

Moving a Lighthouse: Cape Hatteras

by

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Coastal North Carolina's landscape was once dominated by small fishing villages. These villages are losing their fish-houses to million dollar beach houses. The natives of small places like Hatteras are losing control of their communities, both as a result of their own desire for tourism dollars and because of encroachment from outsiders with specific environmental and/or economic interests. The local economy that was once based primarily on commercial fishing is now based on tourism. The current generation of coastal natives is less likely to stay here; property taxes are high, wealthy outsiders are paying high prices for prime real estate, and even nature itself seems bent on decimating a style of life that's lasted hundreds of years.

My collection seeks to capture a time and place that is fading away, to document with poetry some aspects of a sea change that is both difficult to witness and seemingly inevitable. There is a different sense of ownership for a place like Hatteras. How the natives, transplant, and tourist claim ownership create an array of views. In the tradition of *Spoon River Anthology* I'm hoping to address these different points of view. I'm hoping my poems can bear witness to the past while, also coming to uneasy terms with possible transitions to an uncertain future.

I'm aware that the straightforward narrative style of these poems sets them outside of current period style. Stephen Burt's essay "Close Calls with Nonsense" points

out that the “elliptical” style has come as a reaction to narrative poetry that provided “easy epiphanies” (Burt 8) as well as a “focus on personality and emotions.” (Burt 8) My subject matter requires a medium through which its stories can convincingly be told. It was my intent to use a style that might be seen by some as nostalgic, because there is a nostalgic element to the fate of this changing place.

Poems about the coast place themselves easily in a category of beach poems, but small beach towns share connections to small towns everywhere; challenges, myths, and outside influences affect small towns regardless of location. This taken into consideration, the poems of my collection share traits with the landscape poetry of writers like Dave Smith and Campbell McGrath, whose poetry about, respectively, the Virginia and Florida coasts is topically similar to the poems in my collection. There is also a broader connection to writers like A.R. Ammons, specifically his North Carolina poems, who gives such reality to the landscape of southeast North Carolina.

Poets like Smith, McGrath, and Ammons exhibit diversity in subject matter and style, but they, as is the case with many others, tell the stories of a place. They tell these stories through large themes and unique details. This is where my collection fits in. I hope that my subject matter can earn this collection a right to a place in within a larger body of work that attempts, as its underlying goal, documentation. We are losing small towns to the interests of people from the outside and, in many cases, from the inside. These traditions and rights need to remain a part of American culture. Hopefully poetry, including poetry of the sort I am making a case for here, can help preserve at least the memories that will soon be all that remains of these small, coastal towns.

Moving a Lighthouse:

Cape Hatteras

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The Treaty of Sailors and Fishermen I

The smell of mackerel blood and Budweiser has saturated the worn planks of the wharf.
Fish boats bob on their strings like hounds on leashes ready to hunt.
I've learned to accept that my boat makes me an outcast in a village of fishing men,
my boat with big bed sheets for an engine is the destination, not the vehicle.

But we are together on the dock sipping marina coffee, with old hoodies over our ears.
We all know that a thirty-knot sou'wester peels through one's teeth and closes the inlet,
just like we know that our dock lines needed a turn on the windward side.
When did we become sailors and fishermen, who were once one in the same?

You don't really like me that much though because of a boat that goes out
just to go out. Your gleaming fiberglass monuments to fish all evolved from juniper
sailboats that used to fish these waters. The old fishermen used to be sailors.
So, at least we can still pretend that we like each other here sipping coffee.

On the Sideline

From the coffee bench, I watch cock-strutting mates and practiced captains
walk the morning dock. They step over water gaps and whip docklines
around stainless cleats like cowboys, too quick to second guess.
My fingers fumble a paper coffee cup until its heat has eased my arthritis.
Nine now, and those left on the dock won't work today, but morning's easy and slow.
There's no need for the quickness required when the marlin bite hot.
The ground is still wet from the morning shower, my bicycle seat too.
Pelicans with glaucoma perch on pilings around the fish table,
hoping for an easy bite of tuna, old retirees who once dove for dinner.
The ache returns to my joints, so I ready my raincoat.
I look at my hands and remember the motions they once knew.

Moving a Lighthouse

Some famous Orlando cartoonist made a t-shirt of the lighthouse
lifting her skirts and running away from the water.
People from all up 95 arrived in turtle top minivans.
They couldn't wait to see what shoes she had on,
running the 1600 yard dash over the sand.
Sun burned the memory of the beacon into the back of their retinas.

It was only at night the old light keepers came out
to watch the slow undulation of the four beams.
They all watched as she stood like a judge
and rolled by in front of the stars,
remembering the days of the Fresnel lens
and flame, who watched the ships.

Atlantic Tug-O-War

I heard yesterday, after an earthquake, New Zealand moved a foot
closer to Australia. We don't have earthquakes on Hatteras,
but Ocracoke keeps trying to sneak across the inlet,
grain by grain, so Hatteras won't notice the gap getting smaller.
There wasn't always an inlet, and I suspect the old lovers
want to be together again. Or maybe Hatteras broke it off
and will never rendezvous with Ocracoke again.
Sand fences and sea oats make the land's descent less dramatic.
The gray Atlantic pulls, and we push our sandcastle dunes back up.
We fight for every grain of sand.

Rotation

In the marsh, egrets move like sewing needles,
elliptical motion, the leg steps, the head shoots
forward as the sound of no sound
flutters through sawgrass.

Kayakers slice the water paddle into view.

Push and glide like the egret.

Somewhere between the egret and the sewing needle,
the kayaker is man in a machine.

Last in the pack and a breeze sucks
a grocery bag out of the kayak.

It tumbles to the egret that the kayakers never saw.

He follows it through the air
and shits when it lands beside him.

Strangers in a Plain Land

They come down from the Northeast cold,
where one pays for a pass to sunbathe on the beach.
Boardwalks and amusement parks on piers
are what they come here to escape,
here where the beaches are made of sand. No funhouse
to be lost in but your own.
"It's nice here," they say, but you don't got__ .

If we had cotton candy, tilt-a-whirl,
Pizza-parlor, ski-ball,
funnel cake, and neon,
we'd blast off like an Astro-pop entering
the orbit of Ocean City.

Bone Chilled

A whitecap bay breeze will push us along.
Dressed in our pea-coats, cleaned free of grunge,
proud at the tiller, steering the bow for each little plunge .
Cold spray stings our faces, pinched, rouged and wind burnt,
but there's nothing out here that can truly hurt.
We're gods of the sea, masters of brine,
there's nothing to stop us from feeling fine.
Blue water and whitecaps crash over the bow,
my hat washed away, knees shivering now .
My knuckles turn white gripping the rudder,
the muscles in my jaw start to shudder.
Steering for home, the course has been set.
My ego is bashed and my underwear wet.
The gods of the pond have been proven wrong.

Queen Trigger

Underwater I bob on inhaled oxygen,
an alien invading a world of vertical propulsion.
Sheepshead graze on a sunken jetty,
triggers roll over to get a better look.
I dangle near the surface, breathing through a tube.
In my hand the long spear must appear innocuous
because fish flock below me.
Sunlight dapples jazz on the ocean floor.
My stomach rumbles the bass line.

Sky Table

On a green spring afternoon,
we took home an old table
someone left on the roadside.
The wood worn, once blue,
sky-colored but faded and grey.

We planted it in the side-yard
surrounded it with orphaned chairs.
One green plastic, an old wooden desk chair,
a cedar plank nailed to two stumps
and a bar stool. When all were seated,
some towered and some were chin on table.

We started eating there; the weather
was fresh that spring.
Every day the two of us, some days
friends, sat in the dogwood's shade.
Meals were long affairs of cheap wine,
softball tomatoes and cheese
with French names we could not
pronounce. We cooked quickly and ate long.

As summer heated up, more friends
appeared with fresh flounder, cantaloupe,
green bottles of red wine, sweet corn.
Our tongues found purpose again,
around an abandoned table littered
with fine china we never expected
to use. Voices and glasses rang late
into the violet mosquito evenings.

Short Night

All the stars fell.
They landed in your hair
as it flew in the wind.

No need of breath
nor heartbeat.

Your feet skimmed
the surface, creating
mercury explosions
as they pounded the water.

We raced at speeds,
drawn by joy,
and the purest laughter.

You turned to the east.
I did not know why.
The silver night faded,
and you disappeared
into dawn. My breath
was back and I did not know my own footprints.

Hitching Post

Under the shady grove at the White Tarpon,
with Cuban music peppering the air, sitting in soft teak Adirondack chairs,
we sip rum and ginger beer. Grey bearded snowbirds mostly,
but a few of us under forty pencil in plot lines for wishful destinations.
It's a place I've dreamed, where talk is always of sail.
Words like *mizzen* and *clew* flow from our tongues
and are understood by all. A way-station where sailors swill
grog and laugh with one eye on the sea,
where our guts remain like chum in the current.

Widow's Walk

She, in the cool-fall dark,
hugs her knees. Not understanding
the love of the sea. Wind
creeps through the empty house behind her.

She sits out all night breathing
salt air every night.
Her body once filled her night shirt
that now hangs on brittle bones.

Hair that nearly rattles in the breeze,
a bone wind chime. A life
left to the salt corroding
everything it touches.

Widow's walks are for women
with something to look for.
She sits on her porch.
It is the fate of fisher-wives
to lose their fishermen.

Dividing Point

Across the harbor local kids back flip from the breakwater bulkhead.
Teens silhouetted by blazing water, are becoming aware
that their world is small, though their long legs bronze in the early sun.
The sounds of laughter splash across untroubled water.
This may be the last time diving, so close to the freedom of a driver's license.

One will go to college and find a boy from a city, whom she will take to the dock
and show the bulkhead; She'll remember scorching July afternoons.
One will stay and become a grandmother waitress,
watch her daughter's daughter do flips over the sound.

Atlantic Love Song

Coppertone creates milky drops of sweat,
not unlike beads that silently plash
from the mayonnaise water of the cooler.
Over the Death Valley dunes, toes fry
on the way to the cool Atlantic.
Bargain beach rafts crammed under arms
along with chairs and umbrellas.
The corner of the eye catches
a falling dollop of mustard
landing on the left bikini breast of a greased
girl sporting windshield shades.
Sitting on a Budweiser towel sunning
the white edges around her bikini
immaculate body, watching the slow beat of Atlantic swells pound the sand.

Ocean Riders

On the salty skin of earth, man skims for his pleasure.
Green tubes, crystal caverns pitch and plunge over our heads.
On the edge of the sea monster's world, we dare to dangle our feet.
Feeble lungs give us a minute or so under the blue.
We are the mouse in the jaws of the lion,
never believing we are at the bottom of the food chain.

Midnight Flounder

We sneak out in the dark, me, Turtle, and T-Bone,
with gigs in hand, shining under the moon.
“It’s perfect, no wind” we whisper.
Poling the canoe that sags under our load-
spotlights, batteries, a cooler piled high with beer
and ice for the flounder. Traveling
to the honey hole, the cooler loses weight.
Laughter grows louder, and the canoe
rocks a little more. In the shallows,
carefully exiting so we don’t spill
any beer, we begin the hunt.

Turtle has to have the good light.
Travis keeps an eye on the cooler.
We stalk silently, moving like Manteo
before he sailed away from paradise.
The lights illuminate an underwater world,
attract houndfish who nip at our legs
and flip gymnastically when we volley
the attack. Skates cruise coolly unafraid,
like finger mullet who jump in our lights.

I let Turtle lead my eyes, following
the scope of both lights.
I scan my light on the surface,
searching for direction, passing over the flats,
and I become blinded by a million mullet
filling the air, like shattered shards
of a broken mirror.

“There he is,” I say pausing, willing
to let Turtle stick the first flounder.
“Where?” “Right there,” my answer comes
as I lunge like an Indian hunter
toward the brown, speckled, flounder.
My spear, an extension of my arm,
strikes, snake-like, before the flounder
knows he is seen. I raise him victoriously
before I throw him in the cooler
in exchange for more beer.

The moon has fallen, the cooler carries

more flounder, and less beer,
to win. All smiles our beer stained shirts
reek of fresh flounder.
Intensity has left our eyes.
We trudge toward home, all high
fives, recollecting battle stories
of the midnight flounder fight.

Boatbuilding

In a cedar-shake barn with a glowing potbelly stove,
talk is of the bow flare on a skiff.
Standing on curled wood shavings,
I contemplate how many timbers
have come together in this room
to create something that takes us over water.
They're all for sporties these days,
no more blue collar meat wagons.

5:30

I suck rum punch through holes in my teeth.
The dead shit smell of the marsh rolls past on a sou'easter.
Low tide.

The only place I ever wanted to be
was ankle deep in the tide flat mud.
Wherever you go you're stuck.

I want to run out, chase fiddler crabs,
and get filthy enough for mom to get mad,
My rum is almost too heavy to raise to my lips.

Public Nuisance

It must have been night when they moved that house,
left too long on that Rodanthe beach.
Hollywood was gone and that blue shutter eye-shadow
had washed off in a thick nor'easter.

Richard and Diane moved out when the fighting got bad,
so nobody noticed the autumn swells pounding.
Even if somebody had seen, who would've cared?
At least in the summertime there were people around
who had a temporary interest in keeping her afloat.

Once winter washed in it was too easy
to let the house sink into that coooooool sand.
She used to be able to stand up to the scrutiny.
The lights were so bright she couldn't fake it.

For one hundred sixty nine thousand
someone bought a discarded piece of Hollywood.
The waves under the house made for a great shot,
but in the end it was head for the high ground.

Moss

Spanish moss keeps falling on my car.
I feel like I'm driving around
in a backyard Hatteras cemetery with power windows.
The thing about moss is that it doesn't blow away.
At highway speeds it clings, and I've even seen it creep against the wind.
You can't stop the dead, they're always clawing forward
like moss if you stand still too long.

Island Date Night

An Igloo and some oysters
warm the winter night.
Our faces drip words we know
and don't always like.

The girls laugh with glassy
globes of red, red wine.
Behind the glass
her eyes catch mine.

No words come quickly
to my swollen tongue.
The stone in my belly sinks
in a man-made sea of beer.

I find some words
that fall from my lips,
like a wing,
beating the sand.

She laughs
for the sake of her friend,
and my ego deflates
as the hairs on my neck
stand erect.

The bonfire is too far away
for my face to be red,
so I hide it in dune shadow.

Bait Dance

A man on a rock jetty silhouetted
by the drowning sun watches the water.
His eyes scan the slick surface,
broken only by ripples
that reveal mullet lurking below.
The wader-wearing man pirouettes
in brown boots on the balls of his feet,
a ballerina, and at the end
he lets the net fly. It shishes
through the air and pops open
like fourth of July fireworks
fall parachuting over the water.

The leash slides through rawhide-
hands as the net descends,
bounces on the bottom and he cinches it,
the fish trapped within.
Water beads down the net.
He leans against its weight,
back arched, toes pointed
in perfect balance.
Out of the water, fish flap
awkwardly, a silver shimmering
in monofilament mesh.
He slides the collar, clearing
the net, drops the flashing fish
into his bait bucket.
He begins his dance again.

Cane Garden Bay

Where the dogs are long and short. In a corner
Table, smoked out by the grill where Emile cooks the three-meat special,
our beers have broken out in a heavy sweat.
We're just next to the table of Brits singing sea shanties,
trying to be young and spontaneous. A slinky dog
steals a rib. The band plays The Beatles,
and the old Brits get up to dance for duty's sake.
Heinekens come slowly but accompanied by free shots of rum.
She's beside me looking at the band, maybe wondering when we're leaving.
Our waitress, Shami, is on island time, and our throats crave more beer.
One lucky local has a table of tourist girls to himself.
Behind us the grill sizzles with chicken, ribs and fish, which Emile manages
magnificently while wearing a toboggan in the Caribbean heat.
The rum shots take us to dizzying heights.
I scratch her back where it wants to peel and call for the check.

Chasing Kings

A smoky mackerel day and fog presses the air closer.
The boat and my eyelashes are heavy with dew.
We head to sea slowly, in a line like crossing the street,
wishing we were home in warm beds with wives
or sweethearts rather than chasing kings.

Five miles out and the dew has started to roll back.
The swell pulls and pushes our juniper boat along.
We spit on stones and hone knives for keen blades
to slice menhaden from their bones to make bait.
Tic, tic, tic along vertebrae, splitting the tail, halving the filet,
laying it out, sprinkling with kosher salt and letting it sit.

Slow aching fingers are lubed, now the bait pile is high.
The skipper pulls the throttle back in the warm water.
We lob bait and silver spoons into the eddies aft,
start our slow circling as November sun warms our backs.

Autumn

Fall drops like a feather here on the edge of the world.
Stretched summer days have been usurped by crisp orange autumn.
The bikini summer store has become a sweatshirt shop.
The ocean is audible now that the traffic jam has gone home.
Locals crawl from their summertime job encrusted shells.
It's time to celebrate the harvest of tourist plastic and fishing nets.
We have hours once more for dear old friends.
These are the days of north wind, warm water, and good fishing.
Bonfires on the sand again, brown liquor in bags to toast the endangered tourist.
All the truck's drivers on Hwy 12 wave back at you.
Flounder nets swell like last winter's hopeful mothers.
It's time again for the town to smell like dogfish.

Treaty of Sailors and Fishermen II

Days roll back like Post-It notes, a new crowd on the dock in pre-sun gray.
Morning cough of diesels choke the sweaty summer air.
There are six new names to forget as soon as the handshaking is done.
They're all here, but I'm still wrapped in a blanket dreaming
of boats that greyhound through azure swells as silently as the southeast
trades can blow, heeled over with three strakes of copper showing
only a toe on the tiller and one eye on the jib.

One of the nameless men is questioning my method
of sliding steel hooks into baitfish at a yell
pitched to defeat the diesel thunderstorm below our feet.
My answers shoot out like a pamphlet, and the projector
on the back of my skull turns the film of a movie
that is always playing, my schooner bowling past palm-lined lagoons.

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