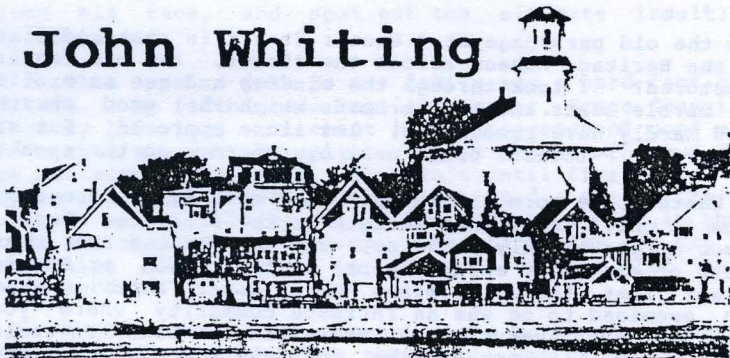


WOMB WITH A VIEW

John Whiting



Provincetown--what a home for a cultural recidivist! How many Americans can return after half-a-century to the ambience of their earliest memories and rediscover a time capsule of white clapboard, weathered shingles, and unaltered landmarks? Those of you who have fought to keep the predators at bay might think only of the creeping condominiums, not realizing how successful you've been. For the town, even the land, is on your side. The people change, the old families die out, but there is a potent tradition, a timeless character that impresses itself on the newcomers and soon makes them, like all converts, the most faithful of the few.

I'm afraid that includes me. I'm not a real native, as I was once witheringly informed by one of the rightful heirs: "You? A Cape Cahduh? It takes three generations to make a Cape Cahduh!" So be it. Even though I was born at Chatham, my father was an unapologetic Westerner who was sent to Provincetown in 1937 by the bishop to unite the two Methodist churches, "half a mile and three generations apart", as Dad used to say. So a Cape Codder wasn't the only thing you made in three generations. All part of the long legacy of slavery, as it happened, though the history books don't tell us much about Ku Klux Klan activity in New England. I can still remember finding a box of old Klan pamphlets in the parsonage attic, steaming with sectarian epithets that made no sense to my liberally conditioned little brain. Dad's explanations were so cautious as to be no help at all. (No wonder, since he knew the powder keg was still inflammable!)

Rattling around in a huge house that was God's gift to an only child (my older sister having fled), I furnished the two attic rooms on the harbor side with the cast-offs that were too old and shabby even for the preacher. There I played, surrounded by walnut, horsehair, steel engravings, rag rugs, shaped-note hymnals, and all the Victorian effluvia that no one wanted until the Georgian Colonial wells ran dry.

And now the old parsonage at 4 Center Street is restored like an annex to the Heritage Museum across the street, the old Center Church. Restored? I look through the windows and see an exotic display of marble busts and silk brocade which the good church fathers would hardly have recognized, let alone approved. But so what? Prosperous P-towners often went overboard, so to speak.

What a waste to be born in heaven: with nothing to compare, we don't know it until later when we look in the rear view mirror. Then we summon up our earthly paradise, and the chances are that it is redolent of our early expectations; it is Erehwon or Utopia to the extent that those promises were never kept. What Provincetown promised to me was an intimate community where you knew everyone and most everyone was interesting. Later I would discover the Greek city-state, the mediaeval monastery, the renaissance university, and their modern avatars: Black Mountain College, Berkeley in the fifties/sixties, the communes, the cooperatives. By then I was used to the idea of an isolated, self-sufficient community where epic struggles took place in teacups.

Not that that's unusual. Every hick town thinks it's the center of the universe. But what jolted me time and again over the years as I packed my cultural bags were the sudden cross-references back to the homely details of my childhood. In Pasadena, Thoreau's Cape Cod made me an object of wonder to my high school classmates: "Gee, you really lived there?" Yes and no. I had grown up surrounded by some of the major artists and writers of the time, people I would study assiduously at university, but they were nothing to me then. I chuckled years later when my experience was echoed by an old man I met whose grandfather had been Ralph Waldo Emerson's milkman. The report of an eye-witness to the Concord Renaissance had come down to me through three generations (there's that magic number again): "Crazy as a jay-bird, the whole lot of 'em!"

And so I only learned to know Provincetown later from the history books. In those simple far-off days I floated in a limbo somewhere between the old-timers and the Portugees. The bohemians went to the Flagship, the fishermen went to the bars (of both sorts), and I went to Sunday School. When Mary Heaton Vorse's *Time and the Town* appeared, my father delivered his verdict, wrong on both counts: "A whole chapter on the saloons and not one word about the churches." (In fact, she tells the vivid tale of how the wood for his own Center Church was burned by the Calvinists and had to be brought in again and kept under constant guard.) Fortunately for him he was wiser than his principles. He had many wharfside cronies whose children I didn't play with.

In those days the cultural barriers were not all of my own making. My father once overheard a heated quarrel between two fishermen, whose vocabulary became more explicitly insulting with every exchange. One finally brought the dialog to an uncappable climax when he grabbed the other by the collar, leaned close

into his face, and spat out the ultimate insult: "Ya dirty Protestant!"

What was a joke to our family was a hard fact of life for others. My fifth grade English teacher, Grace Gouveia, helped to form my life-long excitement in the presence of good writing. The fact that she was the only Portugese teacher in town didn't arouse my adolescent curiosity. It wasn't until five years ago, when we spent half the night getting acquainted, that I learned how her unique scholarship to Mt. Holyoke carried with it the condition that she renounce her church. The fact that she has always been something of a rebel is hardly an excuse for such cultural arrogance.*

Artists were as suspect as the Portugees. Art was a Good Thing, I was taught, but the people who produced it were not all they should be. The "best" people, unfortunately, were often the worst artists. One world-famous psychiatrist who lived in Truro had covered her walls with sub-Grandma Moses landscapes. Guests were given guided tours, after one of which my father was heard to murmur, ". . . but only God can make a tree."

The accomplished artists, alas, smoked and drank and swore and went to the Beachcombers' Ball. One happy exception was Albert Edel, a French academician and refugee who fled the Nazi invasion with his American wife and young daughter and came to live with his mother-in-law next door to the church. How wonderfully exotic: a little French girl my own age to play with! Fifi became my first girl friend in the most important sense: I discovered that a girl could be a friend. Years later, visiting Paris for the first time, I would take her with me in my imagination.

There was no shortage of exotics in the summer, but then Provincetown was a different place, a World Fair every year, a hectic theme park in the days before Disneyland. Without giving it a name, I was aware of schizophrenia. Norman Mailer mentions it at the beginning of *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, the crowded summer streets down which, come winter, you could roll a bowling ball. It could be true of people as well, especially those who earned their living from the tourists. In summer they peddled whatever they had--rooms, food, souvenirs--or became, like the town crier, quaint embodiments of local color. Then, when the audience had paid, applauded and departed, the voluble entertainers reverted to an inbred taciturnity.

One can argue that this is true of any northern climate: I've experienced the Scandanavian temperament in the ecstatic "white

* The papers of Grace Gouveia must be preserved and edited for publication. She has been one of the most percipient observers of the Cape scene for many years and her cross-cultural perspective is unique. Her voluminous poetry contains, at its best, the sardonic wisdom of a street-wise Emily Dickinson.

nights" of midsummer and in the somber, introspective loneliness of snowbound isolation. But there is an extra variable in the equation when the population thins along with the sunlight and the town looks, for a while, like a deserted fair ground.

Winter was a bleak time, with a few friends but no activities. I longed for some imagined city, where things were always happening. In summer my mother rented rooms to supplement the meagre parson's pay and I would hang around when the guests arrived, eager for any news from Out There. One couple who came every year sensed my hunger and fed me sugar cubes and match books from far-away places like the Grossinger Country Club and Radio City Music Hall. I stared hard at them, imagining myself transported to Paradise. Now, when every city strives for noisy anonymity, it is a wintry Provincetown I dream of.

When I was searching for the ultimate metaphor of the Provincetown experience, Professor Eric Mottram of King's College, London, told me of an island in the South Pacific where all the inhabitants devoted themselves to creating and performing plays which reenacted their own tribal history. These plays comprised cycles which could last as long as fifteen years. I then looked up Mary Heaton Vorse's chapter on "The Provincetown Players" and found the following quotes from George Cram Cook, circa 1915:

...why not write our own plays and put them on ourselves, giving writer, actor, designer, a chance to work together without the commercial thing imposed from without? A whole community working together, developing unsuspected talents... One man cannot produce drama. True drama is born only of one feeling animating all the members of a clan--a spirit shared by all and expressed by the few for the all.

Provincetown has indeed been reenacting its history for over three centuries. Each insurgent generation of newcomers yields to its magic and joins the vanguard of defenders against the next wave of barbarian hoards. Sometimes the cycle is a comedy, sometimes a tragedy. But there is always the unexpected twist of events that is inevitable when practically every part is a character role. Perhaps Provincetown's ultimate salvation lies in its perennial gift for ribald farce.

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John Whiting is a free-lance writer and sound designer who grew up on Cape Cod in the 30's and early 40's. For the past twenty-five years he has lived in London, from where his work takes him regularly about Europe and America.

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October Sound, 24 Old Gloucester Street, London WC1N 3AL, England.