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Outer Shores

William Bless

CRAVING EXPANSIVE AZURE SKY, COLD blue ocean, wind-sculpted dunes undulating with beach grass, dusty miller, northern bayberry, blood-orange rose hips, and heather—I recently found solitude on the outer beaches of Cape Cod National Seashore. The lower Cape's many ocean beaches, stretching from Wellfleet to Provincetown, have names that invoke a long maritime history: Newcomb Hollow, Ballston, Longnook, Coast Guard, Head of the Meadow, High Head, Race Point, Herring Cove. Geologically, the Cape is still moving, still being shaped by the primal forces of wind and wave. Through a process known as longshore drift, the eroded sands and sediments of the mid-Cape continue to wash north, adding marine deposits to the tip of the cape. Winter surges erode and scour the bluffs at a rate of two feet plus a year. The Laurentide ice sheet, in its retreat 18,000 years ago, left an outwash plain of sand, gravel, and rock, molding the Cape into its recognizable shape of an elbow, attenuated arm, or "Sandy fist" as Thoreau described it.

The Cape's natural history is in many respects inseparable from its human history. The earliest people to inhabit the peninsula were eastern Algonquians—the Nauset and Wampanoag—who fished and hunted its waters and woods. Later, it was colonized by English settlers and then by hardy, sea-faring Portuguese from the Azores and Cape

Verde Islands who came to fish the waters for whale, and later for cod, mackerel, and whiting.

A new ingredient was stirred into this working class bouillabaisse when artists and writers began coming to Provincetown in the early twentieth century, drawn to the seaside bohemia where one could experiment with one's writing, find solitude, and live cheaply. In the midst of World War I, Eugene O'Neill wrote many of his apprentice plays in P-Town, sea-themed dramas enlivened with a raw, sinewy, realistic language. He eventually moved into a decommissioned lifesaving station at Peaked Hill Bars, writing to the rhythms of the primordial surf and the ghostly howls of lost mariners. That the waters off Cape Cod were dubbed an ocean graveyard suited O'Neill's saturnine personality and the timbre of his plays. He received the news that he'd won the 1920 Pulitzer Prize for drama at the isolated station. O'Neill, along with writer and producer George 'Jig' Cram Cook, writer Susan Glaspell (and Cook's wife), and socialist Jack Reed, founded an experimental theater group they called the [Provincetown Players](#), whose nascent plays were staged in a fish shed at the end of Lewis Wharf on Provincetown's East End.

Other writers would make either a temporary or semi-permanent sojourn, lured by the literary and creative milieu and the great luminous beauty of the peninsula's



tip. This included literary critic Edmund Wilson, Mary Heaton Vorse, Tennessee Williams, John Dos Passos, E. E. Cummings, Jack Kerouac, and Hazel Hawthorne. In the summer of 1920, the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay and her two sisters and mother rented a small house in Truro from Glaspell and Cook. Both Edna and her younger sister, Norma, frequently acted in O'Neill's plays at the Provincetown Playhouse in Greenwich Village, Macdougall Street. Edna—whom close friends and family called Vincent—no doubt came to the Cape to escape the city heat and a number of cloying love affairs. In a missive to a friend, Millay described the rural, isolated features of Truro:

It is a mile and a half only to the outside surfy sea, a lonesome beach where you never see anybody but sandpipers. There are whip-poor-wills which not infrequently keep one awake all night, but nobody cares much, it's such a sweet sound, and there are millions of mosquitoes sometimes... [T]he wind blows a gale about this cottage all the time... and the hills all around are nothing but over-grown sand-dunes.

A few years later Millay distilled her impressions into her poem “Memory of Cape Cod.”

Sixty-five years earlier, Henry David Thoreau had hiked the outer beaches from Eastham to Provincetown, making three trips: in 1849, 1850, and 1855. His prose, in the posthumously published account of his journey, “Cape Cod,” is a mixture of awe and pragmatic observation, filled with contrasting images of nature’s regenerative

and decidedly non-anthropocentric sides. From the steamer Naushon, he describes the Cape as a “filmy sliver of land lying flat on the ocean, and later still a mere reflection of a sand-bar on the haze above” but also as “a wild, rank place [with] no flattery in it. Strewn with crabs, horse-shoes, and razor clams, and whatever the sea casts up—a vast morgue.” The Cape has, as Thoreau conceded, many moods: calm and resplendent one day, freezing and tumultuous the next. And its living ecology continuously reminds the visitor that beneath its inviting exterior is a complex universe of predator and prey, consumption and subsumption.

MANY MONTHS INTO THE PANDEMIC, however, it is a relief simply to be here, momentarily casting aside the masks that we all must don these days, not having to social distance from the earth, sand, and beach plum. I walk on, grateful for the illimitable blue spaces and the bracing salt air, passing the steep prehistoric bluffs tenuously rooted with coastal grasses. Bank swallows cavort and careen along the alluvial slopes, snatching up midges. Herring and laughing gulls congregate on sand-ribs, while legions of least terns dart over the water, diving and reemerging with sand lance, silver eel-like fish, glistening in their clamped beaks. The languid or heavy surf—depending on tide—booms in rank spumes of shellfish, pebble, and sea lettuce, the wrack containing multitudinous New England shells: periwinkle, moon snail, whelk, surf clam, jackknife, quahog. Great white sharks, probably a rarity in the early twentieth century and uncommon in the mid-1990s when I first started visiting, are now profuse, ambushing gray seals in cuts and drop-offs

just beyond the breakers, reminding you that the Cape—commercialism and tourism notwithstanding—is still in essence a marine wilderness.

The past—literary and natural—coalesce and become boundary-less, of course, in the circular plentitude of the present. I like to think of the writers who were drawn here and arrived by Old Colony train or steamer for a few weeks, months, or years, like migratory shorebirds on a sandspit. When Edna St. Vincent Millay visited it was only one year plus eight months following the signing of the Armistice at Le Francport, ending World War I—four years of unprecedented

think of how Edna Millay found solace and solitude in Truro, collecting shells and sea-polished stones, wildflowers, listening to the unintelligible mewling of shorebirds, the wind and heaving breakers, and at night, stargazing at the incandescent clouds of Scorpius and Sagittarius, the vast milky way, Polaris in Ursa Minor—the steady pearl—the briny air thick with the mingled fragrances of bayberry, pitch pine, and mollusk.

Despite twenty-first-century sprawl, dense summer population, politics, and commerce, the Cape endures, symbolic, at least in my imagination, of a natural interrelationship and harmony of human

Now, in our own global pandemic, I consider how easily our familiar institutions can be disrupted and our sense of continuity shaken to the core. Yet everything on the Outer Cape is in a state of perpetual and reassuring impermanence; nothing ever stays quite the same. All you can do is be vividly awake to the living continuum.

carnage—and only one year following the end of the Spanish influenza, which killed approximately fifty million globally. Millay, like other writers and poets of her generation, wrote in the modern industrial age, leaving the minded lexical and acoustic imprints of her being in the world.

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beings and coastal nature. This was John F. Kennedy's express purpose when he created the National Seashore in 1961. I like to think of the Cape as immutable, invulnerable to cultural change, although I know this isn't completely true. The relative constants seem to be its great protected beaches, parabolic dunes, vast tracts of Atlantic coastal pitch pine barrens, bear oak, and wild cranberry bogs. A walk out to the location of Eugene O'Neill's lifesaving station, which collapsed into the ocean in 1931, is impressively otherworldly, the flowing dunes reminiscent of the Namib Desert.

If you were to walk the beaches where



image info

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Thoreau, O'Neill, and Millay traipsed, you would be submerged in the Atlantic a few hundred yards from where the shore now exists, although it won't be there for long either. For those attuned to the Cape, it is a primal, eternal place, and as I walk northward, not a soul in sight, I remember what Henry Beston wrote about in his 1927 chronicle, *The Outermost House*: the one thing we continuously hunger for in the modern age is an experience of the elemental. For me it is this: long empty beaches, a minke whale's flukes appearing a few hundred yards offshore, a driftwood fire of my own making, the startling and sudden roil of feeding bluefish, a well-camouflaged spadefoot toad in the dunes, the gritty seethe of a breaker immersing my bare feet with icy ocean foam and quartz. ❖