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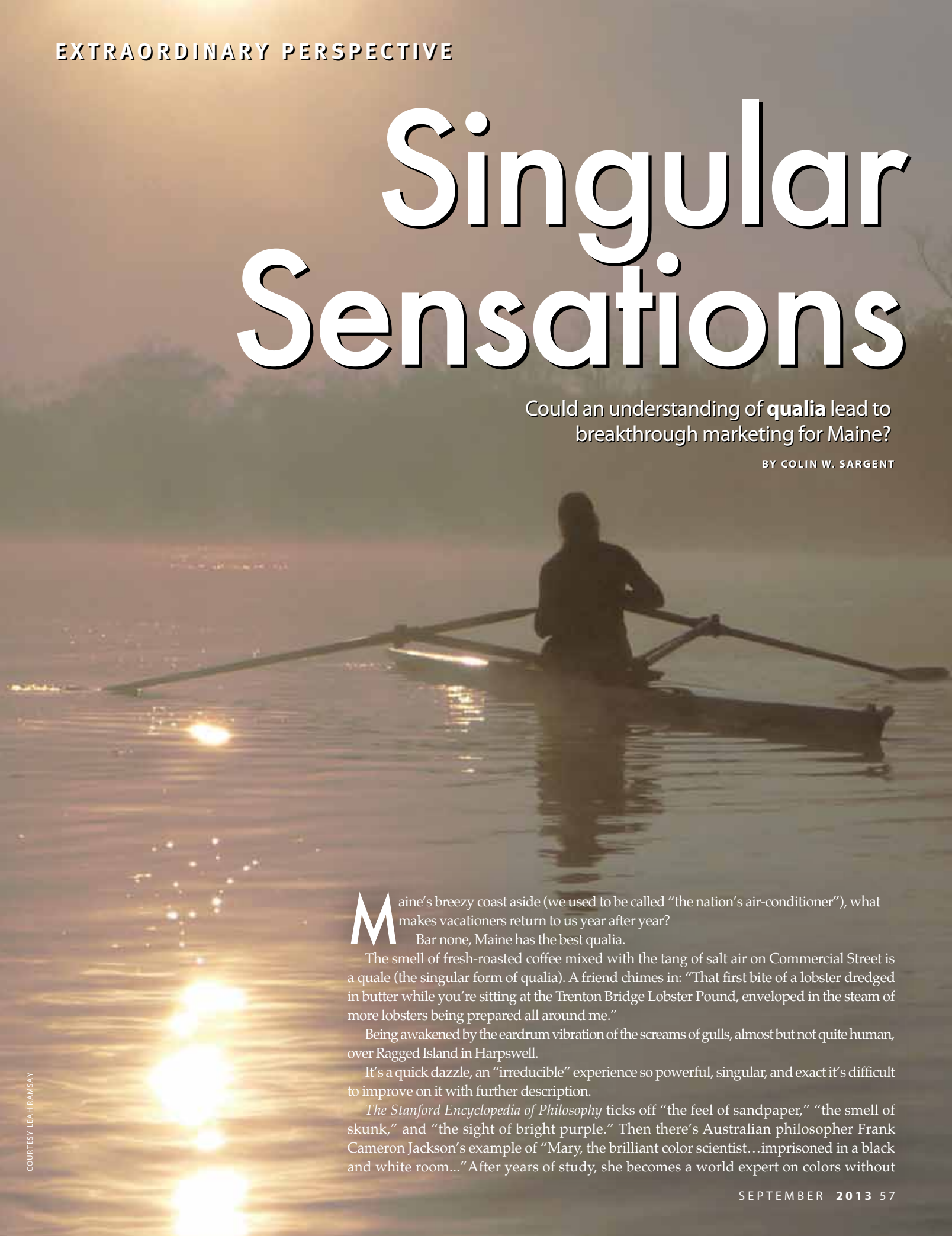
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Singular Sensations

Could an understanding of **qualia** lead to breakthrough marketing for Maine?

BY COLIN W. SARGENT



Maine's breezy coast aside (we used to be called "the nation's air-conditioner"), what makes vacationers return to us year after year?

Bar none, Maine has the best qualia.

The smell of fresh-roasted coffee mixed with the tang of salt air on Commercial Street is a quale (the singular form of qualia). A friend chimes in: "That first bite of a lobster dredged in butter while you're sitting at the Trenton Bridge Lobster Pound, enveloped in the steam of more lobsters being prepared all around me."

Being awakened by the eardrum vibration of the screams of gulls, almost but not quite human, over Ragged Island in Harpswell.

It's a quick dazzle, an "irreducible" experience so powerful, singular, and exact it's difficult to improve on it with further description.

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy ticks off "the feel of sandpaper," "the smell of skunk," and "the sight of bright purple." Then there's Australian philosopher Frank Cameron Jackson's example of "Mary, the brilliant color scientist...imprisoned in a black and white room..." After years of study, she becomes a world expert on colors without

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ever having seen them.

"One day her captors release her...She steps outside her room into a garden full of flowers. 'So, that is what it is like to experience red,' she exclaims as she sees a red rose. 'And that,' she adds, looking down at the grass, 'is what it is like to experience green.'"

Imagine the sensory overload going from never having seen Maine before (no matter how much you've read about it) to seeing Maine.

It's what brought Thoreau here. The crack of a dead branch while you walk for the first time along the Allagash River. The crash of a fawn as he jumps right ahead of you.

The exquisite stink of low tide.

All the jazz about a white Christmas is about qualia. David Lodge cites this passage from Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces*: "The winter street is a salt cave. The snow has stopped falling and it's very cold. The cold is spectacular, penetrating. The street has been silenced, a theatre of whiteness, drifts like frozen waves. Crystals glisten under the streetlights."

The locking and unlocking sound of oars as a single shell slips across the mist of Highland Lake.

The cry of a loon.

Not that Maine is the exclusive domain of qualia. Charmingly, Virgil tries to describe a pear to Beatrice, who's never tasted one, in Yann Martel's novel *Beatrice and Virgil*. And who doesn't love Gary Snyder's "Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout"?

*Down valley a smoke haze
Three days heat, after five days rain
Pitch glows on the fir-cones
Across rocks and meadows
Swarms of new flies.*

*I cannot remember things I once read
A few friends, but they are in cities.
Drinking cold snow-water from a tin cup
Looking down for miles
Through high still air.*

Send us your poor, your tired, your hungry. Send us your qualia: staff@portland-monthly.com. ■

▶ To read an excerpt of Yann Martel's *Virgil* describing a pear to Beatrice, who's never tasted one, visit nytimes.com/2010/04/13/books/excerpt-beatrice-and-virgil.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.



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