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Dune Journal

By CYNTHIA HUNTINGTON

“And yet the absence of the imagination had itself to be imagined ...”

—Wallace Stevens, “The Plain Sense of Things”

“... not only is Lake Wobegon made up, but Minnesota is made up too. I invented it; a lot of people invented it. There is no such state ...”

—Garrison Keillor, “A Prairie Home Companion”

I. Place

THERE IS AN idea of place, the dream we make waking when we begin to name the plants and the animals, and to live with, not in or on, a certain landscape. This idea of place requires our presence or it does not exist. It is created in experience, over time, out of the long conversation between world and mind.

I have loved the Outer Cape, especially Provincetown and the dunes and beaches surrounding the town, for twenty-four years. Once I did not know it; it did not exist for me. In these twenty-four years my life, imagination, memories have all become entwined in the idea of what Provincetown means to me. It has become a place of story, where I worked and walked, married my husband, cooked endless dinners, stood in line at the Post Office, felt myself growing older. It is the harbor in September, rich odor of salt filling the small streets, and the woods at the edge of the highway where I gathered boletas and once saw a doe and her fawn, standing quietly. The going away and the hungry returns, each time reclaiming a place in this place, renewing my connection. Familiarity, which resides in memory, offers comfort. The turn of certain streets is felt in the body as much as the brain, like the touch of salt air on my arms. And surprise, which resides in the challenge to memory, jars me out of comfort to notice changes, a house made over, a beach cut away in a winter storm, the absence of old friends. These two, familiarity and surprise, are mutually dependent, surprise requiring a pattern against which change can be seen, old comforts best defined against the space outside them.

The idea of “place” is not intrinsic. It does not cohere as a concept until it is peopled, storied, given meaning in our minds. Until there is intention, speech, or direction, the earth is without form and void. The idea of place is relative then, reliant on context, and in each person’s mind it is something different.

We locate place in relation to other places. Directions are given in miles between chosen landmarks. You go past the store and turn at the broken tree; it's three miles then to the white farmhouse. Where is the town where you were born? Well, it's near that other town. It's beside that ocean we named some centuries ago, or under a mountain whose name is almost forgotten, now covered with condominiums looking from a distance like a New Mexican Pueblo cluster, as if the white boxes were built into the hills rather than installed in slabs off-loaded from a truck.

"New England" is a place peopled and storied for centuries, and it carries its stories in our imaginations. It consists of six states: Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont. Each of these names had to be imagined, their boundaries arranged in the mind. They form an arbitrary grouping, with a weak geographic link, some historical resonance, and a huge grasp on our imaginations, which have learned to think of "New England" as something, as someplace, and to expect certain things thereby. New England is ocean and scrub brush, sandy beaches. Unless, of course, it is stony beaches. Unless it is mountains and little streams. Or maybe farmland, no, lumbering, fishing, paper mills. No, it's high-priced colleges and foliage tours in October. The more you think of it the more it disappears as an idea, as anything whole. I stop thinking and look at where I am, in a place without a name, original, outside time. Rain spotting a window, a view of dunes and beach roses, the sound of an engine gripping down in sand, somewhere in the distance.

So, New England does not exist, but I'm in it. Much of the year, for many years, I've been in New Hampshire, in the Upper Valley of the Connecticut River, looking across to Vermont. But in my mind, in my imagination of New England, I'm more often in Provincetown, or the dunes outside Provincetown, here on the outermost tip of Cape Cod where I lived for seven years and still return each summer, and where most of my writing is born. Like New England, Provincetown is both a real and an imagined place in my mind. And what's "real" about it had, somehow, to be imagined as well. Somebody had to invent "Atlantic" for that expanse of salt water surrounding us here. Had to say: "We're facing east," or make up the word "Braintree" in order to give directions from Logan Airport to here.

I am here. "Here" is a place that is absolute in its appearance, but constantly changing. I mean to say, there is only one "here" at any time, but it does not hold. Moving away from any place, we take "here" with us and see it change form. We say "here and now" but here is now, and "now" is always a physical place.

II. Here

I'M WRITING TODAY in a dune shack at the edge of the Atlantic. The shack sits within the Cape Cod National Seashore, and is a relic from an earlier time, when these dunes were wild, the province of anyone who might claim them. Now the dunes are owned by the National Park Service, subject to federal

regulation, protected and managed, overseen by policy. If this were not the case, they would be covered with motels and condominiums.

It has been raining since early morning, stopping and starting. It feels especially private out here when it's raining and I know nobody will come. Not that anyone comes anyway. The wind is cool, so the door is closed and the windows shut; nothing is going on outside to speak of. The rain has sent everything into hiding, except the wind. "Private" is a good mood for writing. It takes quite a while for "private" to change into "lonely," and that time in between is rich and wide. It will stop raining long before it comes to that. I've been writing in dune shacks off and on for more than twenty years. They are a unique phenomenon here, I think, these rough, elegantly simple hideaways, with their views of ocean or dunes. Most are single rooms, walls framing windows. The shacks have their own histories, both local and literary. They were built in the days of the Coast Guard, in the twenties and thirties, passed on, purchased or claimed by bohemians or artists, for whom it really was an adventure to quit your job and sleep with a lot of different people and live away from the town in improvised, often very well-appointed quarters. We forget how strong the world's hold on morals and imagination could be back then, how free they must have felt a few miles away, with an ocean view. They have died and left their stories, and their shacks. I keep coming back to these rooms, these shacks the dead left. They moved through these rooms, stacked dishes after dinner, swept the floor. At dusk they lighted lamps and settled into the dark, in a single room above the sea, huddled close to the sand.

The shack I'm staying in this week is very well appointed. It's not the same shack where I spent summers with my husband when we were first married; that one was like a boat, with its slanting roof aimed at the sea, and its endless nooks and cupboards for storage, everything miniature and compact, shipshape. It's not the one that was painted all white inside, every square foot that wasn't window washed with white, so that it reminded me of a New York studio. I spent the first few days feeling on display in that bright box filled with light, even though there was no one to see. I've stayed in as many shacks as I could get invited to, and I'm in this one for the third time. It faces the dunes rather than the ocean, which at first I thought rather a serious flaw, but I've gotten quite fond of the view; it's peaceful and at the same time more varied than the ocean is from a distance, and anyway I only have to walk fifty paces up the dune and turn around to see the ocean. This shack is sunk into the side of the dune among bayberry and beach roses and is very sheltered. I write some of the time at the little table under the window which looks out into the dunes, and a great deal of the time in the big high bed, propped up with a dozen pillows, under the high window looking west across sky and sea meadow.

Why do I always feel I will write well here? I do come here to write. Does it matter that I write here? I tell myself: the air, the ocean, the high sky and sheltering dunes, these quicken a response in me, and they do, but does it have to do with writing, with making meaning, or imagining? Maybe I'm just

in the grip of an old myth, calling on outworn, discredited ideas of “inspiration” the landscape speaking wisdom, God’s voice in the flower ... Do I imagine I see deeper into the heart of the world when I am here? Maybe it’s just the isolation from family life, town, and telephone, that makes the writing good here. Maybe all that other stuff about landscape and inspiration, nature and memory, is bunk. If that is true I might do as well in a rented motel room with the phone unplugged, or a highway rest stop at a picnic table sufficiently far from the trucks pulling in. Sure. You first.

The place matters, but I want to know why it matters. I don’t really believe, anymore, the stories I used to hear, and still make up myself, about a place having a particular quality of its own, a power or aura you might inhale like another component of oxygen. I don’t believe it exactly the way I heard it anyway. Yes, every place has its own qualities: there’s climate, food sources, flat or bumpy land, presence or not of water, salt or fresh, in lakes or rivers or oceans or bogs. But what I always liked to think of as the “spirit” of a place is something constructed from experience and imagination.

Maybe I’m just Pavlovian and I write here because I have written here before. Sometimes I write about being here, the weather, the birds, what I see, but most of the time I write about things that aren’t here. Stories, words released in me from other times, so it is a mystery why it matters that I am here. I think it only has to do with love, and for that there is no explanation, only description.

III. The Elders

THOREAU HATED CAPE COD, someone told me the other day. I have already forgotten the occasion for the remark, but the speaker sounded very certain. Thoreau, our New England muse and celebrant: his book *Cape Cod* is still sold in every bookstore here and is considered required reading for the newcomer. I don’t know if this claim about Thoreau’s state of mind is true, but I can see how it might be. He walked forty miles of this shoreline and found desolation. Found shipwrecks and drowned bodies laid out like cordwood, found huts of refuge that offered no warmth or succor, found old men spitting tobacco, and hard faces lined with poverty and ignorance. There was more to it, but these things in particular might have stayed with him. It must have been like everywhere else, only more gray, and more raw, and besides it rained a good deal of the time when he was walking the beach, and he must have been miserable with the cold wind blowing through his wet clothes as he fought his way down the beach against it.

Still, he wrote the book. Maybe he didn’t want to waste the effort, or the misery for that matter. We don’t always write what we love, though this is often recommended to us. We also write what frightens or appalls us, going again and again to the wound to probe with our fingers: is it still there? We write what we have barely survived, going back over how close we came. We write what we love, or what troubles us, questions we can’t answer. We write the things we cannot be done with.

When Thoreau called the Cape “a wild, rank place,” I think he meant the phrase in all its sour strength. Yes, you can put all America behind you here, but what do you see ahead? Grey water churning up the dead, icy winds, all the cold in the sky coming at you, and no refuge. He was on the back shore in bad weather, with no shelter, out on the edge of the world. There was death in his mind already, so he saw it here too. It was here; he didn’t make it up, but he fixed on certain elements of what he saw. Part of me wants to stand there with him, to look off the edge and not fall over. Part of me wants to walk for miles with the sand peppering my face, and the roar of breakers thrashing in my brain, to test myself against what is blowing me off the face of the earth.

Part of me wants a warm bed and a hot meal, and inevitably, no matter how long I stand there, this part prevails, or I would not be writing this today.

We write, many times, too much from the comforts of home, with its little dissatisfactions and overabundance of thought, and too little from the wild, rank places in us where thought is disordered, and we are small, weak and unappealing creatures. I think of Thoreau at Walden, tucked up neat before a fire, with his pen and his journal writing his accounts in comfort, but it was never like that, probably; I don’t know how fond of comfort he was. He would not write in the high bed under the windows, where the breeze plays across from both south and west when the weather is fine and the windows are open wide. I’m sure he would choose the desk over the bed, at least. He is only so much use to me, though. His Cape Cod is a harsher place than mine, a place of the mind’s stern witness, which I believe and value, but do not inhabit.

IV. Town and Surround

IT’S LATE AUGUST, already hurricane season. You never know when the wind kicks up if something immense is coming, or just another big storm. We were waiting for Floyd a few seasons ago (he didn’t do much here, though he flooded the Carolinas for weeks) and I was on Commercial Street, along with half the town, stocking up on batteries and candles, while we all traded rumors. It’s interesting how people treat hurricane warnings here, as if their own, personal reactions made any difference at all. Everyone has an opinion, from those who “don’t believe it”—because they distrust the national weather service, or were fooled once before, or have personal knowledge they aren’t prepared to share with the general populace, to those who always expect the worst and predict doom. In the complex where I live, a printed notice was posted in the laundry room and on the office door. “Hurricane?” it said, sounding just ironic enough to declare itself exempt from the general hysteria, before going on to recommend the usual precautions: closing storm windows, bringing loose objects inside, having flashlights ready.

The woman at the newsstand had the weather station on. She sat behind the counter, doing accounts on her laptop, getting angry. The rain started and she went out to bring in the newspapers. “I don’t mind a nor’easter,” I heard her tell her neighbor, the woman from the stamp shop, “but I can’t put up with this hurricane business.” I remember feeling stunned by how personally she took it.

There was a spice in the air, urgency of wind and expectation. On Pearl Street a heavy couple in their sixties were wrestling a Harley Davidson up a ramp into their cottage. Many “hurricane” deaths are actually heart attacks. Still, it was exciting, the buzz on the street, the possibility of something big coming through. Kaiser, the African Grey Parrot who spends his afternoons in a cage in front of Shop Therapy, was hanging upside down, whistling “La Cucharacha.” The one-armed man who runs the parking lot beside Land’s End Marine was closing up his kiosk. Then a barechested man in a miniskirt whizzed down the middle of the street on roller skates. How do you imagine such a place? What do you call it? Are we at the end of the world? The outermost place, the lip of the continent?

Henry Beston’s Outermost House was carried off in the hurricane of 1978, on my birthday as it happens, and just shortly before I moved to town. The house had been maintained for years by the Massachusetts Audubon Society, and birders would go out there to stay. One of the birders, a woman, who stayed in the house spent several days measuring and weighing, and came up with a set of building plans—which you can buy, or you once could—which would allow you to replicate the house anywhere you chose.

A year later I was living in the dunes, and writing about it. All that summer I read the books of the place: Thoreau and Beston, John Hay and Mary Heaton Vorse, everything I could get my hands on. It was as if I could not confront this landscape plain and bare, must also know and understand the ways in which it had already been imagined by others. There is the naming of plants and animals, the histories, the felt presence of others who came before, and there is the shape of each writer’s mind forming an idea of the place, its wholeness, its meaning. Those early renderings became part of what I saw and felt as I walked the beaches and dunes; they were folded, sometimes invisibly, into what I wrote at the little table under the window in the evenings, adding my own framework and mind’s imprint. I believe that these efforts, the books written in this place, change the place itself, as surely as a place can change you. Thoreau’s bleak shoreline, Beston’s high summer paradise, Hay’s birds of light, and Vorse’s dry, city-bred love for landscape and town knit together—these create a texture to our imagination of the place, which is really all we have of it.

If you live in the Outermost House, the original house or one rebuilt to spec, will you then write *The Outermost House*? If only it were that easy. How many young people have moved to Paris, expecting to be anointed with the inspiration and angst of their forebears, and thereby acquire genius? It is the writer who inspires the place, not vice versa. The examples are clear. James Joyce’s Dublin can only be found because he created it, out of memory and desire, in *Ulysses*. If you go there, you may find traces of it, but you will have to invent your own Dublin if you hope to go any further. Where you are matters, if you let it matter to you, but it guarantees nothing. For every Henry Beston there is a guy named Louie, who lived in a dune shack filled with discarded tin cans and paperback detective novels and sat with his back to the

door and the ocean, tuning into short wave radio every night, for years. I never met him, but my husband was taken once to visit him by our friend Peter Adams who was delivering propane for his stove. My husband reported on the state of the shack, the lassitude of the owner (who probably had been sleeping before they arrived), and the fact that all the windows facing the beach were nearly opaque. Scratched and scoured by infinite tiny wind-blown crystals, the glass still let in a dull light, but there was no view to be had. Before his doorstep, perched on a high dune, spread the whole Atlantic. A little strip of white beach and then ocean ocean ocean. People would pay a million dollars for a view like that, but there he sat with his back to the sea, his windows glazed over.

Still, I came here with expectations. The artistic bloodline of Provincetown, its favored place in the legend of American art, the romance of the sea, and of the shuttered, quiet town in winter, in these I placed a certain hope. I would write here, write grandly and fiercely, and join my efforts and my breath to the lost breaths of all those others before. I came to the dunes with Promethean expectations—I expected to be transported and enlightened, to spew wisdom and serenity distilled from the mere elixir of sky and ocean. I just had to take it in, and let the landscape do the rest.

I had to learn the town before I could love it, had to live here and have things happen to me and around me, to have things to remember and start mixing my own memories and expectations with the stories that had come down until they all seemed to belong to me equally. I needed to learn the names of the streets, the way certain houses were always spoken of by names of former owners long deceased, find the fish store and the thrift shop, develop opinions about zoning, and recognize the faces in the window of the Old Colony Tap at ten in the morning.

Learning the dunes, too, was more than just studying the names of plants and animals, the shape of waves. I was good at that, gathering information. But the nature of the place posed a bigger question than flora and fauna, or geology or history of town records and anecdote. Those all helped, but I did not know the place until it became personal to me, until I had saturated it with memory and started to create a story of my own.

The story I heard is that Henry Beston was packed off to Nauset Beach to write his book by his fiancée, the poet Elizabeth Coatesworth. She told him: “No book, no marriage.” Now, where did I hear, or read, that? He was a magazine editor, and penned the occasional short piece, many pieces in fact, but she said: “book” and so he went. Maybe she knew he really did want to write the book, and so she urged him on with the best reward she could come up with. Or, she didn’t want to marry a frustrated writer, wanted it out of his system, or perhaps she was proud and needed him to distinguish himself for her. Anyway, there is that unspoken impetus behind the voice and material in Beston’s book, behind his lyrical moments and thoughtful musings, expressing itself in description which only seems to be about Nauset Beach, the Coast Guard, and the change of seasons.

It's certain he did not live out the year there, as the book claims, but came and went, staying in the village of Eastham, sometimes taking the train to New York. It was a week here and a week there. He couldn't stand the mosquitoes in summer; winter found him shut up inside when the wind was high, which was most of the time. But Beston wrote the book; Thoreau wrote the book. These are New England writers for whom place is primary. We study them in school, and we say they teach us about New England. But they have little to say about New England really—no generalities or pithy insights or over-arching theories. Nothing like that. Beston talks about the walk from his house to the Coast Guard Station, and Thoreau reports on an old man mending traps, a twisted tree, an empty hut on the beach.

V. The Old Ones

THE RAIN HAS STOPPED for some time now and the air feels lighter. The sky is mottled grey and white, not opaque as it was; there's even a faint streak of blue off to the west. The storm may have passed. I compromise, setting out for a walk, but leaving the shutters up, just in case.

The remains of the old Coast Guard Station stand crumbling in the dunes, in a sheltered spot behind the beach. I am haunted by this place, returning here over and over, though I'm never comfortable. I know I don't belong. There's a prickling in my spine, a feeling of being watched, eyes not unfriendly, but holding a certain reserve. I'm not known here; there's no reason these ghosts should speak to me.

What remains here is the outline of a building, or part of a building, thick concrete walls crumbling, outlining a big room and a smaller one. There may have been more to it once, but this is what's left. Poison ivy grows up the walls and birds fly in and out, and there are puddles where toads lay eggs in spring, and the whole thing sits open to the sky. To stand inside this space, for me, is almost impossible. I feel a charge, an invisible presence that doesn't include me. Though I peek in the "doorway"—a gravitational force keeps me back.

The ruins used to include the old boathouse. Open at one end, it spent years declining into the ground, closing up on itself. Before my time, when it was sturdier, town kids had parties there. The sand in front of the boathouse was speckled with chips of broken glass, clear and brown and green, from broken beer bottles. The Park Service burned it down three summers ago. It was a hazard. I walk among the burned timbers, where goldenrod is springing up, pull a well-rusted nail from a burned beam, slip it in my pocket. This place is allowed to me. I'm drawn here as to a fire or a ceremony. Sixty-plus years abandoned, the boathouse leaves a scar on the earth, char and rusted wire. The concrete ruins of walls stand up uselessly against the sky.

The history of a place stands beside, or within, the everyday. This abandoned ground offers another sort of text. I can't bring much to bear on it, as I do to landscape; the ruin, with its story of heroism and loss, refuses addition. I am drawn here to witness, only.

I say the world gives us nothing but itself, and we love the world and give it names and meaning. It gives us freedom, and we give it form.

Once there was no “New England” and one day there will be no more. (There’s little enough “England” left in it anyway, by now.) There will just be world here again, and a chance for a new imagining. My love for this place is in how I imagine it, eros offering energy to idea, making the mind fly toward the real, imagined, beloved place.

The imagination invests itself in the real world of landscape, memory, experience, community. The place then becomes real, becomes a specific place you can go to or remember. The place becomes “Provincetown” or “Atlantic” in the intimacy of relationship.

I write what I can’t be done with, this work of making a place in my mind, out of the place in the world. When I speak to the world and something speaks back—it is never ending. I am learning to listen to what speaks back, speaking with my own echoes and so many others.

The world is not bare or passive—it is chock-full of information, which we frame, which our attention reflects, and we choose some information above others, and make an idea of a place. We have created “New England”, created “Provincetown,” and the “Atlantic.” We create them again and again until they are real. This doesn’t mean nothing was there to begin with, but that before us and without us, it lacked a human meaning. This is the sense in which we may say the world requires us. I write what I can’t be done with, which is eros, the creation of a world over and over. I don’t write in the dunes just to record the weather, or the passage of birds, or the voice of the wind in the pitch pines, though these are all essential. I can arrange them and invest them all I like, but still they are more than my understanding can hold. They lie somewhere outside meaning, only provisionally to be “understood.” The world, under our gaze, emerges into clarity but keeps its wild essence; still not human, not part of language, and so never finished, whatever we may choose to call it. New England. Cape Cod. Provincetown. Peg’s shack.