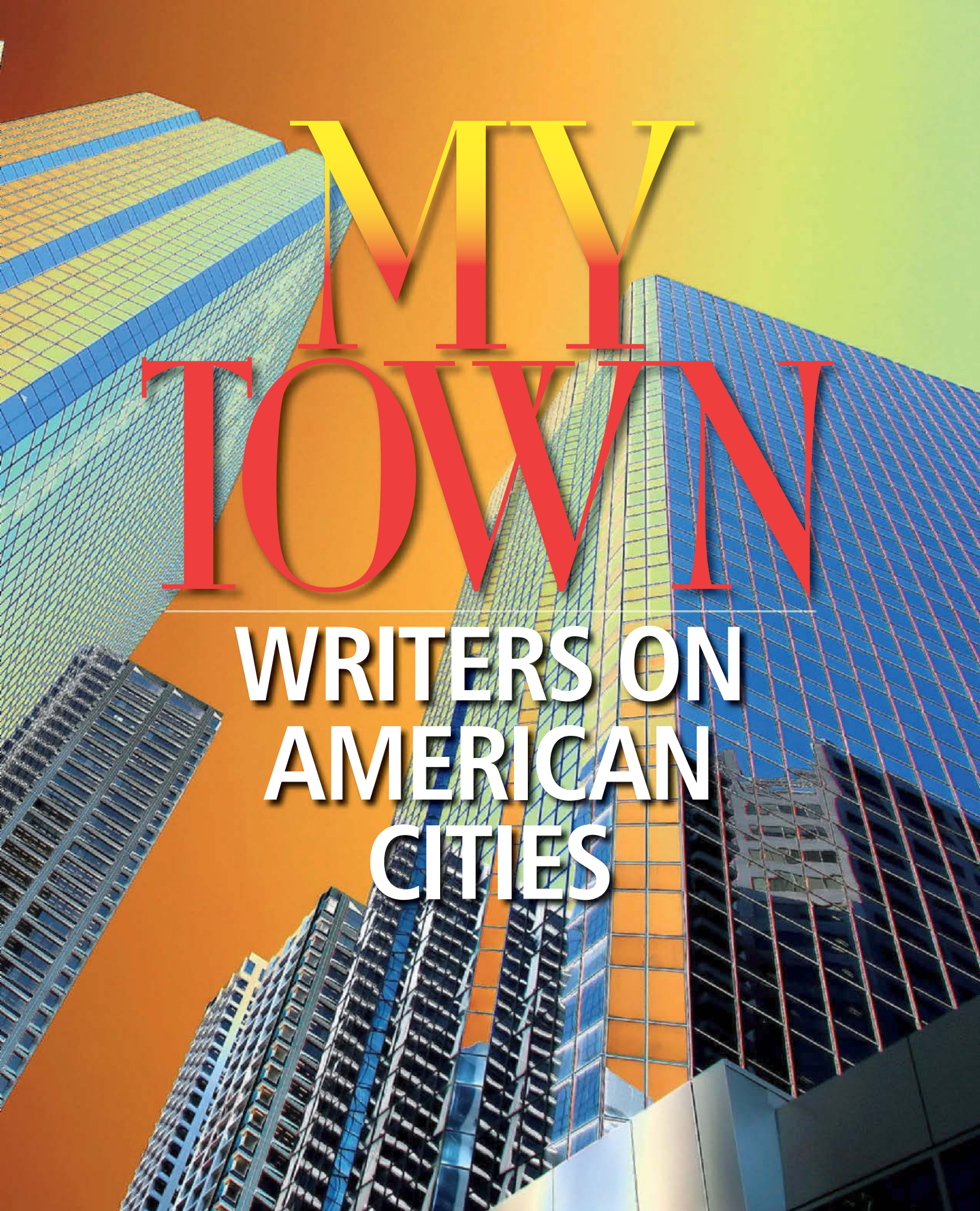
MY
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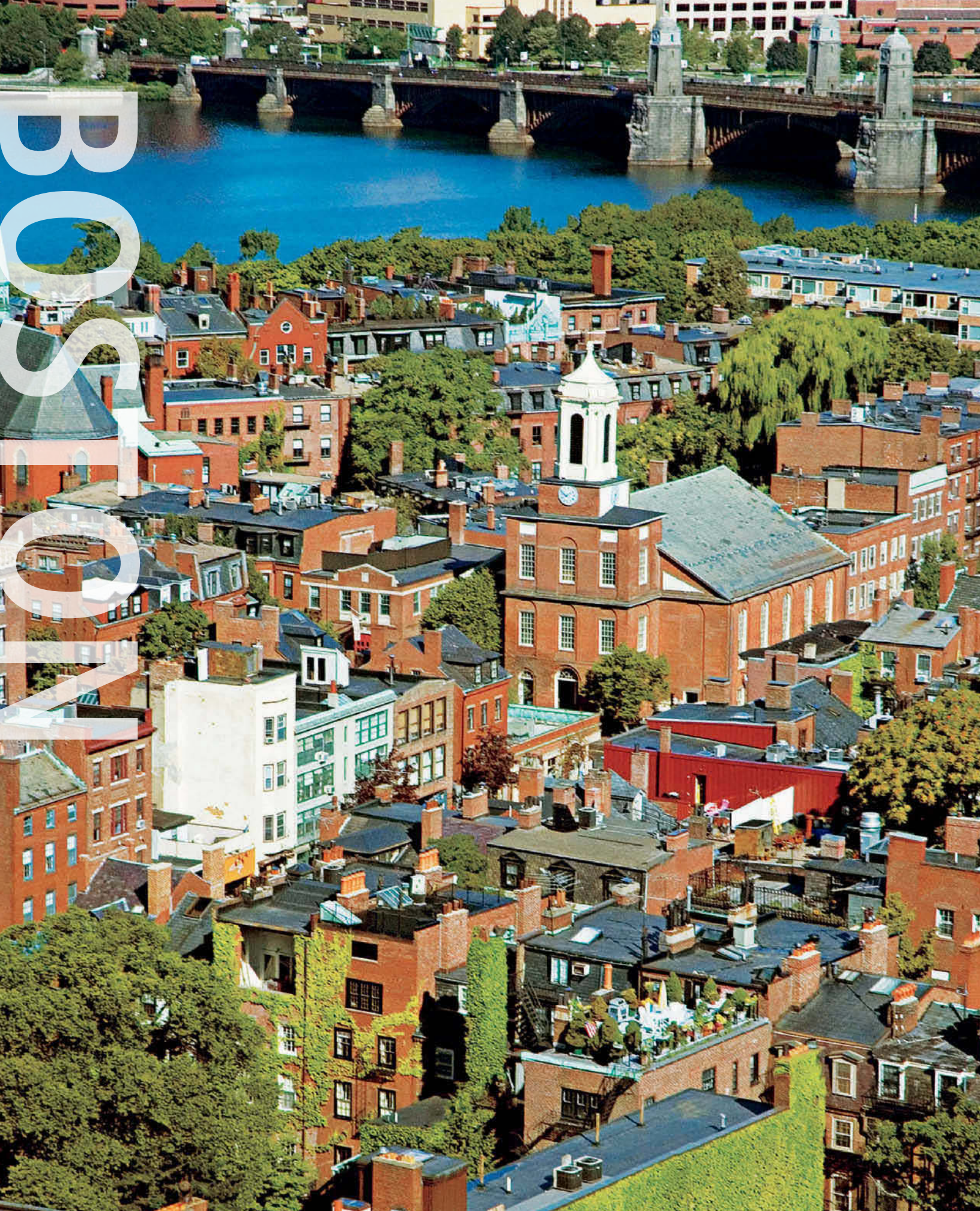

BOSTON

GHOSTS

by Carlo Rotella

Carlo Rotella is the author of *Cut Time*, *Good With Their Hands*, and *October Cities*. He contributes regularly to the *New York Times Magazine*, the *Washington Post Magazine*, the *Boston Globe*, *Slate*, and WGBH; his work has also appeared in the *New Yorker*, the *American Scholar*, and *The Best American Essays*. He is Director of American Studies at Boston College.

My daughter Ling-li, who is 8, has lately been menaced by ghosts. They begin gathering at bedtime, preparing to invade her dreams. Deep in the night, awakened by a particularly vivid nightmare after a string of lesser ones, she pads down the hall to my room and comes around to my side of the bed. "I'm having Bad Thoughts," she says in the dark, her voice low. "Bring everything." I am the resident expert on bad dreams, having had them all my life: half-seen, slavering beasts surging through doors that won't lock and windows too small to fit the frame; a long walk down the corridors of hell with a baseball bat on my shoulder; the same unspeakably hideous movie on every channel and the TV won't turn off and then, somehow, I'm in the movie. Technique is an antidote to fear, I've learned, so I taught Ling-li when she was very small that an ally can enter your dreams to bring you specialized equipment you can use to repel various menaces, and that eventually, as your powers as a dreamer grow, you can dispense with the ally's intervention and train your sleeping mind to produce the equipment when you need it.

Over the years, she and I have assembled an arsenal for her that includes a net for catching monsters; a fire extinguisher, added during her fire-fearing period; a flying castle, and a winged horse to get there; and the Slippery Suit, to foil the bad guys who forever yearn to grab her and spirit her away to their extravagantly unhappy lairs. We've recently added a small, smooth stone you keep in your pocket. When ghosts appear, you put your hand around the stone, which causes a strong wind to blow up, sending those diaphanous sons of bitches scudding away, howling in frustration. But I may have made the case for my own expertise a little too well; instead of training her own sleeping self to carry these items, she still prefers to wake me up and instruct me to bring them to her, as if I were her ectoplasmic gun bearer or attorney.

Ling-li's worries about ghosts date from a recent family outing to Georges Island, in Boston Harbor. We spent a few hours there exploring Fort Warren, in which Confederate prisoners were kept during the Civil War. No doubt some of them died there. In lightless galleries deep within the fort we held hands and shuffled blindly, feeling with our feet for irregularities in the naked stone floor, straining to make out even a faint shape in the blackness, immoderately relieved when up ahead another visitor's cellphone cast a brief, greenish glow. On the return ride on the

The oldest commissioned ship in the U.S. Navy, the U.S.S. Constitution, takes its annual turnaround cruise in Boston Harbor. Opposite page: An aerial view along the Charles River captures the variety of Boston's architectural styles.

ferry, Ling-li and her little sister, Yuan (who is not afraid of ghosts), joined the crowd of kids hanging on the rail at the bow in the watery September sunlight, screaming happily into the wind as the boat sawed through the wakes of other craft. Back on the mainland, we walked past the offices of a company that conducts haunted house tours of Boston. Ling-li approached the guy in a top hat who was drumming up business at a lectern out front. Affecting an archaic accent and a dastardly manner, he at first refused to confirm or deny that ghosts were real, but eventually, upon further interrogation, told her that he himself was a ghost. She absorbed this news without comment, and we went on our way. The encounter with the mock-Victorian tour tout and the spookiness of the fort, reacting together, initiated the current ghost cycle in her dream life.

When people ask me what I like about Boston I usually say that it's old (for a New World city) and you can go almost everywhere on foot. Neither quality is typical of American city life. I grew up in Chicago, a city that now feels to me like an experiment, a cyclopean model train set scattered just the other day across the prairie. All the pyramids and cathedrals of my childhood rose and fell within living memory — the high-rise housing projects marching away along the verge of the expressway, the monumental ruins of steel mills and factories tumbling in slow motion into the high prairie grass that eventually reclaims a deserted lot in Chicago. And Chicago stretches across the flat Midwestern landscape on such an inhuman scale that on a windy February night it feels as if a destination eight blocks distant lies just over the curve of the earth.

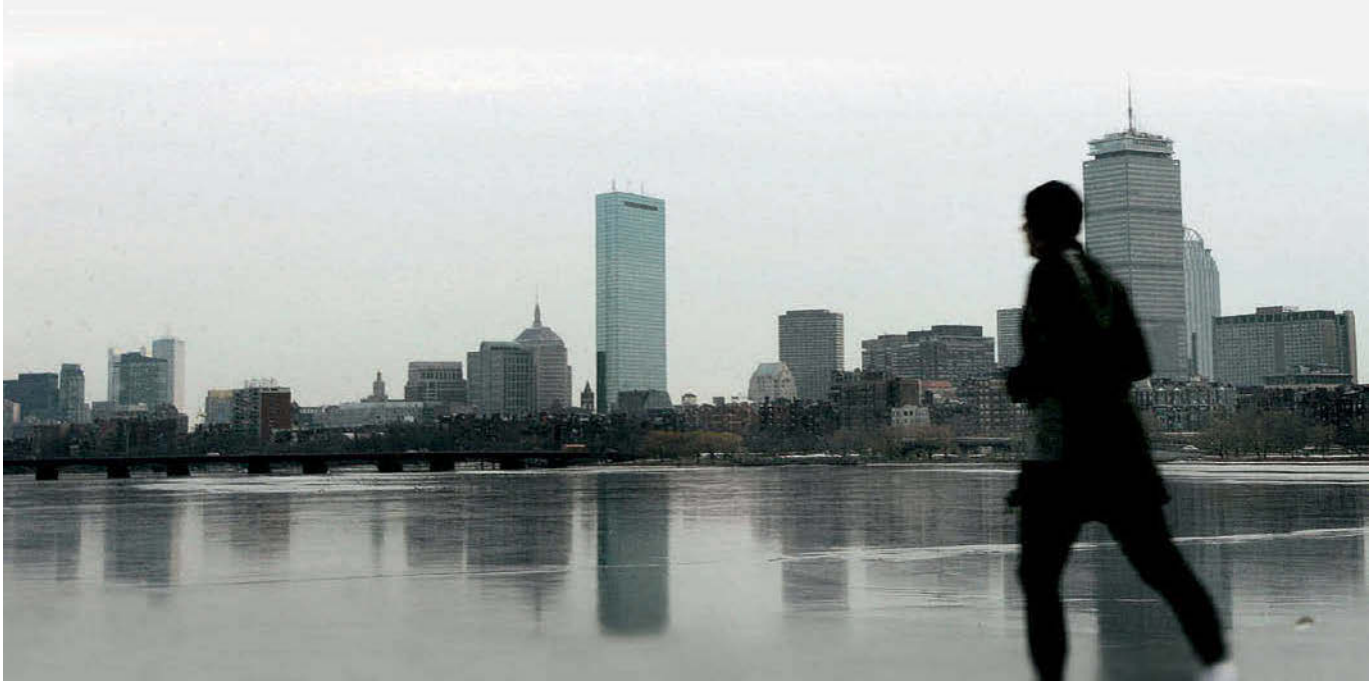
To a Chicago-trained sensibility, Boston feels jammed-in, as if long ago someone had gathered up a great deal of urban material — triple-deckers, college quadrangles, bridges of stone and steel, the golden dome

Top: Sail boats crisscross Boston harbor against the city's skyline. Above: The Old State House, built in 1713, is the oldest surviving public building in Boston.

of the State House, lawn chairs and trash cans placed in parking spaces to reserve them for whoever shoveled the snow out of them — and packed it all tightly into an oddly shaped location at the edge of the ocean. I live in Brookline, a separate town tucked into a concave depression in the boundaries of Boston proper; my neighborhood, my adopted landscape of home, is a collection of familiar wrinkles in the city's scrunched-up fabric. The street I live on, a double row of duplex houses set nearly cheek to cheek, lies between higher ground on one side and train tracks on the other. At night from my windows I can watch the Green Line trains, lit up like excursion boats, passing behind the houses across the street. On winter nights, when I build a fire in the fireplace, the approaching and receding sound of trains comes down the chimney. Bracketed by two fingers of the Green Line track network's handlike spread, the swelling contours of Aspinwall Hill and Fisher Hill, and the main thoroughfares of Beacon Street and Boylston Street, we're holed up here like mice in a niche in an old stone wall.

But coziness requires its own antidote: I like to run at night, after the girls have been put to bed with stories and stuffed bears and night lights. Starting off down the block, I leave the house behind me with the porch light on and another light up in the office window where my wife sits at her desk. I cross Beacon Street and enter Brighton, part of Boston proper, passing houses and then apartment buildings with windows blue-lit by TV. Warmed up and letting out my stride, I cross Washington Street on the diagonal by the police station, the presence of which does not entirely deter the city's famously incompetent and irate drivers from running red lights right in front of it. I follow the gentle downslope of Market Street toward the river. The sidewalks are nearly empty and traffic is light.

Top: Faneuil Hall in downtown Boston is one of the city's many historic sites on Boston's Freedom Trail. Above: In Boston new buildings rise next to some of the oldest buildings in the United States. Below: A lone runner on a wintry day is silhouetted against the downtown Boston skyline.



Top left: Tourists enjoy a ride on the swan boats in the Boston Public Gardens. Top: People walk past subway trains known as "The T." Opened in 1897, it is America's oldest subway. Above: Historic Faneuil Hall has been revitalized as the centerpiece of a marketplace featuring shops and a food hall.

The river, lined on both banks with paved paths, is one of Boston's longest, deepest wrinkles — an intimate natural alley, partially screened by trees and brush, that funnels you semi-secretly through the city, intersecting with streets only where it comes to a bridge. I pick up speed on the riverside path, falling into long-haul rhythm, seized by a growing feeling of insubstantiality as I pass from a stretch of gloom through a better-lit patch and back into gloom again. The occasional rat darts across the path almost underfoot. Sentinel ducks and geese standing watch at the edges of sleeping flotillas of their kind sound an alarm at my approach and then the all-clear when they determine that it's only me. A pale heron rises up with a start from the shallows and with a couple of sullen wingbeats glides away over the water. Once, as I went by a thicket of tall reeds that always stirs whisperingly at my passing, a coyote came out ahead of me into a bar of moonlight, looking back over its hunched shoulder as it crossed the empty road, and paced me for a while before disappearing into a dark wedge of marshy ground on the other side.

I pass the occasional fellow runner or late dog walker; in good weather, courting couples sit on benches overlooking the water. But the living are outnumbered along the river by relics of the dead: Richie Forte, killed in Vietnam, for whom a park in the Nonantum section of Newton is named; David Berray, who died in the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, and is remembered on a plaque next to a playground in Cambridge; Longfellow and Eliot and Weeks and Weld and all the other harrumphing old-timers who gave their names to bridges and boathouses; the legions of long-dead authors whose books gather dust in the stacks of the libraries of the universities that front on the water — Harvard, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Boston University. Not far from the memorial to David Berray there's a granite marker inscribed with a

claim so wishful that it qualifies as a lie: "On this spot in the year 1000 Leif Erikson built his house in Vineland." Ebenezer Norton Horsford, a 19th-century baking-powder entrepreneur with a passion for amateur archaeology of the most poetic sort, is responsible for the marker. He also had a fanciful Viking tower erected farther west on the river, and led the effort to commission the statue of Leif Erikson that peers out at ramp traffic, palm shading brow, from the grassy median of Commonwealth Avenue at the edge of Back Bay. Perhaps Horsford's labors finally calmed the unquiet Viking ghosts that gathered at his bedside, although we'll never know, because Horsford's long dead, too, of course.

Sometimes I try to explain to Ling-li my urge to be out at night, unencumbered, moving fast, fitting myself into the landscape's seams and the cycle of its rhythms. She plainly thinks it foolhardy to choose to be so exposed and alone in the dark, but I try to make her see that the night run is a technique of belonging, of inscribing yourself into a place and the place into yourself. Repeating and varying your routes, you stitch yourself into the texture of your home ground so that you can't be easily pulled from it — not by your enemies, and not even by those who love you. It's true that when you run at night you feel the chill of the thinness of the world, the tenuous weakness of your connection to anyone or anything — especially in the cold and wet, and most especially on a Sunday night in the dead of winter — but she doesn't yet understand how you also strike a blow against this loneliness precisely by seeking it out. As the city's ghosts grow more familiar to you, by degrees you join their fellowship. For every half-seen figure at a second-floor window or in a passing car, for every phantom shape that flickers in your peripheral vision as you pass a stand of trees or a cemetery on a riverfront rise of ground, there are many more you don't see, many more who, rather, catch a glimpse of you: a strangely familiar shadow against the greater dark.

When I return home, I stretch and shower and put on sweats, then pad through the quiet house, turning off lights, checking the stove and the locks on the doors, making sure all is well. My wife has gone off to bed already. Before I join her, I stop in the girls' room to kiss them goodnight in their sleep. I often sit in their room for a minute, listening to their breathing, the house ticking over in the stillness, the muted rumble and whoosh of a late train. I'm the only spark of conscious life in the house, passing soundless and unseen among unheeding sleepers. Yuan once told me, "You're like a bad guy who likes me and protects me from the other bad guys." Sometimes I linger a little longer in the girls' room, waiting to return fully to my body so that I can lie down next to my wife and sleep.

Top: Passersby stroll through an entrance gate to the main campus of Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a suburb of Boston. Above: A frequent winter scene in the Beacon Hill neighborhood in Boston is digging out from a blizzard.

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