mechanics, and people in the trades, such as carpenters, plumbers, roofers, masons and electricians. Some scrape out a living from the town, but most commute to jobs outside of Darby. Locals are distinguished from Commuters by their frame of reference: Locals view the world in local terms. They're regulars at town meetings, and organizers of quilting bees, snowmobile clubs, firefighter barbecues, wild game dinners, old home days and other strictly local activities. Some even hang on to their local lingo and accents. They have a sense of history and an old-fashioned non-ideological conservatism: cautious, fatalistic, thrifty and often oriented toward the past as expressed by an interest in, say, collecting old tools or growing wild rose bushes. Locals are the inventors of that local institution, the summer yard sale.

A person doesn't have to be born into Darby to fit the category of Local. It's attitude and orientation toward local matters that defines a Local.

The current zoning set-up of Darby goes a long way toward establishing what specifically constitutes the town. Therefore, Locals are usually against changes in zoning of any kind. The poorer Locals are afraid that Commuters will squeeze them out using zoning law as the primary tool. The wealthier Locals are opposed to zoning on the general principle that change is likely to be bad for the town and because they oppose anything the Commuters favor.

#### **COMMUTERS**

This is my designation for people who seek to live a suburban life in the country. Commuters can work in any of the occupations of Locals, but the leadership of this group is usually found among professionals—doctors, lawyers, business managers, teachers, second-homeowners. Many Commuters are newcomers to the community, but not necessarily. Some native locals become Commuters when they lose their sense of orientation to the historical town.

Commuters have little interest in town matters per se; their concerns are their children and themselves, concerns expressed in a passion for schools, town planning and districts zoned to give them privacy and keep out the Disposables. Some are the rural equivalent of Yuppies. They have little sense of or respect for

the traditions of the town, and they believe themselves superior to just about everybody. Commuters get themselves onto planning boards and school boards and conservation commissions. Commuters might be conservative or liberal in their political philosophies; what they have in common is that they are predisposed toward improving the town in their own image and likeness.

Through the medium of zoning changes, Commuters have already transformed many New England towns into the equivalent of rural suburbs. I used to think that this process was inevitable, but I've noticed a trend in the years following the first couple of Darby books, which is that many Commuters instead of changing the towns have been changed by the towns. Some have become Locals. A war is on between Locals and Commuters for the soul of Darby, and it's too early to predict the outcome.

### **DISPOSABLES**

In the minds of the other groups in Darby, the Disposables are associated with shacks, trailers and poverty. In my class system as represented by the population of fictional Darby, poor people might be poor Locals or poor Commuters. What marks the Disposables is less their economic status than their bad attitudes, bad taste, bad behavior but also how they are viewed by their fellows townspeople.

Indeed, some Disposables get rich, buy big houses and turn them into eyesores. Disposables don't have strong opinions about zoning; to them zoning belongs to that nether world of the



society they ignore or despise, but they often achieve de facto zoning by their slovenly habits and unneighborly demeanors: nobody wants to live near them. In contemporary lingo, Disposables are often referred to as "trailer trash." What's troubling to me is that so many perfectly fine poor people get lumped in with the Disposables. It always amazed me that some of my students at Dartmouth College, who would never use the n-word, were quite comfortable with racist phrases like "red neck," "white trash," "white bread," and "pasty white" to describe skin color. In the minds of Locals and Commuters the Disposables don't count, because they don't vote at town meeting. Zoning ordinances are often crafted to ride the Disposables out of town.

### **FARMERS**

Most of the farmers I've known I met in my work as a reporter for the Keene Sentinel newspaper back in the 1970s. I found farmers to be well-rounded, well-informed, ironic, intelligent and interesting. I have to laugh at suburban and city people who use the word "farmer" as a slur to indicate an uneducated, unsophisticated rural person. They're saying "farmer" but they're thinking Disposables. Farmers know tools, accounting, taxes, land, law and, in New England—given the fickleness of the gods of weather and the nuisances of rocky soil—philosophy. The only area where Farmers are clearly inferior to suburbanites and urbanites is in their fashion sense. The farmers of Darby, the few who are left, are often wheelers and dealers in the town.

They know how things work; they get themselves elected as selectmen and members of various other boards. Those who quit farming and go on to other work prosper as real estate agents, land developers and contractors.

Farmers are conflicted in their ideas about zoning. On one hand, like the Locals, they're opposed to zoning out of habit and tradition. On the other hand, they can see great possible profit in zoning, and Farmers are nothing if not practical-minded. If a farmer wants to sell his property, it often makes practical sense for him to re-zone his mind as well as his land. Accordingly, Farmers often find themselves in a philosophical and spiritual maze that includes the past, the present, the future, the land, the law, economics, heritage, price controls, free markets, freedom, servitude to animals and retirement in a Florida condo.

I have to confess that in this instance the real world has passed me by. Farmers today are as likely to be organic farmers from away as the native dairy farmers and corn-growers I had in mind for Darby. Maybe I'll try to catch up in future works.

### **GENTRY**

The Gentry of Darby reside in grand houses built between 1890 and 1930 or in remodeled farmhouses dating back to the 18th century. They love gardens, art, and frequent trips to far away places. They are distinguished from the commuter rich by their often modest dress, modest ways and good taste. Though few in

number they own most of the forest land of Darby. They're well-educated and cultured, but the family fortune has slipped, and often the Gentry suffer from cash-flow problems. They retain a great deal of prestige in the town and some power, but it's the power of influence because there are not enough of them to form a large voting block at town meeting, which they always attend unless they are vacationing in warmer place during the second Tuesday in March. They're New England's equivalent of European royalty: up-front sway, but not quite enough in the bank to back it up with.

The Gentry take a cautious approach toward zoning. They lead movements in zoning for historical or environmental purposes, but they often side with the Locals when it comes to conventional zoning such as commercial or single-family housing. The reason for this is partly tradition. Gentry don't want their towns changing into suburbs. Also, the Gentry have little need for codified zoning, since as owners of large plots of land they've already achieved de facto protection from encroaching development.

Me? Though I'm not a native of Westmoreland, I consider myself a Local. In the 21 years I lived in West Leb I was a Commuter.

What brings the people of Darby together is the institution of Town Meeting. In my New Hampshire world of augmented reality Town Meeting will determine the fate of Darby. Just what will be

that fate? The forces on the town come from two directions: the inside as represented by the class structure I just finished outlining and from the outside: highways, development, recession, changing demographics, the unexpected; for example, an atomic bomb drop.

In the Darby books I correctly anticipated a widening of the gap between the haves and have nots in the real world. I did not anticipate an opioid epidemic to make our class divisions all so much worse. I did not anticipate that the region would no longer be a magnet for young people, as it was in the 1970s and 80s when I came of age. As I ponder new writings I wonder about the Salmon land trust of Darby. Is it going to be a unifying symbol? Or an arena for conflict among the competing classes?

When I was a kid growing up in Keene we were the elm city—until we weren't. Briefly Keene was the pumpkin city until it wasn't. And maybe it will be again. Perhaps because Keene lost its identity with the demise of its elm trees, I gave Darby a motto that signifies its identity: "Town Meeting Spirit 1753 to Doomsday".

This issue of town identity means a lot to me. I ask myself what does the future hold for Darby. I see three possibilities: Commuter Town, Tourist Town, and Magic Moment Town.

## COMMUTER TOWN

Commuter Town is my least favorite, but it's probably the most likely, if I'm to be faithful to the real world. The big dairy farms slowly disappear. Local businesses move to the big towns of Keene, Brattleboro, and Bellows Falls. Young people seek adventure in Boston, Miami, New Orleans, L.A., San Francisco, Seattle, Mars.

Darby becomes a boring place, the kind of place most of my Dartmouth creative writing students came from. I often asked them: why don't you write about the suburban town where you grew up? The answer to my question was always the same. The places just weren't worth writing about. It wasn't that they were bad places to grow up in or live in; it's that they were bland. So many of my creative writing students were readers and writers of fantasy and Sci-fi. They wanted to live in the wizarding world of J.K. Rowling, the Middle Earth of J.R.R. Tolkien, the Narnia of C.S. Lewis, the Ewok Village of Star Wars and, yes, even Mars. This quest for excitement and places where you can find some magic all harkened back to their blah hometowns.

So what does Commuter Town mean to the Salmon trust lands of Darby? Commuters with little stake in the town of Darby will pretty much ignore the Trust lands. Meanwhile, a growing shack and trailer class, the Disposables, squeezed by the rest of the town, will start poaching on the trust lands. They'll set fires out of spite. Conservancy lands will become a battleground for resentment.

## TOURIST TOWN

A second fate I have mind for Darby is that it becomes a tourist town. For me as a writer, this idea is a lot more interesting than Commuter Town. So what constitutes a tourist town? Think of Provincetown on Cape Cod in MA, of Stowe, VT, Wolfeboro and Portsmouth, NH, Bar Harbor and Ogunquit, ME. Tourist towns are often wealthy and vibrant, at least in season. However, there's a price to pay. The identity of the town is crushed, and the replacement identity pushes out local people and establishes a newer, glitzier but less meaningful identity.

Darby doesn't have an ocean, a great lake; it has Abare's Folly mountain, but no ski area; Darby is not a natural for a tourist town. However, tourist towns can be manufactured. Here's my scenario for Darby.

It's based on the former Cheshire County Complex property in Westmoreland, which is just kind of sitting there waiting for something to happened. I envision the coming of a corporate entity that I call PLC (Paradise Lots Covenant, a play on words of John Milton's long poem, Paradise Lost) that offers local people at town meeting drastically lower property taxes in return for zoning changes. Darby goes from a town meeting town to a company town. PLC establishes condos, a hotel, restaurants, a water slide, shopping opportunities, perhaps tours of places of historical interest, and of course the state moves in with a giant state-run liquor store. In the summer there would be fishing tournaments in the Connecticut River. Hikes up Abare's

Folly Mountain, with an ice cream stand at the summit. The anchor for these changes, the thing that brings in the bucks and makes it a destination for a tourist, would be a gambling casino, which I would name the Lucky Feather Connissaadawga Tribal Casino after the Indian village in Canada where Keene's most famous proprietor, Nathan Blake, was taken after he was captured by natives in 1746 and that I wrote about in my novel The Old American. The name, Connissaadawga, appears in the History of Keene. The pronunciation comes from my computer.

How would people get to Darby? They would arrive from the east on a four-lane Route 101, renamed I-92, that would go from Portsmouth, NH, to Albany, New York, where it would link with I-90. Imagine Keene a handy exit off a four-lane road? This possibility is not so remote. The idea was proposed back in the 1970s when I was a reporter for The Keene Sentinel. It was bitterly fought and defeated, thanks in a large part by the people of Dublin.

From the south and north the patrons of Lucky Feather Connissagadawa Tribal Casino would arrive via I-91, get off at the Putney exit, and park below by the Connecticut River.

There's a great big farm down there today with wonderful fields that in my perverse imagination would be paved over to make an attractive, giant undulating parking lot. Motorists would be shuttled the river for a gondola ride across the Connecticut River into New Hampshire directly to the casino. There you have it! Vermont as a parking lot for New Hampshire booze, gambling,

and shopping. Maybe this is the fate for the twin states. We're already half-way there.

There would be a power struggle with the governing board of the Salmon land trust perhaps to develop part of the trust lands, to conduct tours, establish bike and walking paths, to have the lands declared a state or even a national park. The small portion of the park that is listed as old growth would be preserved but have board trails going through it so that tourists could see for themselves what an old Northeast forest looks like.

As a fiction writer I regard this particular augmented reality as quite wonderful, because it has so many opportunities to introduce conflict. Do I have the stomach to write this particular alternative? I dunno, and I won't know until I test it on the page. It's the writing and not the thinking that brings me to places of mind.

### **MAGIC MOMENT TOWN**

The third possibility for the future of Darby is what I call Magic Moment town. Defining Magic Moment Town requires some explanation, so bear with me.

The fictional character in the Darby books who most represents my own thinking is Birch Latour, who was born at the end of the fifth Darby novel, LIVE FREE OR DIE, and grows up the in next two books.



Below are a few lines in HOWARD ELMAN'S FAREWELL that Birch says in addressing the Darby Planning Board.

"Communities are always changing, but when we look at the history of a place we identify two important time periods, the idealized time period, what I call the Magic Moment and the End Time when change has so degraded the place that its Magic Moment identity is lost forever. Think of those communities in the southeastern part of our state. Darby is on the verge of its End Time. If we don't do something in the next few years the Darby we know will cease to exist."

It wasn't until I wrote that paragraph that I grasped an idea that was important to me, the concept of the Magic Moment; maybe it was there all along, but not at the surface of my consciousness.

Darby's Magic Moment parallels the Magic Moment of the real town of Westmoreland where I live. Here's how Birch Latour expresses the idea while he's addressing his fellow townspeople at the planning board hearing.

"Darby's Magic Moment occurred in the decades following the American Revolution. Farmers grew crops, raised cattle, sheep, pigs, chickens, and turkeys. Local industry thrived: blacksmiths, tinsmiths, candle makers, glass blowers, sawyers, and timber framers. Every neighborhood had its own one-room school houses. There were three different churches. Citizens met at town meeting to govern themselves. Darby town [like Westmoreland] was pretty much self-sufficient.

'By the Civil War Darby's Magic Moment had gone by, and the town identity has been in decline ever since. We've lost almost all of our farms. We no longer manufacture the goods we need, but buy them elsewhere in the global economy. In another generation River Darby, Center Darby, Upper Darby, and Darby Depot risk merging into one amorphous suburban blob.

"Birch paused to let his words sink in, and then he said, 'It doesn't have to be this way. We can do more than postpone the End Time; we can recreate the Magic Moment of Darby in a new and creative way.'"

For Birch "re-create" means that the town must determine its identity, find the important elements that have been lost and restore them in a contemporary setting. He identifies the four conditions that created the magic moment for Darby: small locally-operated businesses, a community-based education system, a belief in and a reverence for the town meeting form of government, and something close to self-sufficiency based on a relationship to the local natural world. In Birch's mind, these were 18th and 19th century values that he wants retrofit with 21st century technology. He'd rather skip the 20th century.

Birch's plan for Darby is to encourage local businesses such as one would find in my town of Westmoreland: Cox Woodworking, Ferguson Roofing, Stuart and John's Restaurant, Scotty's Auto Repair, Long Ridge Farm, Poocham Hill Winery, and quite a few others. In Darby, the biggest of the small businesses is Birch's company Geek Chorus Software, makers of the hit video game, Darby

Doomsday, so that accompanying Birch's sincere idealism there's an element of self-interest. Isn't self-interest always present? After all this is America.

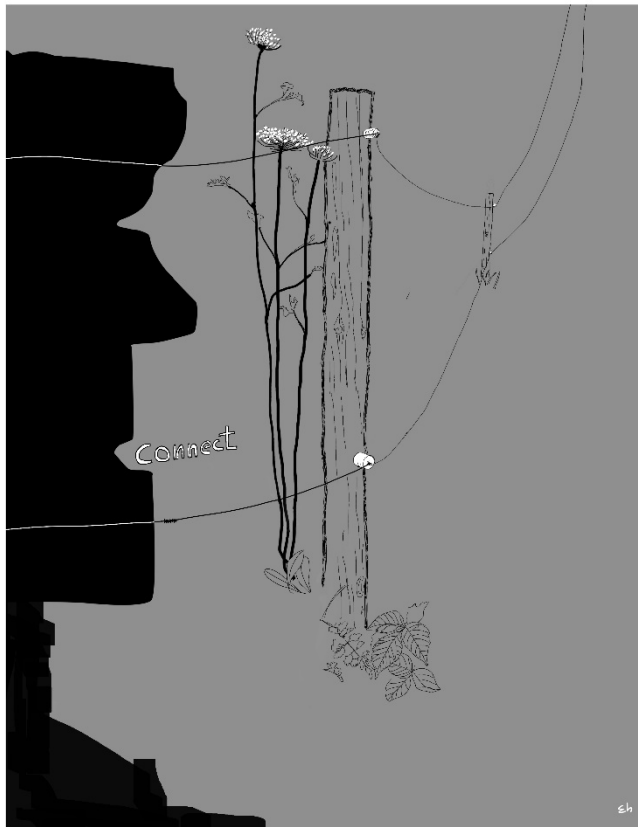
What unifies the four villages of Darby on an abstract level is town meeting; what unifies it as a physical entity is the Salmon Land Trust. Birch Latour views the trust lands as common ground, that is it's open with some restrictions to the public. He wants the town to have a stake in the Trust lands.

Probably the most radical idea Birch has is a change in public education. Birch believes that our current education system of centralized, region-wide schools is ruinous to small-town identity. His solution? Bring back a 21st century version of the one-room schoolhouse, a half a dozen or more modern-day portable structures that could be moved as the demographics of neighborhoods change. These modules would be connected by high speed internet to each other. The professional educational staff in the town would connect students with course work all over the world.

Also parents and other local people would act as part-time teachers. Think of all the talent and expertise in any New England town—law, medicine, banking, mechanics, engineering, accounting, art. Local people would teach, say, aspects of plumbing, nursing, heavy-equipment operation, tax preparation, law enforcement, even creative writing. Your friends and neighbors would be mentors to your children, and you would be

mentors to theirs. You could give local people a break on their property taxes in return for volunteering their time as instructors and organizers. The idea would be to combine the best of home schooling, public education, and local skills.

Can Birch's vision come true in the real world? I can write it but can it happen? Probably not, at least not in its entirety. But maybe a little bit, just enough that our towns can retain something recognizable of their magic moments.



This a drawing of Queen Anne's lace, poison ivy, and an old fence post with wires that no doubt have lost their charge. To me the drawing is a symbol of a national breakdown in meaningful communication among the populace that in my world I have defined as Locals, Commuters, Disposables, Farmers, and Gentry.

The streets of Keene and its parking lots, the state highways and town roads, the water bodies of which we are so fortunate to have many of in the Monadnock Region, the old threatened dairy farms, the new

thriving organic veggie farms, the commercial orchards, the volunteer apple trees that will startle you with awe when you come upon them in the middle of a nowhere, the stonewalls that give our nowheres a historical context, the concrete foundations of our homes and businesses, and finally--finally--our magnificent fields, forests, and wet lands that you conservators have worked so hard to keep whole and beautiful--in my view it's all common ground. In my view the quest for Common Ground is our best hope for humanity's future on this little planet where by necessity all of us have no choice but to walk the walk.

You here tonight? You are more than conservators; you are the keepers of the flame of our identity.

The old man in the mountain, like all augmented realities, was never anything but a spirit brought forth by the human gift and need for metaphor. The rocks fell, but the spirit will remain as long we New Hampshire people will it. I would like to end this talk by referring you to the spirit of the old man in the mountain and his one-word poem: CONNECT.

That's all I have to say. Thank you for listening.