

Poet on the Edge of the Sea

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Seen from high above, surrounded by an intricate pattern of inlets and peninsulas, Logan Airport looks like part of Boston Harbour. Colours separate as the plane zooms down to bring the mixture of landscape and seascape into focus. This scenery formed the backdrop to Plath's childhood and took a firm grip on her imagination.

To mention her name is to call up associations of suicide, hospitals, electro-convulsive therapy and the reckless New York partying she described in *The Bell Jar*, and because she married Ted Hughes, many people assume she spent most of her life in England. In fact, they lived in America for two years, and altogether she spent just over five in England. She was only 30 when she killed herself.

For seven years of her childhood she lived on the Atlantic coast. In 1936, when she was three, her family moved to Winthrop, a suburb of Boston, and stayed there until she was 10. Towards the end of her life after 19 years of living inland, she wrote: "I sometimes think my vision of the sea is the clearest thing I own" (*Johnny Panic* 117).

When I asked at the airport for a hotel in Winthrop, I was told there was only one – The Winthrop Arms. In the Thirties, life there was quieter still. The skyline was different, too. They had not yet built the cluster of skyscrapers in the centre of Boston and the airport was comparatively small. As a child, Plath found it exciting and reassuring to see planes rising into the sky or swooping down to land.

Her parents lived on Johnson Avenue, near the sea, and her grandparents' house adjoined the beach. You can still see it – 892 Shirley Street. She spent a lot of time there because her father, a professor of entomology at Boston University, had diabetes, and her mother, besides looking after him, acted as his research assistant. But her good-natured Viennese grandparents were always glad to take care of Plath and her younger brother, Warren.

"The road I knew curved into the waves with the ocean on one side, the bay on the other; and my grandmother's house, half-way out, faced east, full of red sun and sea lights" (*Johnny Panic* 118-9). Plath used to sit on the bottom step, staring out at the grey water tower on its sickle-shaped stone base and at Deer Island Prison at the tip of Point Shirley to the far right.



From Water-Tower to the brick prison
The shingle booms, bickering under
The sea's collapse. ("Point Shirley" *Collected Poems* 110)

She was never to forget her grandparents' telephone number, OCEAN 1212-W. "I would repeat it to the operator, from my home on the quieter bayside, an incantation, a fine rhyme, half expecting the black earpiece to give me back, like a conch, the susurrous murmur of the sea out there as well as my grandmother's "Hello" (*Johnny Panic* 119).

The house faces the sea-wall, which was built in 1909 against the Atlantic. The spur of land is so narrow here that there's space only for one row of houses on either side of the street which leads to Point Shirley, the name taken from the governor, William Shirley. In 1908 land here was on sale from 10 cents a foot, and this is how an estate agent advertised it: "Almost an island with a waterfront of two miles, it gives fine views of ocean and harbour from almost every point of location, consequently it is always cool; on the ocean side, a beautiful sandy beach 2,000 feet in length, and on the harbour side deep water and fine anchorage for sail and motor boats near the shore."

To the child, the sea seemed a huge, radiant animal, breathing and reflecting light. "Even with my eyes shut I could feel the glimmers of its bright mirror spider over the lids. I lay in a watery cradle, and sea gleams found the chinks in the dark green window blind, playing and dancing, or resting and trembling a little" (*Johnny Panic* 119). She grew up with the cry of seagulls and the smell of salt. She popped beads on dry black seaweed and looked in vain for pearls in the pocked grey oyster shells. She collected "lucky stones" – purple pebbles ringed with white – mussel shells and tiny white shells like miniature ice-cream cones (*Johnny Panic* 117).

One day she never forgot – even if her memory distorted it – was the day she spent in her grandparents' house when Warren was born. She was two and a half. Staring at eggstones, fan shells and coloured glass embedded in the stucco wall, she sat sulking on the bottom step. She didn't want a brother. Humming, her grandmother bumped out bread dough, while her grandfather, who so often took her on beachcombing walks, wanted her to make the rubber plant into a pipe tree by hiding his pipe in it. It was April. The ice-cream and hot-dog stalls were still boarded up, waiting for the season to begin. Ignoring the whistle that invited her to go for a walk with her grandfather, she trudged off moodily to Deer Island prison.

In September 1938 a hurricane blew down 128 trees and uprooted nearly 5,000 square feet of Winthrop's pavements. In her memoir, "Ocean 1212-W" Plath gets the date of the



hurricane wrong, moving it to 1939, but she writes vividly about the "molten, steely-slick" sea, "heaving at its leash like a broody animal, evil violets in its eye" (*Johnny Panic* 123). The hurricane was due at nightfall. Windows were boarded up, boats carried indoors. "The sulphurous afternoon went dark unnaturally early, as if what was to come could not be starlit, torchlit, looked at" (*Johnny Panic* 123).

The rain set in, followed by the strong wind. After sipping their hot drink, the excited children crept out of bed to peek out from underneath the blind. Objects were being tossed about "like crockery in a giant's quarrel" and the house rocked on its foundations (*Johnny Panic* 123). When they woke up in the morning, trees and telephone poles littered the streets, while summer cottages floated alongside the lighthouse. The sea-wall had protected the house, but there was a dead shark in the garden.

Squall waves once danced
Ship timbers in through the cellar window
A thresh-tailed, lanced
Shark littered in the geranium bed. ("Point Shirley" *Collected Poems* 110)

In "Ocean 1212W," her father's death and the move inland are separated only by a comma; in fact the family didn't leave Winthrop until two years after he died, but she associated losing him with losing the sea. Wellesley is 15 miles away – a residential country town, predominantly green, with maples and elms crowding around lawns that flank clean-looking houses. She missed the sea, and never again lived next to it except for brief spells during summer jobs and summer holidays.

Plath was eleven when she started keeping a diary, and was soon making her first experiments at translating seaside sensations into phrases. By 14 she could detail the excitement she felt at hearing waves slap against wet sand or boom as they hit rocks. There is poetry in her prose when she articulates her relish for the cry of seagulls, the salty smell of fish, and the splashing of spray on the sea wall.

In the summer of 1948, when she was 15, she spent a night on the beach with friends and they cooked over a driftwood fire before curling up in blankets. During summer vacations, she often headed for a beach, and in the summer of 1951, after her freshman year at Smith College, Northampton, she and her best friend, Marcia Brown, had babysitting jobs at nearby houses in Swampscott. On stormy days, Plath enjoyed looking out of the window at the rainswept sea, and once, when they both had a day off, they stole a sugared ham and a pineapple from the fridge, borrowed bikes and cycled to Marblehead, where they rented a



boat and rowed out to Children's Island. Sitting in the boat, they used driftwood sticks to beat off gulls which tried to pounce on their food.

Like Illiers, the tiny country town where Proust spent boyhood holidays and which bulks as large in his fiction as Paris where he lived, the Massachusetts went on inspiring Plath. The one she knew best was Yirrell Beach, Point Shirley, but her favourite was Nauset beach on Cape Cod. "Suicide off Egg Rock" was written in March 1959 after a day on one of the sooty ocean beaches north of Boston, with saltmarshes and factories in the background. About to swim out and drown himself, the man despises his body and its processes: his bowels belong to the same "landscape of imperfections" as gas tanks, mongrels barking at seagulls and sausages being cooked at public barbecues (*Collected Poems* 115). He looks forward to the moment when he'll be washed up on the beach with the other rubbish.

Two years later, working on *The Bell Jar*, Plath must have re-read this poem before she wrote the beach sequence in Chapter 13. Esther Greenwood and a boy called Cal are sunbathing on a mucky beach. With two friends they cook hot dogs on a public barbecue. Poking out of the water about a mile from the stony headland is a big round grey rock like the upper half of an egg. In the other direction is a smudgy skyline of gas tanks, factory stacks, derricks and bridges. Esther and Cal chat coolly about ways of committing suicide. A wave full of rubbish – sweet wrappers and orange peelings – flops over her foot. Esther thinks of swimming out until she's too tired to swim back.

In 1956, after Plath married Hughes, they honeymooned in Benidorm, Spain, then an unspoilt fishing village, and for the summer of 1957, as a belated wedding present, her mother gave them three months in a cottage at Eastham on Cape Cod. Here they were close to Nauset Beach and Rock Harbour, which inspired one of the first two poems Plath sold to the *New Yorker*.¹

When she and Ted went to collect mussels in Rock Harbour Creek during the early morning, the tide was low and the mud was alive with evil-looking fiddler crabs, which scuttled away, holding one big pale-green claw erect. She couldn't have written the poem if she hadn't felt she was returning to a seaside world from which she'd been exiled. She simultaneously feels alienated and at home in the fishy otherworld, and can empathise wryly with a dead fiddler crab which must have been a deviant. Why had he strayed away from the herd to a solitary position high among the grass?

¹ "Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor" appeared in the August 9, 1958 issue of *The New Yorker*. Plath's "Night Walk" ["Hardcastle Crags"], was printed eight weeks later, on October 11.



There was no telling if he'd
Died recluse or suicide
Or headstrong Columbus crab.

("Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor" *Collected Poems* 97)

She had made her first suicide attempt when she was 20, but instead of giving direct expression to the urge, which never entirely left her, she made something of a poetic breakthrough by concentrating humorously on the dead deviant.

English beaches failed to inspire her. They didn't smell right, there were no water towers and no brick prisons. On Massachusetts beaches fragments of orange peelings and sweet wrappers could be put to good use in poetry and fiction, but after she and Hughes went with his cousin to Whitby, all she wrote was a scathing letter about tinted plastic raincoats and the untidy habits of the British working class (*Letters Home* 391).

Her 1949 story "The Green Rock" is about a girl who goes back with her younger brother to their home town after five years. She stares out at the ocean, remembering feelings she could never explain: "It was part of her, and she wanted to reach out, out, until she encompassed the horizon within the circle of her arms" (*Johnny Panic* 255).

When they go back to her aunt's house, she recalls rainy afternoons when they played on the front piazza. Seeing the house which used to be theirs, they feel affronted by the new curtains, the fresh paint, the unfamiliar car in the driveway. Revisiting the beach, they find it's quite small and "there was something strange and alien concealed beneath the smooth sand and the calm, unruffled surface of the water" (*Johnny Panic* 257). Even the green rock seems to have shrunk. They watch waves rolling in over its summit. "Only a thin line of foam remained above the spot where the rock lay silent, dark, sleeping beneath the oncoming tide" (*Johnny Panic* 258).

Nine years later Plath wrote the poem "Green Rock, Winthrop Bay."

The great green rock
We gave good use as a ship and house is black
With tarry muck.
And periwinkles, shrunk to common
Size. The cries of scavenging gulls sound
In the traffic of planes
From Logan Airport opposite.
Gulls circle grey under a shadow of a steelier flight.
Loss cancels profit. (*Collected Poems* 105)

Time is to blame for making the rock smaller than it was.



Works Cited

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