

## HOME: A (MANDATORY) CLOSER LOOK

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For many, this is a softening time. Tenderness has eclipsed easy cynicism. Everyone interviewed for this article spoke, in some way, of priorities put into perspective by this pandemic.

By Brian Shuff | Photos by Lauryn Hottinger

*Decor Maine's* creatives share the projects, reflections, observations, and inspirations getting them through this newly exclusive relationship with their homes

NO ONE ASKED FOR THIS. But here we are. The COVID-19 pandemic has kneecapped daily life around the globe. Ads from only a few months ago featuring crowds gathered in restaurants, subways, on humming avenues appear now as strange and unsettling relics. Remember concerts? Remember cafes? Remember baseball?

Everyone has been touched by this (some far more than others), and even freelancers—accustomed to long hours at home as well as uncertainty—have found this time more than a little spooky. There is a huge difference between working from home and *having* to work from home.

This month, we asked some of our favorite contributors what this unusual period has wrought. What have they noticed through the long days indoors? Are they keeping a schedule? Panic cleaning? At last organizing the office? Mastering the texture of crème brûlée? Discovering the difference moving just a few pieces of furniture, or art, or a lamp can make? Perhaps, like many, they're experiencing a refreshed humility upon seeing those already vulnerable made more so by this microscopic menace as well as the myriad acts of united humanity evinced hourly on the news, in our social media feeds, and, if we're lucky, outside our windows.





Doctor-scrub blue. I admitted to Lauryn I find this image terrifying. She thanked me.

**ALLISON PAIGE, Writer** “All my edges have worn off,” Allison says, and it is easy to see in the newfound wistfulness she brings to describing her 19th-century cape on Munjoy Hill and quarantine days spent with her young son. “Writing for *Decor Maine*, I’ve gotten to tour interiors of all kinds, and each time I see my own home a little differently. Sometimes, it’s as if I’ve returned from a castle to find my own home turned into a pumpkin. Other times, I feel the embrace of a kindred spirit.” Now, like so many others, she finds the space transformed into “a little bit of everything.” A school, an office, a restaurant, a gym, a fort, a hostel.

Lately, she and Stellan have taken to drawing their dream homes. “We both like ‘witchy’ houses,” Allison says. “My requirements are a fireplace, a claw-foot tub, and a library tall enough to need a ladder. His are secret passageways, trapdoors, and enchanted chambers. We may never get the exact domiciles we imagine, but right now our home, however imperfect, is a place of great comfort, calm, succor, and yes, shelter.”



“Gifted time,” with 8-month-old Teddy is how Kathryn describes the extra “baby bubble days” that stay-at-home orders have allowed her. At the same time, she is fighting doggedly to ensure that The Telling Room—a Portland nonprofit committed to literacy skills and empowerment through storytelling for children ages 6 to 18—stays afloat.

myself. Every week, I’m deciding what I can give Teddy, my partner, my work, my own physical and mental health, and those amounts are constantly recalibrated.”

**SUSAN PRITZKER, Associate Publisher** With her husband working an essential position at Tyson Foods in Portland and Susan continuing work from their Scarborough home, “at first it seemed like the day-to-day hadn’t changed that much,” she says. “But after about a week, I realized that even though I’m fortunate enough to work from home, I go out quite a bit during the day. I like being around people while I work, so I’ll often set up in a cafe.”

To approximate the experience, she’s found herself taking workday sojourns to the upstairs living room of their farmhouse. “It’s really cozy. It gets a lot of light. And I can really spread out. When I have to be at my desk for something, I’ll use the office. Otherwise, I’m using that upstairs space. It feels separate. It’s funny, but it’s my new coffee shop. It really is.”

**KATHRYN WILLIAMS, Writer** Having just returned from maternity leave in January to her position at The Telling Room, a nonprofit creative writing center for kids and teens, Kathryn feels, on the one hand, grateful for this extended home time with 8-month-old Teddy. “New motherhood is inextricable from this experience for me. My husband and I feel like we’ve gone back into the baby bubble, which feels very much like gifted time.”

On the other hand, coronavirus has left nonprofits like The Telling Room in dire need of support. “I’m home with my kid,” Kathryn says, “but we are also fighting for our life as an organization. I want The Telling Room to come back on the other side of this, so at the same time I feel a tremendous responsibility to keep working. The person I’m most negotiating with over how much I have to give is





... thought that might be covered.

Eager to maintain some sort of routine, Michael began photographing the bits of trash he collected from the wooded area between his home and studio. “It’s not really for anyone. It’s just about seeing how ridiculous and colorful I can make this garbage ... the images look unbelievably out of place with the rest of my feed,” he says. “I think the hardest part right now is understanding that photography, for me, has to take a backseat. Amazing photojournalists are out there covering this, but I’m not a photojournalist. The best thing for me to do right now is to stay home and stay away from people.”

**LAURYN HOTTINGER, Photographer** In the days before official lockdown began, Lauryn, like many of us, felt inundated with bad news. “It was just everywhere,” she says. “I was very overwhelmed and had to express that in some way.”

That expression came in the form of a photograph, Lauryn buried by headlines in a room also papered with news pages.

“I do a lot of self-portraits, but there is rarely any meaning or intentional metaphor behind them. This was completely different,” Lauryn says. Embracing the unusual opportunity to experiment without assignment or deadline, she has since undertaken an entire series, with each image focused on addressing the current moment head-on, bluntly and with purpose. “[Quarantine] brought on a brand-new way of approaching my work.”

**HEATHER CHAPMAN, Editorial Assistant** Surplus time has led Heather back to the creative endeavors that often end up collateral damage of her busy professional life. “I’m an oil painter and a photographer, and I have been drawn to doing much more, when normally, after a long day, I just flat out don’t,” she says.

The “surge of painting” Heather describes coincides with a newfound ease in assessing the large seascapes she’s producing. “Prior to all of this, I was pretty critical of my work, but I’ve found I’ve let a lot of that go. I’m having fun with it in a way that I haven’t before.”

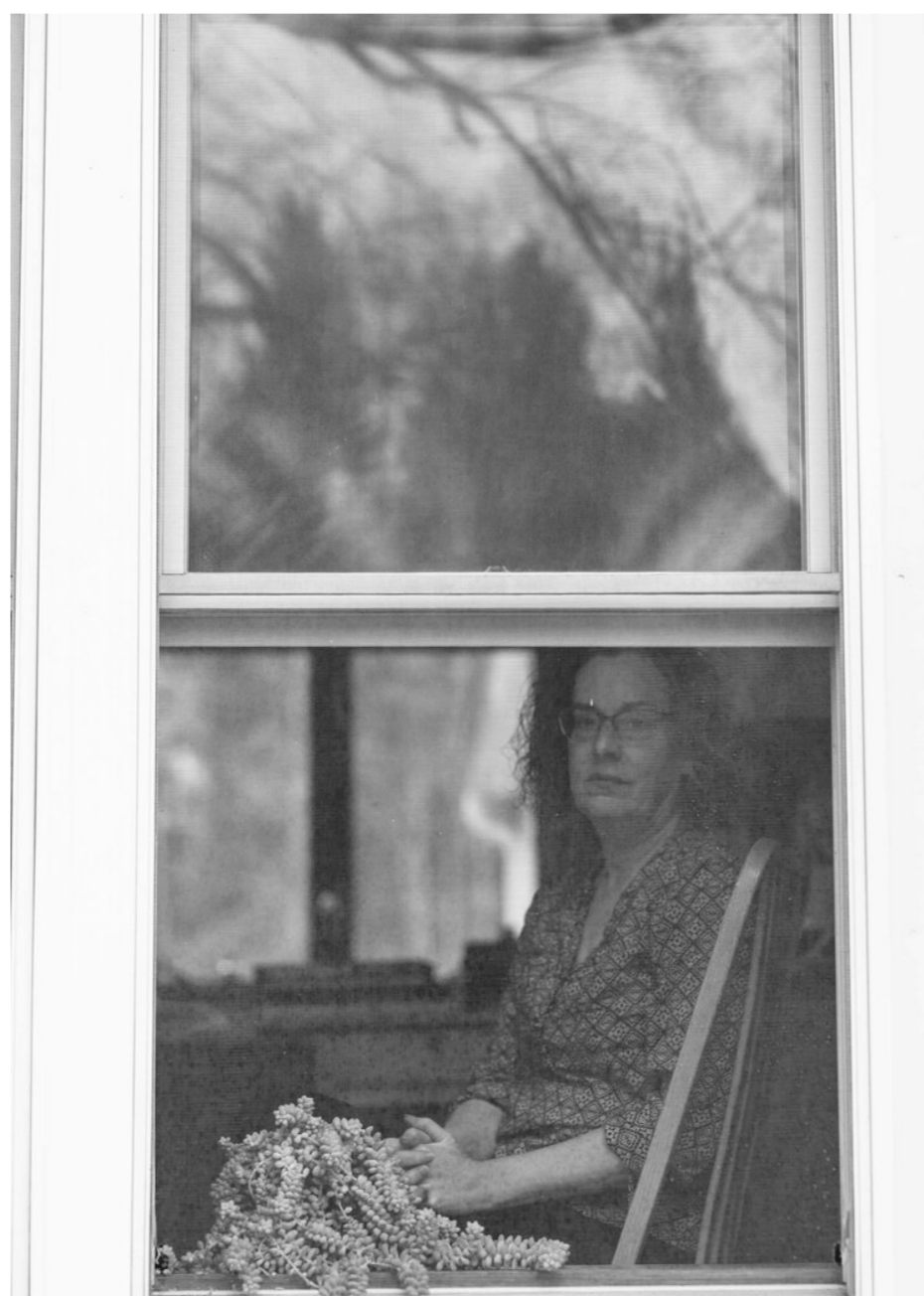
**MORGAN BIRTWELL, Illustrator** As the length and severity of lockdown became clearer, Morgan decided to leave her home in Wayne to ride out the pandemic with her boyfriend. He was managing his family’s New Hampshire farm solo. “We decided we should go through this together,” she says.

Farm life has proven a bastion of mental health. “I’m definitely trying to take pleasure in simple things. Feeding the chickens in the morning, watching the ducks, collecting eggs. Normally, you go through your tasks—make coffee, eat breakfast, wipe the counter—but you don’t really take joy in those things because you’re forgetting to see.”

Of course, lack of work is its own source of stress. “Freelance gigs are pretty much on hold,” Morgan says. “But for the time being, I’m trying to take the days slower, to stay calm, and to have longer lunches.”



This is all of us. Yesterday.



**DEBRA STARR, WRITER** “I have an idea for another book,” says Debra, “but I’m having trouble focusing the way other people are. I just can’t deal with anything. I hope I can stop acting like this at some point.”

Her state of mind, Debra says, she owes to an immense cognitive dissonance. “Where I am, it’s very peaceful and calm, but I can see on my screens how frenetic and horrible the rest of the world is. It just feels strange.”

In taking a break from those screens, however, she has discovered plenty of chances for active gratitude. “Yesterday, I turned off my office computer and noticed—which I’d never noticed—the reflection of birch trees in my screen. I’m seeing things like that far more than I would otherwise. Also, I never use our front rooms unless we have company, but I realized I love those rooms. The other day, I was sitting in there, just loving the colors of that little space. With so many people going through God only knows, I’m really trying to appreciate my home more.”

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