

MICHAEL THURSTON

On *Cape Cod*

IT SHOULD BEGIN WITH A SHIPWRECK.

On October 9, 1849, Henry David Thoreau and William Ellery Channing traveled together to Cape Cod. Having planned to take the steamer from Boston to Provincetown but learning upon arrival in Boston that the boat had been delayed by a storm and that, in the same storm, the *St. John* had run aground just off Cohasset (“Death!” read the handbill they noticed in the streets: “one hundred and forty five lives lost at Cohasset”), they changed course. Thoreau and Channing opted instead for the overland route to the Cape and, not coincidentally (“we decided to go by way of Cohasset”), a chance to see the wreckage of the ship. The first chapter of Thoreau’s *Cape Cod* is devoted to the shipwreck and Thoreau’s reaction to it—both immediate and metaphorically considered. This makes the book, as Robert Richardson has it in his biography, “Thoreau’s exploration of salvation,” but, as Richardson also writes, an exploration whose terminus is the realization that “there is no salvation, there is only salvage.”

On October 10, 2009, I drove to the Cape not by way of Cohasset, but via the Bourne Bridge. My traveling companion was Abby, my sixteen-year-old daughter, whose original holiday weekend plans had fallen through. We were accompanied by Thoreau, too, in the form of an old paperback copy of *Cape Cod*. (This is a lighter load of books than Thoreau himself carried; in *Cape Cod* he refers to the *Gazetteer* and the eighth volume of the Massachusetts Historical Society’s Collections that he brought along, and Paul Theroux writes that “from internal evidence it seems he had a Bible too,” and, possibly, editions of the *Iliad* and of Virgil’s *Eclogues*.) We went to the Cape, Abby and I, to walk deliberately, to follow, as one guidebook has it, the footsteps of Thoreau (or some of them), and to see, if we could, some of what he had so clearly seen but also (and this turned out to be easier) how things had changed in the intervening hundred and sixty years. These, at any rate, were my reasons. Or the ones I most readily claimed.



John Lowney writes of Thoreau’s “continual questioning of narrative centers and intentions—including his own,” and argues that Thoreau “enacts this interrogative mode through the juxtaposition of diverse modes of discourse and through semantic and syntactic wordplay.” Making a similar point,

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Robert Pinsky describes Thoreau's M.O. as the rapid shift "among whims, natural history, polemic, diary, research paper, parody, sermon, history, and wisecrack."



On the east or outside—
always the majority
conveying it beyond reach—
the lifeboat awaits another.
Yet

from the swamps
tossed up from time:
storms, shipwrecks, this very night.
Waves are fast.
No ice is ever found

which the waves had
noticed otherwise. And no
next June
considered worth writing.
In the meanwhile,
the keeper said.



It should begin with a shipwreck.

Cape Cod begins with a shipwreck. With, more than that, a meditation occasioned by the wreck (or, really, by the wreckage), on the relation between the real, the authentic, the important part of ourselves and what remains: the "marbled feet and matted heads," the bodies "to which some rags still adhered." Typically, Thoreau casts a climactic moment in a metaphor salvaged from metonymy; one body washed up on the beach is figured as "the coiled up *wreck* of a human *hulk*, gashed by the rocks or fishes, so that the bone and muscle were exposed, but quite bloodless, —merely red and white, with wide open and staring eyes, yet lusterless, *dead-lights*; or like the *cabin windows of a stranded vessel*, filled with sand" (my italics).

No brigs were run aground by gales during Columbus Day weekend 2009. If it's going to begin with a shipwreck, it will have to be a figurative one. No problem. Thoreau himself quickly and insistently *figures* the literal shipwreck, the littoral wreckage, the wreckers seeking salvage from the "savage ocean." So, to begin with a shipwreck: Emily and I had split (a

relationship wreck), our craft run aground on the Grampus rocks of resentment and failed communication, faith broken, leaving not bodies and broken spars upon the beach but its own litter of clothes—on the staircase, in and around the suitcase—and curses. And it was, in part, out of a wish to get a better view than I had yet had of *this* wreck, to see what might somehow be saved, that I set out to walk from Eastham toward Provincetown.



Lowney: “Thoreau’s characterization of the wrecker as an emblematic figure for the ‘common modes of getting a living’ epitomizes his ambivalent stance toward his own profession . . . —travel writing.” But isn’t all writing a matter of salvage? And, for that matter, savagery? But better still is his description of what he calls Thoreau’s “art of the wrecker”: “the found object aesthetic which confronts and makes the most of whatever the ocean ‘vomits up.’”



It should open with an etymology.

I say *Cape Cod* begins with a shipwreck, but, except for its appearance as the title of the first chapter, no shipwreck appears for the first three pages. It takes Thoreau only a paragraph, though, to etymologize (“I suppose that the word Cape is from the French *cap*; which is from the Latin *caput*, a head; which is, perhaps, from the verb *capere*, to take; —that being the part by which we take hold of a thing”) and figure (“the bared and bended arm,” like that of a boxer, with which Massachusetts defends herself from “her Atlantic adversary”) Cape Cod itself. I find myself similarly inclined, for both of Richardson’s key terms for the book—salvation and salvage—derive from the Latin *salve*, which means, of course, to save, whether the soul from the fallen world and the torments of Hell or the bits and pieces for their remaining usefulness, these being the ways in which, after disaster or injury (“salve,” as in a soothing balm), we try to feel better. And saving is our way of preparing, too, for the unpredictable future; we set some portion aside so that it might accrue interest and compound itself into the means of sustenance.



Thoreau stands back, after surveying (this, more than travel writing, was his real trade, his livelihood) the scene of the shipwreck, and asks, “Why care for these dead bodies?” They are now “empty hulks,” the real selves they once clothed *saved*, “cast upon some shore yet further west.” Shattered by the breakup. Broken not only in heart but also just broken. An old hulk. Thoreau writes that the shore’s beauty was wrecked for many by the bodies and detritus, until those observers might, through an act of keener perception,

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come to see “how its beauty was enhanced by wrecks like this.” A self, a relationship, is not something to be saved from wreckage but is instead something whose beauty, like that of the beach, is enhanced by its brokenness. The way, say, the vale above Emily’s collarbone was made lovelier by the little scar where she had once had a mole removed. We are rendered beautiful by what we have endured; we acquire, by virtue of our wreckage, “a rarer and sublimer beauty still.”



Along the beach
at flood tide,
lost for us to seek:
vessels in sight,
in sand a long time after.

Instead of looking out,
vessels have been forbidden.
There had formerly been
a harbor.
Mention the word

within ten miles,
it will take you half an hour to remember
this country
where music must be rare.
Kill twelve blackbirds, three crows
on the spot.



I tell my daughter none of this as we cross the Bourne Bridge and drive east on Route 6, passing exits for Sandwich. Instead, I repeat Thoreau’s joke about the town being, to his eye, “but half a Sandwich at most, and that must have fallen on the buttered side some time.” It took Thoreau and Channing all day (October 10) to get from Sandwich to Orleans by stagecoach. We take about an hour, and, once we’ve negotiated the Orleans traffic rotary that brings you around the inner elbow of the Cape and onto the forearm, speeding up the now narrower Route 6, are at the National Seashore’s Salt Pond Visitor Center less than half an hour after that.

I am standing in front of a map of the National Seashore and have measured half the distance from Coast Guard Beach to the Truro line when a National Park Service ranger interrupts.

“Planning to hike the shore?”

I tell him we hope to walk a decent stretch today, some more tomorrow.

“Sure,” he says. “You can walk that beach all the way to P-town. That’s what Thoreau did.”

You don’t say.



I never imagined, when I decided to follow Thoreau’s routes up, down, and across the Outer Cape, that I would be the first to do so. Years ago, on my first visit to Walden Pond, I’d found a library not only of Thoreau editions—*Walden*, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, volumes of the journal, *Cape Cod*, of course—but also of commentaries (scholarly and not), biographies (of Thoreau and such famous friends as Emerson and Hawthorne), guidebooks, locally produced pamphlets about Concord history, culture, and cuisine, and coffee-table photo-essays along with the postcards and bookmarks in the gift shop. I’d found not only a well-trodden path around the pond, the way clearly marked to the replica cabin, but also a cairn of stones carried around and left there by generations of Thoreau fans and, a little embarrassingly (for him, too, I hoped, but certainly for me), a re-enactor dressed as “Henry,” who spoke in quotations to a little knot of tourists. The pond, I knew, was in the heart of Thoreau country, right in the backyard of his lifelong home and right at the foundation of his literary canonization; Thoreau’s relationship with the Cape was more fleeting and marginal, a few weeks of walks over several years, a few essays published in *Putnam’s* magazine. The industry wouldn’t have the massive presence here that it had set up just across Route 2 from Walden, but it would have left its footprints on the beach.

Sure enough, in the Salt Pond Visitor Center bookstore Thoreau gets part of a stand-alone case. Some of the same stuff you can find at Walden is here, but there is, of course, more emphasis on Cape Cod. And on *Cape Cod*. One coffee-table edition of the latter juxtaposes photographs of scenic sites with Thoreau’s text to demonstrate, as the flyleaf puts it, that much has not changed since 1849, that one can still see much of what Thoreau saw on his travels here. There is, on a page randomly opened to, an old weathervane, patined by the elements, stark against a lavender sky. There is, on another, a hummock of yellow-green beach grass bowed before an onshore breeze. There is, of course, a prospect of beach and sea, standing on a bluff above Nauset Light Beach, looking north. Pictures one can find on any hike along the National Seashore, to be sure, but ones you’ve got to frame with care to leave out signs prohibiting trespass, signs to keep off the dunes, signs warning of erosion, and signs (wonders, really) that those erosion signs might have been useful some decades ago: chunks of asphalt, creosoted timbers, rebarred

concrete, remnants of roads that ran along the bluff, of houses built for stunning views, before the ground shifted beneath them.

Along with Thoreau's own books, illustrated and not, are the books about Thoreau. Or, to put that more accurately, the books that make some use of Thoreau, that explicate his scripture (a word that got him into trouble with contemporary readers and with his *Putnam's* editors), or that adopt him as a tutelary spirit or inspirational companion. This imagined relationship is implicit in the editions of *Cape Cod* but it is explicit in some of the memoirs and guidebooks. In *Traces of Thoreau*, for example, Stephen Mulloney not only sets out to retrace Thoreau's walk from Eastham to Provincetown and not only titles his chapters with, in some cases ("The Beach" "The Wellfleet Oysterman") direct quotations of, and, in others ("The Cape Again") riffs on Thoreau's chapter titles, but he also imagines Thoreau (not in the textual form of, say, a tattered paperback *Cape Cod*, but as a vocal, ghostly presence) accompanying him. Mulloney even spends a paragraph deciding what to call his companion:

Using just the surname *Thoreau* sounded cold, distant, and academic. On the other hand, calling him Henry, or Henry David, seemed a mite *too* familiar. H.D.T., I'm afraid, sounded too much like a pesticide—but what about H.T.? Yes, I liked that; it was friendly yet not without a gentlemanly ring, somewhat in the style of the South, and God knows we New Englanders could stand some Southern manners. For the rest of the trip, then, H.T. it would be.

I suspect Mulloney thought he was following Thoreau in the style of this digression, naming and characterizing rejected alternatives and laying out the logic behind his final choice, enacting in his own phrases ("mite *too* familiar") the quality that disqualifies a candidate and justifying with a non sequitur his otherwise arbitrary decision, but of course there is nothing really Thoreauvian about either process or passage here. When representing his own companion, Thoreau doesn't dither over whether "Ellery" or "Channing" is more proper or whether "W.E.C." sounds like a newfangled toilet. He simply says "my companion" and moves on.

I'm picking on Mulloney because he exemplifies a tendency to misread and, by misreading, misappropriate Thoreau-as-guide; where, as Richardson puts it, *Cape Cod* is a book shadowed by death, Mulloney and others read it for inspirational nuggets and life coaching. All this is on even more prominent display in Adam Gamble's guidebook, *In the Footsteps of Thoreau: 25 Historic and Nature Walks on Cape Cod*. The problems (as I see them) begin on the cover (not, I imagine, the author's responsibility, but this only supports my sense of a misprision of Thoreau general all over the Cape). The background

of the cover is a photograph of an Outer Cape beach at low tide. A bit of bluff is visible on the left, a combing breaker on the right. Between these, the wet beach and the rippling, receding water glow in the sun. Above, wisps of white cloud scud across a bleached blue sky. Like the photographs in the illustrated edition of *Cape Cod*, this one is framed through the conventions of the scenic. No evidence of human presence or habitation is visible either on the shore or on the sea, and features of the landscape are used to mark boundaries and guide the eye to the vanishing point. Or rather, because it is superimposed on the upper left quadrant of the cover, to the ephemeral portrait of Thoreau that hovers, pensively staring and faint enough so that clouds can still be seen behind him, over the vanishing point. Thoreau's gaze is directed down at the beach, as if, transported (like the former inhabitants of those shipwrecked hulks at Cohasset) to some new shore farther west, he is looking down from Heaven at his former haunts. Opposite Thoreau's faded face, red letters set out the title: *In the Footsteps of Thoreau*.

Perhaps it is only my own experience, my several encounters with it (as a poster on the wall of a church hallway, as a plaque on an aunt's living room table, as a pamphlet handed out by evangelists on campus), that makes me read, against my will, a specific intertext here: "Footprints." Do you know the inspirational fable in which a man who has been walking with God looks back over the sand and sees, for some stretches, only one set of footprints? He accuses God of abandoning him during those moments, only to be corrected by the deity, who says something along the lines of "No, those were the times I carried you." The story is usually illustrated with a photograph of a lonely stretch of beach (with or without footprints, one set or two), and the constellation on this book cover of just such a photo with the ghostly head of Thoreau and the bold, red word "Footsteps" right against his chin calls the fable to mind. We are invited to walk with Thoreau and, maybe, promised that when we become too tired to carry on, he'll pick us up. With some saving bon mot, probably, since the final feature of note on the cover is, at the top, in small white italic type, a quotation: "A man may stand there and put all America behind him."

I say "perhaps it is only my own experience" that makes me read "Footprints" for "Footsteps" here, but the back cover continues (just as it presents the rest of the photograph) the portrait of Thoreau as spirit guide. One blurb tells us that this book "is the next best thing to having the 'Traveller from Concord' as your walking companion." Another suggests that Thoreau models the right experience of Cape Cod's "wonders of nature," a childlike innocence and curiosity. And the list of the volume's salient features includes, along with a number and variety of walking routes and entries on historic sites, along with a number of detailed maps and illustrations, "dozens

of inspiring quotes from Thoreau on the ‘Art of Walking.’” A quick flip through the book, which breaks the “Great Thoreau Hike” into eight manageable chunks, reveals not only pages devoted to “What Thoreau Saw” (illustrations of clams or whales or jellyfish presided over by the same portrait that dominates the cover), but also, from time to time, a box in the upper corner labeled “Words to Walk By” and containing a passage from Thoreau’s essay “Walking,” or from his journal. Part III of the Great Thoreau Hike, for example, includes this passage from the Journal (June 7, 1851):

It is a certain faeryland where we live. You may walk out in any direction once on the earth’s surface, lifting your horizon, and everywhere your path, climbing the convexity of the globe, leads you between heaven and earth, not away from the light of the sun and stars and the habitations of men. I wonder that I ever get five miles on my way, the walk is so crowded with events and phenomena.

Not a bad thing, one supposes, to have readers’ attention drawn to the plentitude of sights to be encountered on a walk, but it’s a surprise to find juxtaposed to “after turning right, continue straight ahead toward the maintenance building” a reference to the “faeryland” in which we live and walk.



“Whimsy,” Pinsky writes, “natural history, polemic, diary, research paper, parody, sermon, history, and wisecrack.” Check.



At low tide, the beach is like a sidewalk along what Thoreau calls the “highway of nations.” Flat and smooth, the wet sand compacted so that it hardly shifts under the walker’s weight, the few yards of sand nearest the receding waves are as easy walking as you can hope to find. From the bottom of the wooden staircase at Coast Guard Beach, Abby and I walked across the tougher going of dry, foot-churned beach to the low-tide stretch of strand and turned left. On our right, now, just as Thoreau has it, “the endless series of white breakers,” and, beyond them, “the unwearied and illimitable ocean.” Where we had come through a landscape of shrubbery around (and in) the marsh that glowed, as it did for Thoreau in 1849, “with the brightest imaginable autumnal tints,” the palette on the beach itself was neither bright nor autumnal. The late afternoon sky was the color of faded jeans, the beach we walked on bronze, momentarily lighter where we stepped. It’s common to say the sea was blue, or green, or, as Sylvia Plath memorably describes it, “bean green over blue off beautiful Nauset,” and it’s true, as Thoreau writes, that “first and last the sea is of all colors” and “commonly, in calm weather . . .

the sea is green or greenish, . . . then blue,” but on this October afternoon it was a gunmetal gray. Along the top, and sometimes coming down the side, of the bluff to our left, the rugged beach grass and scrubby growth was green, but, like the bleached sky, muted and washed out. Absinthe after the water’s poured in, not before.

The beach’s color scheme—along with its sandy composition and the absence of potable water—is part of what leads Thoreau, among others, to liken it to a desert. When deserted by crowds of brightly clad bathers, the place offers little lush to the observing eye. This is not, though, to say that the beach, even when uninhabited by humans, lacks life. “Between high and low water mark,” Thoreau writes, “a sort of chaos reigns still, which only anomalous creatures can inhabit,” but what a profusion of anomalous creatures can be seen. For Abby and me as for Thoreau and Channing, gulls circled overhead; plovers and sandpipers raced the surf; clams, crabs, and snails dug and burrowed. We noted all these as we walked, and laughed again at the bumper sticker we’d seen around the Orleans rotary: “I ♥ piping plovers. They taste like chicken.” But the life forms that most excited us when we noticed them treading water about thirty feet offshore were the harbor seals.

We’d been walking for half an hour or so when Abby first spied one. We had seen seals before when spending time on the National Seashore, but they’d been farther out, visible only as dark blobs on the placid surface of the ocean. Now, though, the seal was close enough for us to make out its features clearly. But just as we started to do so, it disappeared. Abby gave a disappointed shrug and we started to walk on when we saw the seal’s head break the surface again. This time, it was not alone. As if it had seen us while lazily scanning the beach and had gone down to bring some others up to witness the sight, a half dozen seal faces appeared and stared at us as we watched. Now, in this moment of mutual examination, we could really read their faces. I was surprised at their gaunt appearance. These were not the sleek sea lions on display in aquariums. Rather, they were clearly wild creatures accustomed to the cold, to scarcity, to the sudden losses occasioned by predation. They’d spent their lives in an unforgiving environment; they’d seen things as they were, as Thoreau, read one way at least, invites us to see:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only
the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach,
and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.

They had achieved a confident hardiness. Their wide, dark eyes shone with wariness. Sunken cheeks exaggerated the size and depth of those eyes, and, with the taut smoothness of the skin over their skulls, gave them a look something like the thestrals—horselike magical creatures visible only to

those who have witnessed death—in the Harry Potter saga. They exuded an ineffable and stoic patience, commensurable, perhaps, with the duration over which they could live on a single held breath. We named them—Big Eyes, Bug Eyes, Gwyneth, Nosey Joe—but it was easy enough to imagine (though Thoreau would resist the temptation) that they were naming us too, and given the abysmal depth of their long stares, that was a little chilling.



The “found object aesthetic which confronts and makes the most of whatever the ocean ‘vomits up.’” Or what the shore itself presents, maybe. The face of the bluff we walk alongside, walk in the lee of, walk almost on sometimes to escape a more than usually aggressive wave, is sprouting scrubby green growth: whiskery stubble after a few unshaved days. “The plants I noticed here and there on the pure sandy shelf,” Thoreau writes, “were Sea Rocket (*Cakile Americana*), Saltwort (*Salsola kali*), Sea Sandwort (*Honkenya peploides*), Sea Burdock (*Xanthium echinatum*), Sea-side Spurge (*Euphorbia polygonifolia*); also Beach Grass (*Arundo*, *Psamma*, or *Calamagrostis arenaria*), Sea-side Golden-rod (*Solidago sempervirens*), and the Beach Pea (*Lathyrus maritimus*).” This tough brush is joined in some stretches with newly planted dune grass, tufts set at regular intervals. These patches suggest a project, erosion prevention by rooting something down with sufficient strength to hold the shifting sand in place. Beach and bluffs advertise not just the continuity of change—one wave after another, one tide after another, one storm, one shipwreck, one broken old hulk—but also the possibility of renewal. Or plural: possibilities, renewals. Some naturally occurring, some resulting from deliberate policy and cultivation.



We could have saved it
(the nucleus to be established).
Also valuable, the same
lay in the inhabitants.

Must be
some years since,
her cargo strewn,
exposing to the sun.

Saved a wreck,
perhaps respected.
Take it.



Chilling. Just the thought of soaking a sneaker-clad foot in a wave. As the tide comes in, the nice, flat sidewalk is submerged and, if you want to keep your feet dry, you have to walk further up the beach. There, the walking is, as Thoreau says the Cape Codders put it to him, “heavy.” You sink with every step. Progress is slow, and the more slowly you move along the vertical axis of the beach, the more quickly the waves move in along the horizontal. Pretty soon, you realize, there’s going to be an intersection. Soon, but not yet, you think as you jump (you like to think “nimble,” but your companion won’t let you) away from one especially ambitious wave that makes it farther up the beach than you expect. You’ll walk up in the beach grass first, walk up into the dunes if necessary, maybe even walk under the shadow of the bluff, in spite of the periodic signs warning against such foolhardiness. You should have left the beach back at the last wooden staircase, you think. It’s getting to be late afternoon, your legs are getting sore with the heavy walking (this, by the way, is the only “sentiment” Thoreau claims to allow himself in *Cape Cod*), and you’ve still got to get on to the motel. The cold water looks and sounds, as cold water so often does, hard. You know how cold water can hurt when you fall into it, when it’s dumped on you, even when you’ve walked out into it all on your own and acclimated to the best of your ability.

It happens eventually, of course, the sloshing of a wave over your clumsy feet. Blame the deep, churned sand. Blame your tired legs. Whatever you blame, the effect’s the same. But not what you expected, because where the crashing water has begun to sound like breaking glass, and where the rising breakers look like sharp peaks, the water that washes over you, though cold, is strangely soft. Strangely only until you notice—again because you’ve noticed it over and over as the tide has rushed in—the churning froth each brittle breaker becomes when it breaks. Of course. The waves are pulverizing themselves as they crash upon the shore. The tidal beating they take on the sand and rocks soften, gentle, the water.



“Before land rose out of the ocean,” Thoreau writes, “and became *dry* land, chaos reigned; and between high and low water mark, where she is partially disrobed and rising, a sort of chaos reigns still, which only anomalous creatures can inhabit.” We are all, most of the time, somewhere between high and low water mark. Are we all, then, anomalous? A definitional impossibility. But we see ourselves as such, don’t we, marking as norms the low and high, the one to be delivered from, the other to be aspired to? A sort of chaos reigns. We

seek havens from it. Long walks on the beach, the tortuous twists, semantic and syntactic games, in the work of a writer whose footsteps we follow. "The Beach," where Thoreau makes this observation, is the fourth of *Cape Cod's* ten chapters, but it was the last to appear during his lifetime. After four installments, *Putnam's* ceased publication of the Cape essays and only when his executors produced the book version three years after Thoreau's death did the subsequent chapters (from "The Wellfleet Oysterman" to "Provincetown") appear in print. The book upset what Pinsky calls "contemporary pruderies" with what, in his historical introduction to the Princeton edition, Joseph Moldenhauer calls "'heresies' of wording or tone on religious matters." I have mentioned objections to Thoreau's use of "scripture," and some writers point out the challenges to orthodoxy woven through "The Wellfleet Oysterman." Surely, though, Thoreau abraded some readers' nerves with his discourse on Charity Houses or Humane Houses, the structures seaside communities had agreed to build for the relief of shipwrecked sailors but whose furnishing Thoreau finds to be neither charitable nor humane. "They appeared," he writes, "but a stage to the grave."

There is something of a subgenre by now of Cape Cod house memoirs. The classic, though not the inaugural, exemplar must be Henry Beston's *The Outermost House*, and Beston's is joined by such books as Wyman Richardson's *The House on Nauset Marsh* and George Colt's *The Big House*. These later entries boast some creature comforts, but Beston's emphasizes the rudimentary nature of his shelter: "It consisted of two rooms, a bedroom and a kitchen-living room, and its dimensions over all were but twenty by sixteen. A brick fireplace with its back to the wall between rooms heated the larger space and took the chill off the bedroom, and I used a two-burner oil stove when cooking." Beston's house is a palace, though, compared to the structure Thoreau and Channing examine in Eastham, one lacking the features mandated by the county, having "neither window nor sliding shutter, nor clapboards nor paint."

The passage in which Thoreau describes their efforts to see into the Charity House is worth quoting at length, for in it we see at once Thoreau's metaphoric transformation of one kind of looking into another, his stylistic juxtaposition of different discourses and voices, and his vicious critique of hypocrisy:

However, as we wished to get an idea of a Humane house, and we hoped that we should never have a better opportunity, we put our eyes, by turns, to a knot-hole in the door, and after long looking, without seeing, into the dark, —not knowing how many shipwrecked men's bones we might see at last, looking with the eye of faith, knowing that, though to him that knocketh it may not always be opened, yet to him

that looketh long enough through a knot-hole the inside shall be visible, —for we had had some practice at looking inward, —by steadily keeping our other ball covered from the light meanwhile, putting the outward world behind us, ocean and land, and the beach, —till the pupil became enlarged and collected the rays of light that were wandering in that dark (for the pupil shall be enlarged by looking; there never was so dark a night but a faithful and patient eye, however small, might at last prevail over it), —after all this, I say, things began to take shape to our vision, —if we may use this expression where there was nothing but emptiness, —and we obtained the long-wished-for insight. (88)

To see the truth behind euphemism, the eye must be turned from the world and from its light, the gaze must be undertaken with “the eye of faith,” not in a religious sense (though the religious sense is parodically present in the echo of Matthew 7:7) but with a trust that, once adjusted to the dimness, the (punning) pupil will open to the available light and, in a moment of clean perception, achieve insight. The truth Thoreau finds in the shabby and locked-shut hovel? “How cold is charity! how inhumane humanity!”

Housing stock on the Cape has improved somewhat in the intervening century and a half, has improved even since Beston built his Eastham shack in the 1920s. Driving from Orleans to Eastham that morning, Abby and I saw well-tended neighborhoods, manorial estates with wood-shingled houses and golf-green lawns (many sporting names, most varying on “Sea” or “Beach,” but also the egregious “Pooh Corner”), condo developments (many named Nauset This or Nauset That, but also the egregious “Cottontail Cottages”), and, one after another along Route 6 north of the rotary, motels offering all manner of amenities, cheek by jowl with businesses tending to the body, its needs, and comfort (pizza parlors, massage studios, donut shops), almost all named Cape This or Cape Cod That or Outer Cape the Other, as if without these constant reminders we might, in this stretch of anonymous suburban development, forget where we are.

We washed up, after our hike, at the Wellfleet Motel and Lodge, which offered, along with the roof and shower and bed that would have been enough, cable TV, a hot tub, a rack of brochures informing us of all that, given time, we might do for entertainment and relaxation (Mini-Golf!, Go-Karts!, Outlet Shopping!), and, upon check-in, free cookies. Reserve and ye shall be received. Pay and it shall be given. How warm is commerce, how welcoming the tourist industry!



Pinsky: “The sublime beauty and grotesquerie, wrecked and restored and wrecked again . . . is the writer’s echo of the ocean itself, claiming and giving

up and reclaiming, . . . reassuring and then disturbing and then, in a cycle without end, reassuring again.”



The contents of my pockets after the afternoon’s walk: a nearly perfect scallop shell, one corner of the rectangular hinge broken off, slate gray and with its ridges somewhat smoothed; a worn fragment of clamshell, its purple strata faded and its striated grooves worn almost smooth; a charcoal gray stone eroded by the tide to the thickness of a metal slug or a coin smashed on railroad tracks; a half-inch cube of cloudy, whitish sea glass. Set out on the table in our motel room, they compose a set apparently intended to illustrate the effects of such rough elements as sand and salt, such tough treatment as that meted by the tide. I could not claim for any of these bits and pieces beauty either rare or sublime, but, their edges worn down and their textures soft to the touch, they looked and felt—the word will seem odd but it is the only right one—gentle.

I had been thinking much on gentleness. Not least because, during the storm, it had seemed an unimaginable quality, but also because those same storms, and the months of brining and tossing in the subsequent salty tides, had gone some way toward creating it. Not “gentle” in the sense of “high-born,” of course, or “noble,” but in the sense the word bore when it entered English in the early thirteenth century—“gracious, kind”—or the one it had developed by the 1550s: “mild, tender.” The patience and politeness I had found in recent weeks were not like any I had ever before possessed. (“Politeness”: another once-meaningful word now fallen to the status of a minor virtue; the word denotes a mannerly attentiveness to others, but its root is the Latin *politus*, which means, literally, “polished.”) The sea change Shakespeare’s Ariel sings of is often used as a figure for the dramatic transformations we undergo, but it seems to me, sitting in our Wellfleet motel room while Abby sleeps a few feet away, looking at these wrecks I’ve salvaged from the beach, that we’re really made into something rich and strange when we are washed and tumbled, smoothed by a harsh element that makes us perceive clearly, a stringent cold in which we come to see, as Wallace Stevens puts it, “nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.”



Twenty miles or less from my Wellfleet motel room, somewhere along Race Point, perhaps, but maybe as close by as some Truro beach, the poet Mark Doty had come upon a shell similarly transformed by rough treatment. “A Green Crab’s Shell” describes the exterior of this artifact, not green so much as bronze, “preserved in kind brine.” Bereft now of its capacity for “menace /

and power,” its guts eaten by gulls, the crab shell is reduced to a chamber the “size of a demitasse,” to a “little traveling case.” While it smells, like so much of what gets tossed up on the beach, of “seaweed and ruin,” the opened shell reveals the “shocking, Giotto blue” of something like the sky. The relic saved from a wreck has been transformed by the sea into sculpture (Doty echoes Rilke’s “Archaic Torso of Apollo”), civility (not just a coffee cup, but a demitasse), luxury (the traveling case, Doty writes, “comes with such lavish lining!”), and, finally, that bit of sky, the “deep blue air” visible through high windows (if I might change poets in midsentence) that, as Philip Larkin writes, “shows / Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless,” but that, contained in (Doty again) “the smallest chambers / of ourselves” would testify to the vastness and (given the blue’s “shocking, Giotto” modification) the capacity for salvation we bear within us.

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