If you find yourself in Copley Square, or want to take a quick trip down the MBTA’s Green Line, it’s worth stopping by the bronze animals that sit adjacent to the square’s fountain. Only about three feet tall, the sculptures reference the Aesop fable and represent the variety of runners that participate in the Boston Marathon.

Nancy Schon [shoon], the creator, is a local sculptor who grew up in Newton, Massachusetts and is maybe best known for her work on the Make Way for Ducklings monument in Boston’s Public Garden. But it is her connection and thoughtfulness channelled to this work that caught my attention. As a child, she would sit atop “Heartbreak Hill” on Commonwealth Avenue to watch the race with family and friends. She charmingly remarks that she would prepare orange slices and water cups for the runners every year.

Nancy noted that it was after watching the 1991 marathon in which she desired to commemorate the many different persons that participated. People question the choice of the tortoise and the hare, but Nancy felt, and I quote, “it would be impossible to portray all the people from all over the world who run”. By showing animals instead of people, especially animals with a well-known story attached to them, she called it a “perfect metaphor”. Because her childhood and adolescence was marked by the event, she was determined to make something that was kid-friendly. The cuteness and comic size of the tortoise and the hare are a beacon to an energetic child that wants to touch just about anything and everything. Nancy wrote that “I hope that children will cherish these animals - pat them, hug them, and learn the important lesson that the fable teaches. After all, children are our future and they are the runners and citizens of tomorrow.”

The Boston Marathon is the oldest foot race in the United States of America and for many it is an honor to be involved with something so important. Many runners run just to finish, not for the expectation of winning, but for the challenge and sense of accomplishment. In the scene that Nancy depicted, the hare had awoken from his nap that he obnoxiously took to establish his superiority over the tortoise. He was scratching his ear and looked up only to find the tortoise who had challenged him to silence the hare’s arrogant boasting was just a step away from the finish line. It was at this moment that the tortoise won and said, “slow and steady wins the race”. Both the story and the sculpture remind us that persistence and perseverance pays off.

Schon partnered with Friends of Copley Square to install the sculpture in May of 1995 since the 100th anniversary of the Boston Marathon took place in 1996. This year’s 2021 race will take place in October rather than April due to the Coronavirus pandemic. It will be the 125th anniversary, making Nancy’s sculpture twenty-five years old this year.

Her work is critically important to the recent controversial discussion of the purpose of monuments and memorials. Nancy is the epitome of someone that we can appreciate for both
their art and place in the world, unlike a figure such as John James Audubon. These statues bring nothing but joy to the surrounding area and increase the sense of community in the Copley district. When I first went to get footage for this essay, the Copley Farmers Market was taking place. Although it appears as if the animals were ignored and forgotten, without their presence who knows if the area would be as welcoming as it is today. Their role was to connect not just people of Boston, but people across the country and the rest of the world. Through the frequent market in the square, I would say that they have accomplished that.

Why Copley? Well, down the road from the sculptures lies the Boston Marathon finish line that is brightly colored year-round. Today, the sculpture may have developed a new meaning after the bombings that took place in April of 2013. Next to the finish line is the Boston Marathon Attack Memorial, a much harsher monument compared to the bronze animals. A tragic event, the memorial is engraved with the names of those who died that day and it serves as a striking reminder of the violence that plagues the world.

When contrasted to Nancy’s monument, her work could be seen as naive or tone deaf to one who does not know the origin and background of the statues. I don’t believe that they should be removed because of the air of wonder and innocence that it expresses. The two statues implicitly work together in a way then, as a movement from childhood to adulthood, dreamy illusion to harsh reality.