When I finished winter exams, I flew home and was picked up by my father in Indianapolis. We detoured through Terre Haute on the way to New Harmony, in the south of our state, driving all the way beneath a gray, rain-threatening sky.

The drive always seemed drowsy and anonymous. I felt vaguely aware that there was nothing of interest outside the system, off the road. Trees might rear and fields spread outward, farming equipment might stand desolately in the harvested emptiness and small oil-field pumpjacks bob steadily—and yet they seemed pasteboard figures in a perfunctory scene, as though the onward and endlessly stretching scroll of the Hoosier State needed to be filled by something.

But it was different this time. I refused to let the scene's peculiarities pass under my notice. I saw hedge apples like yellow brains in the roadside ditches; wire fences thronged with shrubbery—when birds sit on the wire and excrete, my father explained, they drop motley seeds; entire fields run with regular rows of upchurned earth, like the traces of massive moles: evidence that a drainage system of black plastic pipes had been installed.

I'd spent the first 18 years of my life in Indiana; I knew the land so well that it had passed into archetype, became something that just was. Say what you would about it, you couldn't deny it existed. But at Harvard, as it turned out, people denied just that. To many of my classmates, the Midwest was the quintessential void; from both the coasts, they forayed into other countries, while the center of their own remained a cipher. In the face of this assessment, I'd never found the time to develop my own understanding of my state. It existed, I knew. It took up space. But beyond that, I couldn't say much.

As we drove home, the empty space filled up. It wasn't as if I'd suddenly come to understand the land. Rather, a difference had emerged, a sudden complexity that I'd never allowed myself to see, and I had to ask myself, with a newfound critical bent: What had I been seeing? And why?

So there's this Texan, or maybe he's a Sooner, or a Hoosier—it doesn't really matter, so long as he's not so refined, has a rougher understanding of decorum. Anyway, he's off to attend some East Coast school, and upon arrival gets it into his head to do some studying, but he's so bemused by the fanciful brick and high-rise architecture of his temporary home that he has to stop and ask a native for the location of the library: “Excuse me—I'm new here. Would you mind telling me where the library's at?” The native responds in a voice gone all transatlantic: “Here at Harvard,” he draws it out, long as a sigh, “we don't end our sentences with prepositions.” Not to be trod upon, our Texan (or Sooner, or Hoosier) responds in a stereotypical Texan (or Sooner, or Hoosier) accent: “I'm very sorry about that. Could you please tell me where the library's at, [expletive of your choice]?”

Just a few months before entering Harvard, I was told this joke by an established member of my Indiana community—his hearty frame convulsed mid delivery by bouts of shoulder-slapping merriment—who himself had attended a similar East Coast institution in the 1980s. Beyond the avowed triteness of the setup, delivery, and punch line lurked implicit messages, not the least of which was: You're going to have to watch your back. Your tools will be humor and subversion, the joke said; you will have to stock your quiver with the arrows of conscious humility and, like a folk hero, contrive to let them fly at the right moment, at the right target.

It sounds pompous and solemn and naïve, but I really was think-
And I think this perception of emptiness affected me—I became like a travel agent, bent on selling my home state, presenting as lures whatever stereotypical emblems came to mind. I had to justify it, prove that something was there. Over time I built this into a routine, a sort of grandstanding alter ego who engaged in all forms of cornpone kvetching, extolling the manifold virtues of cornbread and down-home coziness, the friendliness of backwaters—even, on one occasion, crafting an impromptu dance move at a party and christening it on the spot “The Shucker,” despite the fact I’ve probably shucked only enough corn in my entire life to yield half a bushel of husks.

The problem is, if you’re constantly trying to sell your homeland, you’ll hardly have time to reflect on it critically. Whatever youthful impressions of Indiana I’d brought with me to Harvard—that its residents were merely lovable yokels, patched overalls and all, that the mindless cultivation of commercial crops constituted its raison d’être—became solidified, entrenched. When I dipped home for summer or winter breaks, I saw in the long glides through the countryside what I expected to see: nothing.

It all comes back to indifference, which, in the present context, is the same as ignorance. When people talk to me about Indiana, their ignorance is apparent. And in a strange way, it ends up protecting my own ignorance, safeguarding it. I always note, in these interactions, an unwillingness on both sides to probe too sharply. Whether this springs from a desire not to give offense or something else entirely, the end result is the same: nothing is challenged; I’m forced to defend nothing; and no one learns anything. Not that there isn’t a reasonable solution to this indifferentism; I certainly wouldn’t advise anything so militant as an organized chauvinism. Nor would it be reasonable to make everyone learn a few things about every state and then quiz them on a bimonthly basis. But it does seem to me that we could give more thought to the spaces we bring with us, to recognize in even the plainest plats of land an irreducible strangeness—and then perhaps, like a cherry on top, someone could reach out to say, “Tell me about the Hoosier State.”

Berta Greenwald Ledecky Undergraduate Fellow Bailey Trela already misses Indiana.

**A Calming Presence**

Hockey goalie Emerance Maschmeyer steadies her team, in record-setting fashion.

The moment was easy to miss. Halfway through the third period in an early January game that Harvard would soon put out of reach, Colgate defenseman Nicole Gass skated into the zone and, from the top of the right-hand faceoff circle, snapped a hard shot toward the Harvard net. The puck sailed past two Crimson defenders and into the pads of goalie Emerance Maschmeyer ’16, who flicked it harmlessly into the corner.

And that was it. Maschmeyer, 21, a senior co-captain of the Harvard women’s hockey team and its principal goaltender for the past three years, had made her 2,108th career save, surpassing the school’s all-time record. A half-second later, her teammates corralled the puck along the