

# Fiddler Crab in the Score

*Poems by Jnana Hodson*



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# Fiddler Crab in the Score

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# ***PART I: Of whales, whelk, and me/n***

*Debussy*  
(“Deb, you see ...”)

# NEW WORLD

## 1

the first time, to be  
out on open ocean  
sailing  
embarking for the Isles of Shoals  
glimpsing whales  
three minkes and a humpback

entering my own New World  
any or all  
from the west

## 2

eleven hours in a twenty-eight-foot craft  
out and back  
through the treacherous mouth of the Merrimack  
  
to skirt White Island and its lighthouse  
to stroll Star Island  
with its hotel and summer cottages  
  
to skim lolling water, knife through whitecaps  
at midday in July and August, the air so brisk  
sweaters and jackets come forth



to taste the temptation to up and split  
touring disparate ports for women and excitement  
or more simply, exciting women

though a Siren of Blood Pipettes insists  
nobody in his right mind would take a lady out to sea  
in a vessel lacking a bathroom

3

sea rocks the boat  
cradles the hull  
pulls in one direction while the wind  
pushes in another  
hushes, more than whispers  
seduces

the sea says nothing

not of the ancestor  
who landed as an orphan  
after French privateers attacked

nor of the emaciated ancestors  
from Rotterdam by way of Scotland  
arriving in Philadelphia

nor of the nameless  
parents and children who died

amid the trials of voyage

the sea tilts

away from a future

4

at the helm, a command

in some experience of vast trajectories

or a command in the eccentricities of local shoreline

for a skipper stranded in mudflats on the outgoing  
tide

or knocked into the surf by a swinging jib

yet racing along the submerged jetty after nightfall

or a command matching sails to wind

or capricious weather, yet

to tie up and moor safely

a command, with a wary eye,

charts and compass – mastery obtained

always with some element unpredictable

## URNS, FROM THE PAGE

### 1

once more, flipping a month, a year  
– another mountain, loon, lighthouse, tulip

markers of days and flowing

history or future encoded

as numerals, this imprecise bank ledger  
with moon phases

occasionally with a comfort of knowing I've been there  
or desire to go  
or recollection of encountering what's pictured

as for next month or next year  
no matter how carefree  
the intended journey or dreaming  
some map or guiding is essential

unless we're simply floating  
and who knows, then

### 2

still, the clearest water remains a mask

moving, breathing  
more than land

with the preponderance of life  
on land, atop  
in water, below

while the intertidal zones  
open to interpretation

3

each tide  
a page that turns back on itself

enigmas

a reminder of holy spaces  
we enter rarely, if ever

point behind point  
without end

## FRAMED IN THIN CURTAINS

### 1

in front of the open top sashes  
to either side of the opened-out double window  
a young woman stands, frozen in contemplation

one arm raises a peach-infused rose  
to her chest

in profile, offering her own soft green and gray allure  
she may be lovely or simply plain

if the figure would only turn or speak

instead, she gazes downward, past the blossom  
to the glass bowl on the wooden table  
with its two fish, or maybe four  
depending on refraction and reflection

fish golden, like her hair neatly pulled into a bun  
catching the sun

*The Goldfish Window*, 1916  
oil on canvas, 34½ by 50½ inches  
Frederick Childe Hassam

### 2

I long assumed the shape was Celia  
in an imagined youth  
on the island

but the torso is too tall and willowy  
and the yard too sylvan, with no hint  
of acerbic ocean

or literacy  
or music  
in the indolence, brewing

3

the painter stopped reposing  
on Celia's island  
around 1916

just before the outbreak of the war

not, as I'd presumed, with her death there  
twenty-two years earlier

still, in the continuing homage

from the parlor, then  
to the garden  
and then the rocks rending the sea

the brush loaded with several colors  
simultaneously delivered  
in a single stroke  
viewed through tall stands of hollyhocks  
or the back of a room, swept clean

## FIERY

red hair

fine red

against such barren, desolate white rocks

the artifact, the history

summer



# THE ISLES

## 1

the cluster of eight small rugged islands  
    (or more, depending on the tide  
    and how one's counting)  
ten miles out from New Hampshire  
    and Maine

Appledore, Star, White, Smuttynose  
among them – the landing at Gosport  
ornithological laboratory, conference hotel  
lighthouse and keeper's housing

## 2

distinctly hot, hazy ashore  
a threat of afternoon fogging  
obstructing the islands

board the M/V Thomas Lighton, named  
for Celia's brother, HARBOR CRUISE & TOUR  
and it's twenty degrees cooler offshore  
windy, nine-foot tide normal

far from anything, a kite flies, wagging a long tail  
    gulls flock a fishing boat  
"whistlebones, cricket sticks"

a young woman sings

approaching the unfamiliar light of an afternoon squall

“everyone on the deck, down under – now!”

quickly enwrapped

in a darker fog, a gray luminescence  
viewed from the inside  
of a pearl  
all passing in minutes

3

you could volunteer for the trip  
to thin hop vines overrunning her garden

bring home rootlets  
for a memorial planting

to stabilize and flavor  
your own bottles

fermented in late fall and deep winter

## CURRENT, CURLING

### 1

prevalent, from the west  
clear and cooler, from the north  
rain on the way, from the south  
tempest, from the east

reading the wind

in a flag  
in smoke  
in running clouds  
or water in a clear thistle tube

### 2

listen, a storm approaches  
through leaves and hills

the same sound as falling water

surf repeats its snare drumming  
along the shoreline

matching a far-off airplane

all voice great power

resounding

in a stream  
in the tide  
in air  
even in a light bulb

what's present, now  
within some great  
motion

around each wing  
the flow of thought  
keeps running

3

ring around the moon  
as a warning

listen, rainfall  
will warm the ocean

and swimming is best  
just after high tide

# TOPOLOGICAL DISPARITY

## 1

any stretch of shoreline  
is not two sides of the same coin  
viewed from water or land

even assuming you know the twisting roads  
or clusters of housing and wharves  
    or white steeples and beacons  
the familiar melts unevenly

even the maritime charts and roadmaps  
    conflict  
one measured in knots  
and the other, miles

for many good reasons  
the pieces rarely fit

even if you could walk on water  
and still the rough waves

## 2

land is a kind of insurance  
if you don't crash

any grounding and the atmosphere  
both move, often in contrary  
currents, you navigate a facade

blue is never the ocean's true nature  
even on a summer day  
unnoticed red or yellow modulate

when rain comes up  
the beacon vanishes  
in fear or arrogance

### 3

no matter how similar  
they initially appear

waterfowl bridge this disparity  
moving, air

## ROLLING WITH WHALES

on the way out, a fifty-year-old shrimper from Louisiana –  
originally from Gloucester, where he's visiting his sister –  
tells of the Gulf's particular brutality

how crews typically go out twelve days  
till the hull is full . his boat with three Rolls-Royce  
engines so loud harborside residents complained  
he hesitated to open full throttle  
unless the water's churning was especially rough

rocking at the jetty-mouth sandbar  
like Canobie Lake's pirate ship ride  
three delighted school groups shriek

when we top twenty-one knots – his boat, twenty-three  
yet his went down / couldn't salvage any gear  
lost two crewmen with him five years  
he himself now limps  
wounded in the knee by a barracuda,  
and it's not healing right . he hobbles along  
with a cane, wondering if it's time to quit  
the shrimping in his blood  
run an excursion boat instead

“and you, sir?”

## HOW THE STREAMS CAME TO THE SEA

I come to the sea a stranger  
a person of a different religion  
learning to eat at one table

these days, one who dwells inland  
as far as the tide retreats

the passion of the moon  
with its heartbeat and home and  
those who have been torn and uprooted  
will sense this

no image holds the tide  
the moon, then, must do

somehow resembling the moon I knew first in Ohio  
and later, in sagebrush desert

all things who move furtively in the night



## ESTABLISHING DIRECTION

### 1

light in shimmering bronze  
illuminates maritime charts and sails  
unfurling with desires, an escape  
in the apex of broad wakes

*who you think you are  
doesn't matter  
when the tide turns*

a band from the North Star  
turns toward harbor –  
glints of affirmation or rebuke from a stranger –  
ruffles bells and rigging

*identities don't matter  
when the wind turns*

off we go, then, and this time  
this world or this way and then another

### 2

five seals, headed north  
  
their heads sparkling with stars

disappearing quickly

the austerity of beach swept clear

## BLUE NOSE

### 1

he would row to town, then  
only because he could not ride a horse  
and the wind had closed shop for the day

yes, they were sniffle-boned  
with a single cork fire  
their only refuge  
these short men, who could stow under

while three Little Pigs were no sailors  
the Big Bad Wolf, the skipper's  
second-cousin, blew the boat home  
when the air was the color of sand

### 2

to the extent waves crashing ashore  
resemble a conch shell filled with bubbles

lobster pot markers and multicolored balloons  
sway against the current

a seaport is a place of brick and stone  
and tall white spires lacking sails

3

the flock of birds you think you saw  
was only the wind turning

bereft of commerce, no lighthouse  
would proclaim the duplicity

of ocean and sky tinged with ice  
even in high, heartless summer

## BATTLING THERE

twisting on those rubbery legs  
even diesel-fumes  
are soon scented pea-green

enclosed in a gyrating cubicle

with heaves, swelling  
brine, and collapse  
the recurring lurch

the cadence evinces  
hammering water  
in endless variations

diagnosed as *mal de mer*  
more accurately than  
*sea sickness*

on the organ of speech  
or taste  
on the yearning for shoreline  
or home

whatever their origin or the vessel  
no crew ever earns immunity  
in this hangover

nobody truly masters the sea

# SHIVELY

## 1

dockside, I'm told they're not going out  
due to continuing sea turbulence

contrary to the phone message  
an hour earlier, this requires

a course change in my day  
and the whales can wait

## 2

breakfast, then, with playful banter  
over an omelet  
my replies light-hearted, sharp

on her slow morning with intervals  
a willingness to try country dancing  
some night, casually

while her boyfriend in a rock band's  
just set out on a six-week tour  
well, hopelessly

inquiring of her nametag  
surmising we're distant relations

yes, her grandfather had come from Ohio

though she's ignorant of the Swiss root  
turned Pennsylvania Dutch and  
westward pioneering (oh, well)

3

from the depths, aspiration springs  
after more than a year, submerged  
my own choice, admittedly, the waiting

4

faithfully, all the same, as promised  
sent off a file of genealogical material  
never even getting a thank-you

## TO SPOT BLOW-SPOUTS

with determination, I return the next morning  
with the seas considered calmer  
still riding fifteen-foot swells, nearly throw up  
despite two motion-sickness tablets  
but once out in the bluest of oceans and under clear sky  
there, to spot blow-spouts surrounding the boat  
and the sleek arc of backs slice the lolling surface  
– the glory of six humpbacks, two minkes, and four fin  
whales  
tallied in forty minutes of a five-hour trip –  
a splash, and they're gone  
while we, in the long V-wake of an arrowhead  
aim toward harbor



SO FAR OFFSHORE  
WE NO LONGER VIEW LAND

1

on undulating bedspread  
we float into childhood  
waiting, watching for some giant  
to surface, to pause, to breathe and rouse  
grandparents from depths  
spawning thought, integrity, character

sand eels, its plankton filtrate  
into fishy odor of blow-hole mist  
a scribble between champagne intervals

calmly, the tail lifts for an incisive thrust  
and vanishes under the echo of an eerie  
still footprint as open as a further blank page

2

a good whale  
is the size  
of a pond

3

a rudder follows the ship

of memory turning toward some future  
of a map embellished in history

## SHINY RED BARK

as a decaying hurricane  
a thousand miles offshore  
stirs exceptional surf

it's fair to question the origin  
of an unfamiliar shrub  
discarded beside New England gulls

a possibility torn from the Bahamas  
three days traveling the speed of wind  
along with the sound of dog barking

## NEW ENGLAND

one oak leaf  
on open beach

a mile away  
from the nearest tree

Christmas Day twilight  
newly unwrapped

surfboard as a ribbon  
against patches of snow

beclouding  
breakers

with more on the way

## AND KEY WEST

### 1

joining me as a bowsprit  
on my usual whale-watch vessel  
now wintering in Florida, a day trip  
en route to Key West

a lonely teen evokes  
my lover in college  
the year before I met her before

two dolphins leap in front of us and

in his rounds, a crewman explains

“you don’t see that often, especially so far  
from shore . you saw them, didn’t you?  
you’re very lucky”

an omen, then, to the past

### 2

in town, roosters in banty yards  
on back streets, warning

*BEWARE  
OF DOG*

such a disappointing declaration  
to swarming eyeballs  
anticipating something more exotic  
a gator, perchance, or snakepit  
or open voodoo performed with hot sauce  
please understand, you're approaching Haiti

3

acknowledging this is an island of Biblical proportions  
I stand outside Hemingway's veranda  
and shout prophetically

*KELSEY SENDS  
HER REGARDS*

meaning her scorn  
for required high school reading

this touch of sarcasm gleaned  
teaching Sunday school  
in New Hampshire

this day, when I'm my own old man of the sea  
is held in the tentacles of Genesis

4

again the Gulf waters roil  
and the decision is announced  
we'll be sent back by land (one)  
rather than any Paradise Lost  
    without moonlight  
in the dark  
road houses and health food  
storefronts along the midnight  
highway become fragments  
of reggae notes, the songs of another  
vanished lover, between mangrove

5

even on a subtropical bus  
cockroaches climb toilet walls  
mimicking addresses I've left

# OF MASTS, SPARS, AND BROKEN YARDS

## 1

in moonlight  
Cape Ann, two months after the Perfect Storm  
  maybe three  
while standing back on a broad outcropping  
25 feet above the roiling and ebb

unpredictably, a wave explodes above me  
from behind  
washes around my feet

I could have been swept away  
so step back, gingerly, if you will

## 2

driving a ridge, no view of shimmering expanses  
  
between country club and great estates  
sand plowed like snow  
two feet deep, both sides of the state highway  
  
mixed with kelp



nothing to trifle with  
this fluid motion  
in its hypnotic attraction

all recitative  
with cymbals and snare drum

MEMORY, IN THE FLOW  
IN THE BAND

choppy surf, to jump in delight  
knocked over repeatedly

feet clad in seashells

tide, to be tied

flamingoes, with lobster-claw heads

though over time, even her name  
has vanished

the starfish  
imprinted  
in each sand dollar

autocratic  
snapping turtle  
on green pebbles

# RETURN

## 1

slowly approaching a line  
that grows from the edge of the sea  
and then spreads at the harbor mouth

slowly, details emerge  
and at last, some recognition  
in what's become familiar

home, or at least neighborhood  
extending

attuned here, more than elsewhere

the awareness, something all your own  
has happened with this place  
but not knowing precisely when

in the tide  
returning

## 2

introductions, by degrees  
lapping and receding

even in six hours

Plum Island with Eric, Bill  
and the baby, “Why don’t we leave our towels  
down there?” rather than the crest of the dune

“you’ll see”  
once the surf bubbled inches  
from our possessions

or high tide covering the jetty  
that shaded the sailboat venturing out

or entering a ferry on one deck  
and exiting  
on the return, from another

or weather

on a carefully selected  
Sunday picnic, and air  
optimal for swimming at the sandbar  
only to have the Coast Guard  
pull up in an inflatable raft with a bullhorn  
“Out of the water! A storm’s coming!”  
while the sky’s still cloudless but  
before we reach shelter two hundred  
feet away, the sun’s gone and a deluge opens

with or without hail

or the mid-afternoon ferry  
through twenty-foot swells  
and returning at sunset  
on calm water

not that we're friends  
or have much of what you'd call  
a relationship

3

miles inland, closer to the house  
detecting high tide in marshes and rivers  
or its absence

salt hay in cow milk

# LEVIATHAN, AS AN EMBLEM

## 1

now to see  
North Atlantic  
in my sphere

landlocked  
till twenty-eight

that week, camping tide-to-tide  
beside North Pacific

and you speak of turning to Christ?

## 2

who found the eagle in the desert canyon  
and high mountains  
before the Upper Mississippi  
or Great Falls of the Potomac?

still, moose fail to inspire me  
as elk did

## 3

whales, then  
rather than moose  
in contrast to elk of the Yakima Valley

this mirror of historic economy

besides, moose and whales do not leave tracks  
everywhere we trek here,  
unlike the elk out west

to say nothing of ticks

4

water, defining land  
    defining water  
and the overlap

I want to know what the ocean voices  
    in its repetition  
addressing the absent moon  
or distance, even in the erasure

bank of fog  
curtain of resounding  
fog horn or bell

or vast silence

before

the hundred thousand variations of nor'easter  
just off this point

no need to circle the planet

we have our fill of floundering  
agents of change



# WHERE LAND OVERLAPS SEA

## 1

ODIORNE

neap tide bares

POINT

concealed rock, vegetation

enigmatic imprints  
and sculpted mud

with no visible  
agitation, waterfowl  
ride surge advancing  
a nor'easter . soon

a resilient catapult  
of violent breakers  
will sling kelp  
and fracturing wood

I, too, have accumulated  
visitors, routines,  
and ceremonies  
in glimmering eddies

along the cove, we  
retrace familiar steps  
in some upstream fiddling  
“Lady of the Lake”

CHAUNCEY  
CREEK

exhaustion fizzes on sand  
as gray as wet cement

within the slumping fervor  
of perpetual tasks, a rankling

there are times to observe  
the basic fact of having life  
or a changing tide . a Sabbath  
will multiply into Jubilee

chance, then, a  
translucent backwash where  
vertical stone deflects  
sour bluster . respect

the amorous twinning  
as two join hands and  
arch toward feeble sunlight  
or smoldering friction

whip about, for the lolloping  
freighter perched at harbor entry  
has vanished, its pilot and  
tugboats up-channel to wharfing

CLEAVING

GRAVITY

traps upon stumbling rock

which is most apprehensive

beside mangled lobster

the gannets, periwinkles  
or the bedraggled cavity  
of unsettled promise? you see

in the border of restless  
brine your father taught you  
a world never dozes . any

hesitation gives cause to  
worry . you turn wary when chores  
dwindle in silent devotion

your mother practiced floating  
in the desolate anguish  
of kelp or laundry . she

heeded lighthouse flickers  
in her afternoon soap operas  
there's no reason to dwell

near ocean to watch your house  
wash away . a tides table  
has just so many applications

with fangs of shattered clamshells  
dogs slip the chains of gummy  
anchors to leap on jellyfish aprons

4

PEAKS  
ISLAND  
harbor fortifications

deep blue and sun-splashed  
Casco Bay Ferry skirts

pilings, wharves  
“America’s oldest”  
route still in service

in fresh snow on the horizon  
(if you get far enough  
out on the water) Mount

Washington’s as pristine  
as Rainier from Seattle, despite  
its vast difference in

elevation soon, it’s  
DICK AND JANE SEA SPOT  
on Peaks Island, still

quite nippy . officially  
it’s spring and  
the crocuses are up

*going to my baby-doll's head*

5

NEWBURYPORT                    the sea is a place of rhythms  
you counter with Rolls-Royce  
diesel suffusion that has plumped  
Dame Fortune and the ace lane . yes

she has been enshrined with more  
than is required . quite distinct  
from what she could maneuver in  
rolling pockets or breakers . still

you let out nets with an unfolding  
vulnerability or weightlessness  
that penetrates convalescent warmth  
after each nor'easter when you anticipate

fresh sandbars at the jetty capable  
of chopping your vessel in half  
to strand you like the pretzel  
of a conch sheared on both sides

its Arabic eight or eighty-eight  
both smooth and pitted you collect  
at Plum Island . sunrise be praised  
when brassy spring disengages

a calciferous king's crown  
to toss upon pebbles with shuddering  
disdain . who would have thought she  
would be drumming in a jazz band

6

YARMOUTH

just one point where  
neap tide exposes outcroppings

revisits the nearly forgotten spicy  
tangle under wharfing . want to crack  
the postcards where everything appears  
too perfect to have claws or a drowning gale

within the severe expanse of horizon beyond the jetty  
seventy tiny boats curry lobster pot buoys  
spiking the restless water

the scavenger, of course, plies layers of darkness  
below the insolent swirling markers  
and their masked lines ending in winter

many things have been washed here  
from faraway places, a few even  
greatly removed from any shoreline

7

CAPE NEDDICK

through field-glasses I scanned  
empty sea

WAY BACK WHEN

while counting a hundred  
vessels

I navigated, attentive  
within blooming unease

here, blanched heaves concealed fitful cod  
compounding grit and scintillation

breakers braided toward shore  
from the rocky divide where each

year seemingly proficient scuba divers  
drown baffled within shark-toothed caverns

stony gusts propelled choppy surf  
into silvered pyrotechnics . way back when

all the tangled evidence left me wondering  
how she might have ever intended to return

8

GERRISH ISLAND

in my binoculars a panorama

of Nubble Point and Boone Island lighthouses

spiked an ocean as dull as the blue side  
of crinkled aluminum foil . above me

an overcast sky was smeared with the primrose  
tones of uncooked, cut chicken . beside me

a soup of gray-green flour rose toward the  
wiry wreckage of lobster traps . at my feet

sundry tinted crab husks the gulls disposed  
fluctuated from glaring vinyl orange

to a speckled cream-and-tangerine fleck  
to dull red and pastel blue . the sweet flesh

belied cruelty that weaves into hurricanes  
you would tell me about love, then

9

*how quickly the rocks submerge*

PEPPERELL COVE            maturity is a contest  
   of a universe  
where each would obtain an authentic stake  
within aptitude, elegance, and redemption



*a rooster seeks to discharge his duty*

not to undermine foundations  
above our own households, for we are not gods  
nor to settle comfortably below our potential

*kelp on a beach soon reeks in the sun*

sail on, then, until a stranger  
directs your nets to overflowing  
harvest at high noon

*ask if this will vanish in your life-span*

## ROUNDED WITH LIGHT

rounded stones of the shoreline  
or a garden path glisten  
    many navy blue or nearly straw

others speckled with indecision  
    speckled, within and without  
what grows hard as rock on a rock

nearly black stones exposing white ridges  
to the light, blue veins, like mothers  
    slate-blue orb cleft with white quartz

some color of cooked lobster  
    glow of berries  
in dull eddies

    of clamshell or snout of rising seal  
given an eye, the face of a cod or shark  
approaching with its mouth closed

    another burnt  
    and still burning  
none yet look like washed potatoes

between them, broken mussels and sand  
    firm in clear brine  
each retaining its shape, for now

## ***PART II: Pinprick, out of blinding***

*Britten  
as an interlude*

# NIGHT WATCH

## 1

between sunset and sunrise  
the ocean returns to desolate obsidian

of her dark depths  
in the character

at best, stars above  
strand of shoreline, depending

maybe the moon  
with her sea-legs

or repeated slapping

## 2

breakers arrive as a single point of reflected white  
opening out evenly in a line on either side

a lip, sometimes to one side only  
rarely claiming, "I love you"

sheets of gleaming water shift on the sand  
or everything way out, obscured  
in fog

scolding  
pipers scurry about  
on their stilt-legs

at highest tide, pebbles sound of boiling

with all the sunburned drunks long asleep  
or the party, behind glass or on the deck  
a cigarette meanders somewhere to my left  
though I catch no shards of conversation

3

if only the beach were not broken  
by rocky fingers and cliffs

unseen ledges and outcroppings

or overwhelmed in abrupt tempests

the night voyageur might sail dependably  
by the compass

but vessels and their crews  
mostly go down along coastline  
blindly

mistranslating, the whole sense stymied  
by a single word, a puzzle, upturned wind

count the seconds, then, in the flashing  
points  
matched to the chart

one red-lighted buoy  
white caps below

Whaleback just clearing the hilltop

a large, well-lighted ship near the Shoals  
waiting for high tide to enter Portsmouth

or on a very clear night, way off  
Thacher Island, Cape Ann, Gloucester

how is it the Boon flare jumps about  
three spots, playing the length of shrouded rock island?

of the available beacons  
the closest, curiously, appears only a muffle

in the call of the underside  
“come to me”

mournful bell or horn  
and strobe light

restless, relentless  
rhythm, however unpredictable  
retreats, advances  
restores, destroys  
cleanses

5

I cannot imagine rowing ten miles to an island  
at midnight

after an evening in town

but they did  
for a drink or conversation  
so they said

## BY DAY, BY NIGHT

### 1

I admire a lighthouse more than a ship  
without masts, as a qualifier

anchored in some upstanding foundation

I, who have roved the continent  
and no further  
gaze from the shore

or out, from the water,  
to peer at each obelisk  
instructing the coastline

yet masts, in open sail  
could make this a wash  
or a wish-list

### 2

I look in vain for a painting or photograph  
of ocean only

always some shoreline

or ships – naval battle

conflict or simply

what attempts to bridle wild space



the lighthouse, as a genre, especially  
countering the fabled variations of blue

at last, O'Keeffe's large canvas of clouds and sky  
comes closest

even more than her cross by the sea

3

costly as a ship  
to construct and to run

this marker  
of commerce, progression, and change  
made obsolete, still

a warning as welcome

faithfully alludes to danger  
in homecoming

a way around obstacle  
a passage through the mouth  
to safe landing

as much as the other abode  
sailors justly dread

in daylight, a solitary standing figure  
a sentinel  
upright numeral one

a spire, a prayer  
shrine, stupa  
gravestone

defiantly erect penis

by night, its repetition  
insisting  
“Here! I’m here!”  
as much as “Beware!”  
in a tally of shipwreck

once with its whale oil and great lenses  
arrayed on a crystalline comb  
investment in life

such magnification  
casting its spark  
so far

this rock, uttering its explicative  
to death

pinprick of light

## LIGHTLY, FROM LONG WHARF

Sunday afternoon, folk dancers set forth

in lines along three decks, their ages ranging  
from preteen to longtime retired

moving to jigs and reels

with a few hornpipes tossed in  
a succession of bands and callers

down Boston Harbor, its inlets, islands, and lights  
to the beam at the mouth and back

a motorboat pulls up with two girls who missed  
the departure but are forbidden from boarding  
en route, per federal regulations

says the skipper  
despite their ingenuity and appeal

two dances later, another speeds alongside  
laughing, waving, "Hey, look!"  
and two guys moon us

continuing under loud jetliners, low overhead  
feet from Logan runway built out into the water  
a waltz or a schottische

or slamming a wake  
threatens to launch someone overboard  
save for young Ellie

the skyline receding, turning to sunset

corkscrewing, as it were, back into history  
with a host of bad puns, “for the halibut”  
and back again, under stars

culminating in “Jefferson and Liberty” and  
“Hull’s Victory” beside Old Ironsides

traditionally  
docking at ten

## RELICS, IN TIME

### 1

along the edge  
where river after river, cove and forking  
    confuse and disguise without end  
each minaret has a name, often two

a badge  
    capped by a dome  
    a green-copper half-moon  
    above glass and the flash  
    or a triangular  
    arrowhead pointing to Heaven

the occasional towers standing in pairs  
are to be read as eleven, rather than two  
in the mathematics of waves

along Cape Cod, Cape Ann, Cape Elizabeth

### 2

token of peril  
crag and sandbar

a warning  
to welcome

a warning

acknowledging most shipwrecks  
occurred within sight of shore

however deceptive the calm

3

a preference for lighthouses on craggy sites  
to those on lawns or hillocks

still all stand

arrayed as white prayer flags along the coast  
these relics, in time

all fall away

as we journey

# COILING, IN THE SHELL

## 1

to speak of romance and sinking  
hand-in-hand couples  
approach  
as a candlelight dinner  
more than tragedy

the golden love I viewed as a lighthouse  
my lighthouse  
one of two back in Ohio, Ashtabula  
marking  
my own shipwreck, as well

in another history, Capt. Heman Smith  
(He-Man), of Colonial Eastham  
established a fire akin to a spire  
(the latter, perchance with a clock  
or weathervane)

marking time, the years

Chatham Light  
2 white flashes  
every 10 seconds

(2 bulbs revolving close together  
followed by long silence)

originally from twin tower  
steel shell with brick interior

2

which way the wind now?  
the lifeline, the hymn  
“Pilot me!”

3

aloof temples  
to sails and rigging  
extreme discomfort, sacrifice

in the dangerous occupation  
to be murdered within sight of shore  
once the storm broke

not just rock and water  
but wind, especially  
unpredictable, these potential

remote ruins of antiquity  
American abbeys  
at the confluence, hence



the fire in its crown, its eye  
resolutely  
facing up to uncertainty

4

one night, entranced by movement  
in three rectangles of soft light  
in the keeper's house, considering  
the occasional guest on the island  
maybe a window with a wafting curtain  
or secretive figure moving to the side

daylight revealing  
only a pole with Old Glory  
in front  
of those three panels

more than the custom house  
or harbormaster  
this reminder of deception

nobody sees far into the water  
and often little of what's upon it

trade and fishing, mostly  
occasional cruise castle or  
the warship or well-known pirate

(death lurking below  
in the rocks,  
in the clouds and fog)

say what you will of radar, sonar  
and satellite positioning  
but life, love, and politics  
    remain fragile

# LIQUID

tempests

Shakespeare  
before Beethoven

whale oil, burning  
to guide whalers

bacteria, infecting  
the diesel

to filter  
to tame

a lobster  
in hot water  
for a change

# YANKEE

## 1

don't presume the ocean is smiling  
or the gulls enchant  
the spire warns you

especially in New England

to step  
back from the wreckage  
or unexpected nor'easter

## 2

gales and furies  
sweep up and disappear within hours  
behind placid indifference

raise public duty

expense and craftsmanship  
defining coastline  
signatures, on the dotted line  
in the clearest conditions

## 3

pointer / referent / rhythm of light / solitude or  
loneliness / romantic illusion / high-maintenance history  
lightening bolt / flicker / flare / discharge  
beer can or wine bottle uncorking or blowing its cork  
tourist magnet / spike / whistle, horn, upturned bell  
observatory / night madness / memorial / first end of the  
sea  
fist of defiance / ordered rock on rocks / spiral staircase to  
sky  
to the horizon / a hollow tube / a composition of lenses  
slivers of glass / slivers of crystal / a glass circle carousel  
a hermitage / pigeon roost / billboard / thumbtack  
anchored ship's bridge / silver cup tilting / upraised finger

4

Boon Island, flashing white every five seconds  
projects nineteen miles out to sea

Goat, faintly to the north

to the south

White Island, out in the Shoals

and Whaleback, would be double white flashes every ten  
seconds

just over the trees

way off, Thatcher Island Twin Lights  
(aka Cape Ann Lights or Rockport, Mass.)  
project seventeen, but viewed from up on rock

at Nubble, some extra distance  
on a rare night

of calm  
antiquity

joining the squat red beam  
and strobe flash  
each one  
proclaiming liberty  
over any face of oppression

the tyrant sea offers

## ***PART III: Cord and rigging***

*Horatio Parker  
in a parka  
on deck*

## DARWIN

when they go leaping  
not just frogs or turtles

the porpoises and dolphins  
silverfish, in a school

whales

children and dogs in the surf

mimicking the great waves  
on the rocks  
the fireworks, with percussive

origins of birds



## RHYTHMS

on the beach, just as I'm settling in  
Megan demands to leave

clear refreshing water  
no breakers

a large turtle – snapper – climbing on the sand to lay eggs

Boon Island Light, 137' tower, 6½ miles out  
cut into rock, perched on oblivion  
with its gruesome winter tales

I lose my new kite to surf  
of five breakers stacked  
blue, beautiful

and then head off to the Maine Diner in Wells

on one outing to Seapoint, a hefty Rottweiler  
climbs in our backseat as we're debarking  
"he wouldn't, would he?" I'd just said to my wife  
in lovely late afternoon light  
so what do we know?

and then it was appetizers at Shalimar  
before the movie, *Girl With a Pearl Earring*

silverfish jumping from the Piscataqua at Prescott Park

in Portsmouth

in front of submarines  
docked across the river

take Wells or Moody two hours and  
get a bit of sunburn  
unlike Jessi, who fell asleep on the deck now  
her midriff's so sunburned she can't bend over

choppy, with some undertow

Seapoint again, this time alone  
glare off the pounding surf  
    restless, relentless  
sliver of waning moon when I awoke  
assumed the tide was going out  
    but it's still high

to the north, in sea-fog, Nubble Lighthouse – the island –  
drive back, touches of autumn, connecting barns  
an American flag, red leaves, and a pumpkin

## ON A FERRY, PASSING

while viewing a window  
through a window  
both from the interior

the pungent odor of maritime diesel  
announces a passing  
commercial fishing boat

squeaking with gulls

## ON STONE CLEAVED FROM RAMPART

however elegant, talisman bowsprits  
cast gelatinous shadows  
along shoreline and then blackened wharf  
grappling irons of the hull or side gateway

expertly, the customs master inspects  
postgraduate credentials in each captain's script  
and assesses the excise due

the crew, returning well-off in some dividend  
of dexterity, superstition, and chance  
fathoms contempt at the helm

some hauled fishing mesh or harpooned leviathans  
or transposed merchandise from Shanghai or Liverpool  
while privateers or warships are porcupines passing by

while on the other hand, coming downstream  
through melting forest ignorance  
deadly as any rip current, as any metropolis

with charts, rudimentary as  
a canoe or kayak  
traverse bitter

names for the same stars  
argument or laughter, depending  
on the embrace

in all that I found welcome

still, you know seasoned voyageurs  
who will fear water

## CRAB

Atlantic horseshoe  
Atlantic mole, Acadian and longwrist hermit  
Atlantic hairy hermit, Atlantic lyre, Atlantic rock  
Jonah, European green, lady, Asian shore  
Atlantic sand fiddler, Atlantic marsh fiddler

all resembling  
individuals I know here  
at play, at work, at church

in contrast to blue-point, Dungeness, king  
devoured elsewhere

the Old Bay and vinegar  
or drawn butter

or shell, in Caribbean soup  
or on tree limbs, in the Everglades

all scuttle, scuttle  
along

## TRADER BLOW

the wind embosses  
vibrating  
fingerprints

that change  
identity  
from Chinese peasant

to kaleidoscopic  
Lakota Sioux  
fish scales in sunlight

\* \* \*

captains who tired  
of ordering sails trimmed  
and reset

sporadically settled  
in a large white house  
on a town green

somewhere in mountains  
far from the ocean  
where wind rarely ceases

\* \* \*

the common is greener  
than currency portraits  
the color of sea-foam

when the sea-fog breaks  
their lawn recoils  
from waves concealing crags

then they remember  
how stillness once  
held them at graveside



## FREE AND EASY

rolling in a hammock  
or gently in a boat

rolling along  
rolling home

waves rolling too

## SHELLS UNDER THE RIGGING

fingers stiff, numb  
on ice-encased rigging

any fire in the hull  
a hazard

tend the footing, Jack,  
and stay dry, if you can

steering around the storm

\* \* \*

hell comes without  
flame  
without smoke  
under the prow

\* \* \*

impressed  
by chance misfortune

or the flight from somebody  
gone astray

rolled together, creaking  
skin to crab shell

all the same  
lost, for the cold duration

## CHAPTER AND VERSE

the story of Jonah  
is not really about  
a whale

Noah, a comedy about futile effort  
and response  
more than survival  
turned tragic

(a Yankee shipyard demands  
hundreds in their scurry  
hardly a father and three sons)

Paul, after the shipwreck  
we're getting closer

to parting the seas

to stilling the storm  
and walking on water  
without fear

## EX-LOVERS, SOUTH OF LONG SANDS

this planet tilts fifteen fishing boats  
from the horizon  
before anxious hurricanes

flush the bankroll jetty  
rogues in bathrobes  
lead their flocks wherever

National Ocean Survey Benchmarks  
glint with abrasion beside  
shredded wire lobster pots

stone cleaved from rampart  
saucers, bowls, valleys cup  
tumbling sea-foam projectile

ski-craft in watery disjoint  
upend beyond sand-dusted brass  
once again, it appears

I've really done more  
to preserve their genius  
than they have

# PENOBSCOT BAY PARTICULARS

1

what if the tide never turns  
but waits to be submerged  
in the next high tide  
one after another until  
the whole city is inundated?

sailboats would go under  
on their moorings, perhaps still  
rocking mostly one side  
from perpendicular

the wharf and its autos  
would mean nothing  
while the moon ignores her orbit

2

masts sway  
like speedometers

or gauges  
missing their dials

3

a whirlpool, however large or compact  
swirls within myriad currents  
that knit the harbor

some talk of changing public opinion  
or the incumbent party  
but don't reckon the vortex  
swimmers approach  
    laughing to each other

any remorse  
over their drowning  
will ring hollow

3

while ducktrap is a fish  
a store touts its Ducktrap Decoy

whether for some waterfowl or the fish  
lingers in question

awaiting a retort  
from Daffy, Donald, or Daisy

as for the fish? only silent  
    disdain

## DRIVING NAILS

near the waterline, someone's hammering  
throughout the day, someone's always  
hammering

a staccato telegraph  
of winter's approach or gratitude  
so little demands repair  
or just some old goat's survived

though when the hammering ceases  
he may be eating a sandwich  
or sawing a board to be hammered  
yes, two taps secure its position

in the quiet, he's  
gone off to the supply house  
for a another box of nails, another size  
a door slams from another direction  
where new hammering erupts

before the man puts his hammer down  
on a leather tool belt  
and then orders a beer

you'll find boxes of hammering  
in the tool shed, brown paper bags  
of hammering in the mud room  
old jars of hammering



on his truck bed

open any one  
and his arm and shoulder  
begin moving  
the whole world as his anvil

## UNAMPLIFIED, DOMESTICITY

Noah's wife  
and the daughters-in-law

are the real story  
Begin!

if you can  
with maiden's tresses

with sea lettuce

the ladies, the tears  
the absent years

the hornwrack, smelling of lemon

# GIDEON

## 1

in a beachside motel lacking  
a Gideon's Bible beside its saggy beds

it's a mystery  
just what else might be missing

I, for one, wouldn't go looking  
under the mattress

even at these off-season rates

## 2

off-season, an indolent tourist village  
still awakens with Boston newspapers

rolled up on narrow sidewalks only  
now most stores open about noon if at all

and workmen pound new yellow shakes  
between weathered gray before the dew lifts

their rounds of hammering and rolling surf  
repeat a brazen dance figure in a limited palette

of blue and nearly beige you could render  
the clouded and sandy past overcut  
and overgrazed  
    excepting the stooped plumes of wild grasses

3

an earlier Quaker dove pigment might  
whet the salt-air and pepper mercies

    appearing now

as two couples gleaning the beach  
precisely as four aging women

    once the gulls raise their aprons

4

tan sand, deep blue water  
deep blue sky, touch of green  
    against the cliffs  
gray houses or driftwood

deceptively peaceful  
the lulling surf

surfcasters at dawn

wary of ferocity just below the horizon  
or water's surface  
approaching the realms of Jezebel and Baal

Sunday dawn or sunset  
matching the moon  
(heart) breakers

# GEMINI

## 1

### COLOR SCHEME

based on a crabshell  
found on a Wellfleet beach  
russet or ochre or even a dark purple  
on primrose cream

perfect for a cover or bedroom

how perfect  
walking on sand in a stiff breeze on a clear morning  
at the end of June  
after overnight hail

## 2

### BOOMERS

breakers or thunder  
cracking  
on rockweed

3  
MARKERS

at this hour yesterday  
there was no MEN or WOMEN  
lettering anywhere on the cliff-top  
restrooms

today, so neatly imposing  
a question to previous puzzlement

## WELLFLEET, 8 A.M.

orioles  
oysters & mussels

cottontail by the house  
large deer tracks along the road

scarlet tanager in flight

after thunderstorms in the night  
cloudless with wind  
surf calm, algae-free for a change

Maguire Landing (who are they kidding?)  
way too open for berthing

Lecount Hollow  
Lecount Hollow Road  
Lecount Hollow Beach, confirmed  
at Marconi Beach National Park Service signpost

Highland Light is also  
called the Cape Cod Light

Truro Beach has High Head (Beach)  
on Head of the Meadow (Trail)

sandstone  
column in a bluff  
of sand



and the Earth goes round  
rounding quartz  
and sea-wave  
rounding cloud vapor  
the sun in its arc

## CUT SHORT, BEHIND

herring and flounder  
cod and halibut  
    by the ton  
among others

booms and nets

drumming up the channel

wrack fringe tubeweed  
knotted wrack

no more the pig-tailed sailor

# THE SUGAR, THE TEA, AND THE RUM

## 1

each storm left me freer  
though we fought its current

I remember they were beautiful  
yet there's no going back

even the gravel dances  
in its resistance

## 2

having chosen, to admire  
    now the array  
I won't touch or summon

a golden haired ponytail  
a particular line of bust  
    or bum  
ankle or thigh  
blue eyes or brown  
even the freckles

forgone, by decision  
by vow, destiny, determination

forgone, by rejection  
force, signs of unavailability  
aging, timing, locale

the exquisite sexuality of all  
these nearly perfect bodies  
so perfectly revealed, so teasing  
each in two-piece exposure  
of navel rings, tattoos,  
promises of thickening to come  
some coolly aloof, intense

but the sixteen-year-olds  
from Albany or Montreal  
come large breasted, open-faced  
and converse with me in the surf

not yet wounded or heart-torn,  
not yet bitter

3

one stretches out  
fully displayed  
oblivious  
all her attention  
to the sun  
her warm body and skin  
– the earphones, especially

(what happened to radios  
all blaring different stations?  
– CDs and tapes, for starters)

the blatant sexuality  
untouchable – perfect sunrise  
lean limbs, soft without  
slackness, thickness, laxity  
nothing yet sagging  
nothing yet faded or fading

two others are everything coy  
inviting, shy  
still full of yearning, hope, expectation  
awaiting the final growth spurt,  
the ultimate height  
– the bust size reality

without betrayal, blue pain

despite strong wind and cool air temperature  
the surf's glorious

walking the breakwater, overhearing two teens

“are we really so ugly? I don't  
understand how she's ...”  
one to the other, as I pass

I can't refrain from saying softly  
"you're not ugly" and keep walking  
in a wonder if I were only decades younger  
what I'd do, they have no idea  
of their timeless appeal

"oh, thank you!" one chirps, looking back  
as if Heaven itself had spoken

here, with a soft edge of the ocean  
contrasting with the soft pink of the sky

4

small waists, small ankles  
everyone  
dancing on sand

out from

pickleweed  
eelgrass  
cordgrass

## ON THE SHORE

1

that skinny-assed blonde  
can't be their mama  
coming, going in the morning

seven baby toes  
point skyward from a  
yellow bath towel  
covering a blue  
carriage, a placid  
high noon

in a straw hat and billowing pants  
bare-chested, he's all show

save the baby bottle  
and cooler he carries

2

all that lipstick  
just to walk the beach

who do they think  
they're fooling?

“You can always tell  
when a dog’s happy”

3

the horse in the surf  
carries blonde honey  
from a stream of four pregnancies

while the mother

wrapped in a beach towel  
resembles a gull  
standing toward the wind

4

white gauze pants streaming  
around bronzed legs move  
a drunken goddess across hot sand



TO BE SO LUCKY,  
WATCH YOUR STEP

the ubiquitous mother hovering with a camera  
captures a family scene  
posterity may ask why she wasn't present  
at the beach or ballpark or birthday  
why the photograph  
holds only half of the picture

between folded lawn chairs  
and a cooler or tote bag  
of towels, books, or snacks  
two grandparents waddle  
toward crashing water

with cold-eyed potato-chip lust  
a gull assesses me  
and shrieks, inadvertently  
summoning a posse

the leathery old women  
with gold ankle chains and  
skin absurd as mahogany  
are up from Florida

a giant crab sculpted in sand  
has already lost both claws  
to rising tide and encroaching dark  
  
and I wonder why I'm hungry

# GOLDEN VANITY

## 1

the lifeguard  
flicking  
her pierced tongue  
after moving the white stand

sun, blue water, blue sky  
fine sand the color of flesh  
still not tanned

so much lighter  
than the flesh of sun-worshippers

half-moon

low-tide

midmorning

## 2

the idealized ranges  
among rounded or lithe  
large breasted with tiny waists  
or small, with long legs

tall or short  
blonde, sometimes

“I’m doing all the work”  
the rudder says  
to the sails

in all their imperfection

3

of course, this is the season of sunshine  
between hag storms

the thickening in thighs and waist  
may assume its own beauty  
depending on the air

its qualities  
intelligent, playful, graceful  
caring

the mothers who herd  
in ancient ways, perhaps  
within shared secrets  
or a code  
learned in waiting  
however solitaire  
however many children or

closets and dishes

perchance coagulating  
into more wisdom  
than you'd think  
    humanly possible

these are women  
we never see  
in Hollywood

as for the men, what happens?  
some duty to keep driving  
more than a particular car model itself  
    a job title, an address

tattoos or muscles  
or growing beer gut

those turned forlorn, invisibly leashed  
trailing their wives or daughters  
through the factory outlets

all that can erupt  
murderous, jealous, inquisitive

the animal nature  
awaiting the arena, the stadium  
the snowmobile or Jetski

or Harley ride

mute, bovine, in their own ways

or leathery bronzed  
adorned in gold chains

or soon turning stony  
fossilizing  
in open air

shells scattered along the shore  
and highway

4

wind current  
water current

current affairs

all these divorces  
maybe they'll knock  
the price down

## SMALL FRY

Gould's Trumpetworm  
looking to all the world like sand

spoonworms

speckled flatworm, milky ribbon worm  
the many segmented worms  
(rolled up into a body when threatened)

shells of northern white chiton  
diluvian punturella  
spiral margarite  
wide lacuna  
the tiny periwinkles  
flat skinea  
three-lined basketsnail  
solitary bubble  
fuzzy onchidoris  
graceful aeolis  
shag-rug nudibrand  
northern dwarf-tellin

if you're close  
or have a yen  
for maritime bonsai  
of a zoological twist

dig in

# SUMMER SHINE

## 1

supposing all these people were ducks  
playing around the water

two kites and four American flags

reverse  
with the unseen wind

## 2

the parade keeps rolling in  
against tide, from the other direction

so organized, those  
with wagons lugging chairs  
umbrellas, coolers, buckets and shovels,  
towels – maybe a tent  
mallets and games or toys

to come to the beach  
and erect a tent

at the high-tide line  
on a clear hot day



obstructs the view  
with no purpose

now, if only the rubber viper  
floating in the child's hand

would lead to panic! and clearing

beware of undertow  
and apply sunscreen

3

a pair of legs  
a pair of fish

thrashes

demonstrating  
how light sparkles

when it dances

4

he becomes so sunburned  
he gives a new meaning  
to "lobsterman"

with or without Old Glory  
blue awnings shade windows along the beach  
in all matters of propriety, as she says

“you’re not to knock  
other people’s castles down  
– that’s the bottom line”

## WRIGHT AT SPRUCE CREEK

late afternoon, high summer  
    tide running out  
soon exposing broad mudflats  
    Megan ventures far out at sunset  
a fawn approaches her  
    then scoots off  
each step, a sucking sound  
    “Where’s your momma?”

in the pebbled beach, squirting  
    clams  
where earlier  
    muddy mushroom clouds flowered  
my wife had never seen that, either  
    some six inches or so  
    nearly a chorus

will it rain?  
will it rain soon?

after another limp-paper day  
foggy or overcast, sun trying to break through

this was to have been a beach outing  
    already I hear thunder

loud rock music from a boat or a distant party  
    finally mixing with church bells

“All Things Bright and Beautiful” and  
a Whittier hymn

late afternoon thundershowers daily  
a real blowing gullywasher yesterday

back in town  
at the fishladder, river herring are running  
but researchers keep the eels

# LITTLE FISH, DON'T CRY, DON'T CRY

1

here, there  
the swishing  
slap

foaming lines  
crashing  
return home

an apron draws back  
and under  
this dancing petticoat

under sun  
white rippling  
blue ocean

overhead  
polished

“You’d better fear me”  
the ocean repeats, “even  
if you only ride me, I can  
crush you. See all these bubbles?  
Sometimes fish drown.”

in the distance, a sail

out where I wafted  
beside minke and humpback whales

a fish that became smoke  
sprouts a wing

2

“you’re always on deadline,”  
the surf accuses  
in my wife’s voice

in the bog  
even a moose calf carries  
the weariness of aging

3

Union Bluff Hotel  
York Beach, late afternoon  
everyone paired, like porpoises  
– Shrek, in sand sculpture, sunning  
at the center of attention

when we leave after 5  
tide’s way out and still receding  
New Moon

## COUNTERPOISE

all the water in our cells  
senses kinship

yet fears drowning

in the night  
    or winter  
especially

the undertow  
of desires

the tide in our souls

each one of us, 60 trillion cells  
each one, with this tension

## ***PART IV: Tide chart, in the heart***

*Vaughn Williams  
and Howard Hanson  
Behold!*

*Melville  
more than  
Whitman  
more than Olson*



## ESTUARY

from the north  
the Piscataqua takes the Cocheco  
Great Works, Salmon Falls  
their next steps

from the south  
the Great Bay flows into Little Bay  
before pouring out into the Piscataqua

as their tributaries

the Squamscott at Exeter  
Lamprey at Newmarket  
Oyster at Durham  
Bellamy at Dover

with bald eagles all winter

miles of shoreline  
resembling Maine coast  
to the northeast

the two bays, largely unnavigable  
in all their swaying grasses at low tide

the flushing, of heart action

# ADIEU, WITH SMELT

## 1

salt air! across the mud flats at Exeter  
across the Piscataqua at Bloody Point, too

precisely, what color was the ocean?  
must have been blue, reflecting the sky  
rather than its gray or green garb

what stands out is its clarity  
with underwater boulders appearing to be fish  
moving in a current where the optics  
of each unbroken surge about to become a wave  
distort the objective size and location, so  
careful now, watch your toe

and despite a water temperature of 63  
the lifeguards bundled up in white hoods  
“like KKK” or Klansmen, my wife said

new moon, intense tide running out

returning in opposition to a squall line  
tongues of lightning  
I hoped would track east but instead  
hits from the north, after we'd watched its motion  
off Walkers Point

with one sweep of white oblivion  
everyone scurries for the parking lot

though I stay with the lifeguards at their tower  
and learn of the two submarines

    one Russian, one ours  
just offshore when Putin visited W  
helicopters and Navy all over this site  
even the jetty closed off so the two officials  
could speed in to the bait shop

now, the air clears quickly  
but cooler than I'd like for swimming

Goths in their black  
come to York Short Sands  
in the late afternoon  
five guys, two females, one with red-dyed hair and a lithe  
body  
who quickly strips to a tiny black bikini and lights a  
cigarette  
this fearless one who will enter the cold water  
who still clasps tight to her man, who remains oblivious  
as the leader of the pack he is or she  
    who bewitches

followed by days of alternating storm and clearing

a deluge on my way to work  
towering thunderheads before sun and hail

the electrical power zapped five hours and  
again the next day, surly tourists  
without air conditioning or television

while we're in the sun and majestic waves  
    knock me over  
(though still too cold for prolonged exposure)  
slate gray out at sea, a distant American flag at the point  
blown flat out, from the south, an ominous sign

so we amble off, dress, go to the Goldenrod for chowder  
and the lights flicker repeatedly and then  
in a deluge of rain and hail rattling on the tin roof  
    go dark, mid-afternoon  
14 calls for the York Beach fire station, including boats in  
distress  
our car, in the motel parking lot, in a foot of water

scattered or isolated T-storms daily the past ten days  
    ditto ahead

Sunday so lovely I swim the length of the beach  
Tuesday, 9 a.m., too cold  
Thursday afternoon, swimming again

a family from Youngstown, Mahoning Valley, Ohio  
shows me the starfish they caught  
to take back to their two saltwater aquariums  
“the starfish we buy are shy, they hide”

a swim followed by a beer on the Union Bluff Hotel deck  
a BLT, too

swim four times in seven days  
high summer

Handel arias blaring on my commute one day  
Walter Trout blues the next

great breakers, a few knocking me off my feet  
chill to the body core  
gray clouds looming ominously

the surf calmed out while I dry off  
I've timed this perfectly, the low tide turning

again, at high tide with triple breakers  
dive under the first, try to leap over the second  
get knocked down or off my feet by the third  
can't help laughing

water and air both perfect  
surf stirred no doubt by Hurricane Hanna  
far to the south  
now it figures, without lifeguards!  
beach populated, not crowded  
in this last swim of this season

when the remnants sweep through

we get four inches of rain  
and spot flooding in Manchester and Concord

a day after surfboarders ride twenty seconds a stretch  
Long Sands, multiple breakers  
wind from the shore ripping tails of spray off the breakers  
ever so breathtaking

at night, the highway flooding  
a breaker splashes over my windshield  
I find seaweed in under my chasis

you'd be mistaken to assume such turbulence  
has a purpose  
beyond itself

2

in coming to love the ocean at night  
its isolation and moods, the sizzling sound  
as water runs out through a bed of pebbles

approaching a pile of stones, I observe

LT



TT

and think, “how sweet” until, up closer  
letters scrawled in wet sand fill out the message

Large Tits



Tiny Tits

as a love song of our times, I'd venture

3

Saturday cloudless, we stop for ice cream

one man actually lazes far out in the surf  
with fading September  
a few bikinis sun on the sand  
another at poolside

Sunday set for a half-marathon

in a line, holding hands at the beach  
a dozen Ohio Amish behold an ocean and  
at last, the mystery of tide

though I must explain to my daughter  
the idea of the van driver  
in such travels

one night  
by the shuttered bowling arcade, Fun-o-Rama, and  
Surfside Restaurant  
a baby seal stranded at midnight  
can't walk or turn over, but rolls on its side

I approach within a foot and a half  
as it looks up, imploringly in its softness  
what reassuring, comforting words could come from me  
hoping it can float away in the approaching tide  
its long whiskers, big eyes like the Smuttynose Brewery  
logo

I'm not a commercial fisherman or lobsterman  
with a pistol

and another  
my daughter calls to say the motel has a dune in its parking  
lot  
and half the porch chairs are gone, she's never seen such  
surf  
as that morning, except on the Weather Channel  
now it's mid-October, and the Patriots game plays out in  
snow  
while we're spared the brunt of this storm



wild surf, 11 p.m. while bringing her home  
waves crashing over the Long Sands roadway  
she cowers

5

now, fully  
understand why they close up  
all winter

these barnacles, when the tide's out

## CIVIC DUTY

the captain's obligatory cabinet  
of curiosities

surviving the common shipworm  
as much as tempests and pirates

coastal glimmers of Africa, Asia, South America  
Australia

tales of exotic tribes  
their furs and fabrics

his contribution to the Greek Revival institute  
or Atheneum  
or the square, on the quay

stuffed monkey  
as much as the parrot  
or inscribed ivory

## SEPTEMBER, THE CAPE

1

*Wellfleet, at their grandfather's*

two perfect horseshoe crabs  
adorn the table  
of the uninhabited house  
while he's in Florida

in the fridge, Heineken dark  
"your surprise" – available across the highway

Wellfleet and just think  
oysters or the saltmarsh

sunlight breaks through  
my desire to travel lighter than this  
unlike the children

an array of silver cups, a blinding turn  
the chameleon hiding nowhere  
but itself or the air, last week:  
"You don't look happy these days"  
also: "What do you want from me?"  
how I wish I could answer the latter

pine / oak / locust scrub  
"tick country" even the lawn

tiny green acorns  
dry cranberry bushes, as part of the groundcover

in his yard	}	in the house
sand everywhere		the arranged ginger jars
the grass brown		his collection
with pine needles		Rookwood Pottery, at
least		
the book		

patch of mussels, each one the size of a pea

round brick  
worn by the ocean

of course if we lean back, even nearly at shoreline  
the water's over our heads

water taller than I am  
is the problem

or water that sweeps you  
off your feet in this ocean so clear  
we see fish swimming past us – one  
a striper two feet long, the other a cod,  
halibut, mackerel – I don't know fish, really  
bigger than my daughter beside me  
just days past twelve

what kind of life has this been?  
with flashes of brilliance, just enough  
remaining for harvest

*her knife, sharp and long*

sailing into the wind  
repeatedly, returning and now  
through the years

windowpanes  
two over two  
traditionally  
live our lives

one, in a denim jacket  
while the other, in a blue swimsuit  
nap in clear breeze

I wonder how people fall asleep in the sun  
in chairs, at that

Rachel, my wife, informs me of changes  
how so much has overgrown now  
she no longer sees the saltmarsh or cove  
from the dining room, even traces  
of Reenie's garden have vanished

ever dutiful, busily Rachel thins hostas and day lilies  
where Grandpa has taken an ax to their roots

“and I came to the Cape for this?” but the motion  
grounds her in a way the surf grounds me

blue sky, blue ocean  
warm water compared to Maine  
choppy surf “knocks a child over”  
happened once and now Rachel won’t  
bring them back here but prefers  
bayside, where the water’s warmer

I believe her, yet

when we walk the road to the Atlantic full on  
she observes  
overgrowth around cottages and houses  
is often quite pronounced  
to go with the windswept, cracked gray of dunes cabins  
and the ever present shake siding

all night, all day  
the highway mocks  
the surf’s rhythm

in the swells with Megan, she snarls  
“I thought you said it was warm”  
“warmer than Maine!”  
and laments the waves aren’t bigger  
though they knock us off our feet and  
fill our suits with small gravel  
(viz Grandpa’s bathroom floor after her shower)

turning overcast, trying to spit rain  
cool, too  
no swimmers but three dozen surfers in one stretch  
kids sledding on the dune cliffs  
30 feet, maybe, the low spots  
100 in others

a seal, faroff, away from the surfboarders  
feel the sun now, too much on my face

wind and wind gong  
fiddler crab and mussels  
the saltmarsh tide turning  
chalk and slate outside the general store

oak, pine, and locust trees  
a mole scurrying along the foundation

all these beachcombers  
tomorrow expect no one  
after the weekend

“we’ll take you back”  
the waves cackle and rage

will the kid ever learn, packing a whole suitcase for herself  
(too much and still no swimsuit)  
for a short trip?

morning water cold but great breakers, a great workout,  
knocked over, body slams – lose my trunks once, saved at  
the ankles

fortunately, out of season

surf calms but still choppy, very windy  
a seal head appears, just briefly

Sunday morning, clearly the last swim of the season

a record amount of rain for the month  
Hurricane Wilma decaying offshore  
kicked up quite a show here

twenty-foot swells crashing on the rocks

2

### *Provincetown*

we always return to the Portuguese Bakery  
(same site a century)

meat pies

sweet bread loaves

kale soup: a bit of sausage (linguica)

potato, kale, noodle, kidney bean

“what they eat when the fish aren’t biting”





great black-backed gulls

the lowlands

so clear some say the south shore islands  
and headlands can be seen from Pilgrim Tower

ocean now olive green, not the glorious cobalt  
of morning  
and saltspray rose is another name for *rosa rugosa*

its blossoming  
congregation of enameled green beetles

Friday night raw oysters, butterfly shrimp  
vina verde

3

*of what they call the Lower Cape*

Kerouach Road, off Route 6, one more spelling  
the authors, yes  
the town claims, though it's

been a while since I've seen so many New York plates  
driving in the country

take Small's Swamp Trail, Truro  
pitch pine (the best, said Thoreau, for heating

and a typical house took 40 cords for winter  
black oak, bear oak, wild sarsparilla (ginger family  
sweet pepperbush, bull briar

the kettles (sinkholes) and ponds  
in addition to beach

evening, the bay from Truro  
so Mediterranean  
this could be more than Italian cuisine

#### 4

*Monday morning, with traffic*

the working Cape  
traffic with school buses, construction pickups  
teachers and grocery clerks

three surfers in a van with Maine plates drive up  
in the overlook  
decide the surf's breaking too close to shore  
drive off, with Australian and German accents

the parking lot has one name  
(Maguire Landing) on the map  
the beach, another (LaCounte)  
on the Park Service map  
posted at Marconi

even in fine weather

“No Dogs Allowed” but of course there are  
often in pairs

no sailboats in sight either day

fishing boats today / commercial lanes too close?

what’s next?  
where’s the politics?

people hover above, indecisive  
regarding the sandy slope  
to slip down, then trod upward

5

*final day*

a speckled snake, a white-bellied squirrel

Grandpa’s squirrels all have frisky tails  
even when they chase each other  
up and down a tree  
maybe they’re just itchy

“watch out for dogs and hunters”  
(wildlife management area sign)

“hunter orange cap or hat required”  
in season

crickets and grasshoppers  
late summer

a horseshoe crab shell the size of a helmet  
edge of the saltmarsh, Dummer Cove  
as the clean water test  
– where would you be without it?

bite of decay

“how do you know when it’s time to go?”  
a vacation within a vacation  
getting away

## WALKING

Marginal Way

Cliffwalk

York Harbor ledge pathway

all

set against great estates

salt spray

and churning

# A HUNDRED STEPS TO THE SEA

## 1

along the shoreline, the heads of two gray seals  
bob and glisten

later, three seals together, lazy

and then, a dozen seals basking and lolling ensemble  
twenty feet out  
“you never see that”

while strolling a ribbon  
between sand cliff and ocean

I try estimating one ladder or stairway  
from the cottage above

later, two young wives  
from Atlanta and Nashville  
cute as can be  
in their annual escape from their husbands

tell me they rent a place  
just over the crest

109 steps      “Every year we count ’em  
and they’re never the same”

against shoreline hammered every fifteen seconds  
by a three-foot curler or six-foot breakers

judging by surf fishermen  
at fifty- to a hundred-foot intervals

still, where the high apron of beach has been cut away  
at high tide, I'm forced to remove shoes  
roll up my pants and allow the surge to swell around me

it's warmer than Maine  
now after Labor Day

"Had I known, I would have brought my swim trunks"  
"but it's pretty rough, too"

hard to believe I'm walking on oysters or clams  
the receding wave sighs  
when I glance back at bubbling sand

another seal patrols the shore

when I see more of them in one day  
than in all the rest of my life

comb jellies – white melting ice cakes  
gelatinous to the touch



slightly resilient, like grapes  
all over the place, where the water's just been

scallops, they call 'em – open up in the water  
like jellyfish (their relations  
but these don't sting

crab shells, a few mussels:  
somebody's eating well:  
a decaying small shark

3

just three boats visible white specks  
plus the freighter over the horizon

yes, 3 vessels  
where yesterday  
we saw none

wide open ocean

at my feet

would I rather be  
kelp  
or the indestructible  
green rope  
tossed from the sea?

sea spinach

4

just north of Marconi Station  
keep thinking I hear jets  
under the relentlessly crashing surf

many crab shells at the waters edge

some decaying fish up to two-feet long {cod  
strands of spine  
a gull leg and webbed foot

all to myself, step out and pee

a pair of footsteps  
one going my direction  
the other, approaching

above, beach plum like large blueberries

Marconi Station “you’ll know by the bricks”  
knocked down to the Atlantic

but I see just one red cube and  
way down the shoreline  
what I think old pier pilings

begin moving as I approach  
schoolchildren, field trips

the real debris appears as milk jugs  
clear plastic bottles and cups, foam plastic coffee cups  
and insulation, yellow nylon netting, multicolor nylon rope  
a battered lobster pot, a child's toy outboard motorboat  
a cooler melted in one corner, stray firewood neatly cut  
bottle caps, a large oil filter like a radar cover canister  
(haven't seen a condom yet), a black inner sole to a size  
eight or nine shoe, pressure-treated lumber, nothing  
too revealing so far, Glad bags, drinking straws  
an aluminum shard barnacle embossed, a rusted horseshoe

5

as for cottage colors  
on the bluff

gray shingles  
blue trim

each one with a brick chimney  
and fireplace romance

my wife contends a seaside cottage  
should be plain, simple  
something that can be blown away in a storm  
without horrific loss

## ZIG-ZAG WINE-GLASS

hydroid, lacy, with polyps

sea staghorn  
green rope seaweed  
Irish moss  
sea sorrell – soft sour seaweed  
sausage seaweed  
rockweed, some with bladders

all the sludge and grit  
the sea mucus

black rock so slick you slide off  
lucky not to have sprained an ankle

in petal-like tentacles: anemones  
elegantly  
secreting a protective coating

disk in the sand  
sticky bumps  
rhythmic pulsations

urchins, their spikes  
around an olive

LATE AFTERNOON  
AUTUMN SUN

1

180-degree  
sweep of ocean  
seen from a cliff

great slow curve  
of our planet

eight vessels  
are barely  
specks on this expanse

two seals so close  
Rachel observes their features

“here I am”  
the great breaking surf

2

toddler tracks  
bird tracks  
    out for the show

car tires

looping over bicycle  
beside shoe  
gull, dog, and mouse  
imprints in sand  
leaving the parking lot

everybody's  
been to the beach

parasailing / surfing  
weekend

3

Juan skirts New England  
slams New Brunswick as a tropical storm

a danger of frost on Thursday  
or we may be spared

by our proximity to the sea

4

moonlight

couples  
entwined

on sand

man, we're getting older, America  
still ill-at-ease in this dwelling

# FOLDING

## 1

late afternoon      clear, cool

Ogunquit River icy but the surf  
kicked up by Fabian now well to our east  
proves rather pleasant, I walk right in  
ride the swells for twenty minutes  
maybe more

but the air, mid-70s with breeze  
just won't warm me

autumn begins tomorrow

## 2

yes, sea-fog  
first day of autumn

ocean restless  
maybe angry

the lichen gray sea

thrashes, gnaws, rips  
in a feeding frenzy



foaming waves tear the shore

stark drama, stoic nature

a waterfall sounds more focused  
than this widespread surf  
maybe it's just wind

no time for interruption, interrogation, imagination  
this is it

## ANOTHER FINAL SWIM OF THE SEASON

great waves at high tide  
mid-September, swimming  
more comfortable  
than the Fourth of July

ride the river's fast strong current out  
beyond the safety rope

an older crowd – adults, mostly  
few children, and those, preschool  
no teens  
no lifeguards

wind from the south  
coming up the coast  
presses the warmer water close to shore  
without blowing cold  
but still warns of rain

maybe the Boon Island weather buoy  
correctly read  
water temperature at 64

all this joy, with disbelief

## ROCK GARDEN

seaside plantain

rosette  
sunburst  
sulfur dust

lichens

rosy laver

dulse

swallowtail, in passing

## RAW OYSTERS AT THE DANCE

while one daughter and her boyfriend are off to West Bath  
I take the other and her friend to the contradance  
in Kingston  
and there, at the break, Smokey of Old Grey Goose  
(the band)  
opens a cooler and begins shucking oysters he harvested  
five or six hours earlier, offers me one and eventually four  
of the largest, plumpest tastiest raw mollusks I've  
encountered to date

I'd say, Grandpa Williams, in Wellfleet, take note!

late November's the best time, now that they've fattened  
says Smokey, exhibiting the shell with its rings  
exhibiting their growth  
in a year and a half  
or two

as we chat, I learn his daughter was the young fiddler  
at Bowdoinham, back when, with the intermission waltz  
she was teaching another six-year-old  
I began dancing, with the woman in conversation  
before everyone else joined in

yes, my elder daughter was up in Smokey's  
neck of the woods, as they say

“the Hennesseys? West Bath?”

“yup”

“good people”  
with oyster beds of their own

## THE LANDING

Mozart's *Cosi*, for me, life's rarely been  
frivolous flirtation  
(contrast Bill Clinton's gusto at anything)

how ugly, bored and boring  
those Bush twins!

G'pa, on the other hand  
joined the Air Force  
and wound up along the bay

scallops, sea scallops

plankton

## WHY ONE PRESIDENT HATED THE OCEAN

sailing takes skill  
error can be fatal  
even a fish line  
can be humbling  
no falsehood  
holds up in the undertow  
poaching is a crime  
enforced by lobstermen  
with shotguns  
and the first disciples, men of the sea  
still rebuke pretenders  
messing with their haul

## CREST AFTER CREST

futilely, inscribing pages next to surf  
sand sticking everywhere

so much sun  
the beach remains  
an Impressionist  
impression

Labor Day  
everybody else packing up  
early

leaving the place open, free  
to breathe, this

blue and tan  
brief sabbatical

at last, I can return  
to mountains

# # #



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



As a native Midwesterner, Jnana Hodson did not see an ocean until he was 12. A decade would pass before his next encounter. By degrees, though, the daily tide changes have become familiar to his eyes and touch. He' learned to respect and fear the ocean's temperamental nature, as well as its bounty and sensual delights. It's not just the water, either, but the shoreline and inlets and the landmarks along the way. He can tell you of Gloucester, where one of the twin lights was doused after fishermen and sailors repeatedly confused the second beam for another referent and crashed – or of the lovely Twin Lights at Cape Elizabeth, Maine, where the unused older tower sstill stands in the background.

These days he lives in a former seaport in New Hampshire.

## ALSO BY JNANA HODSON

### Poetry:

- Blue Rock
- In a Heartbeat
- Johnny Badge
- Harbor of Grace
- Waves Rolling Too
- Returning to the Table
- Elders Hold
- Winged Death's Head
- Green Repose
- American Olympus
- Over the Mountain
- Back Pack
- Susquehanna
- Riverside
- Rust & the Wound
- Long Stemmed Roses in a Shattered Mirror
- There Is No Statuary in Our Garden Except for the Plastic Spacemen Occasionally Surfacing
- Home Maintenance
- Rat-Tat Oscar

## **Novels:**

- Big Inca Versus a New Pony Express Rider
- Hometown News
- Promise
- Peel (as in apple)
- St. Helens in the Mix
- Kokopelli's Hornpipe
- Daffodil Sunrise
- Hippie Drum
- Hippie Love
- Subway Hitchhikers
- Third Rail
- With a Passing Freight Train of 119 Cars and Twin Caboose
- Ashram

## **Non-Fiction**

- Revolutionary Light

Thistle / Finch Editions



Dover, New Hampshire USA