

## My Mudflats

By Patricia Brennehan

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“I believe that a human imagination is shaped by the architecture it encounters at an early age.”  
-Barry Lopez

“There was neither non-existence nor existence then; there was neither the realm of space nor sky which is beyond. What stirred? Where? In whose protection? Was there water, bottomlessly deep?”  
-Rig Veda 10:129, Verses 1-2

I must be 5 or 6 years old. The photo is a close-up. I am framed in blue sky, cloudless, and wear a red, white and blue bathing suit, very nautical. The wind is blowing- wisps of hair lift, float, across my freckled face. I stand on something that looks like sand, or mud, and I hold up some sort of shelled creature, probably a hermit crab, and peer up into the space inside with an intent look on my face.

For two weeks each year my family would travel to the same colony of cottages on Cape Cod, usually in August, loading station wagon and boat full with two parents, five children, a dog, and all of the necessities for summer vacation. Two weeks of sand, ocean salt, wind- an experience that was wide and expansive- and then we'd return to the woodsy nest of our home in the Boston suburbs, to predictable rhythms of school and weekends. Somehow those two weeks grew into a mythic presence in my memory, within my being, perhaps due to the timeless nature of vacation. Ocean spaciousness, the great being that I so missed and longed for when I was away.

If it's true that we are shaped by the landscapes that surround us, I am those stone walls of New England that line the fields and follow the curve of the roads, stones hauled from farm fields where they'd emerge each spring, birthed from mud, stacked large and small to form elegantly crafted solid fencing. I am those narrow winding roads, densely tree-lined, meandering in a space where the four directions matter little, where you find your way with landmarks. I carry these landscapes within, and they feel familiar and reassuring. And yet those seaside vacations with my family register as *home*. I am that limitless ocean landscape, that funky fetid smell of mudflats, the briny sharpness of ocean spray, the expansiveness of it all. Years later, not long after my first cancer diagnosis and mastectomy, as I worked an overnight

shift in a Minnesota treatment facility that overlooked prairie landscape, alone in deep quiet while the children slept, I experienced a twinge of familiarity along with a sharp longing for home: the snow-covered landscape, in its undulating glimmerings beneath soft moonlight, looked just like an ocean, vast and alive.

What was so alive about the seashore was, paradoxically, hidden underground. Of particular fascination for me is, has always been, the phenomenon of the mudflats that appear at low tide. Brewster, the place on the Cape where we'd stay, has the largest, widest expanse of tidal flats in North America. There are similar sized mudflats in Brazil, and tidal flats also occur in other parts of the world. The "flats" of my childhood experience are held within the hug of the curved arm that forms the Cape, and snuggle along the coasts of three contiguous towns: parts of Eastham and Dennis, and the entire coastline along Brewster. From the shoreline, at the bareness of low tide, we'd walk a mile or more before encountering the surf of deep ocean, a distance that, as a child, was magical, a marvel. Infinite.

My experience of the low tide mudflats was just this: something defining, something explanatory, something predictive. It is said that we each live out a particular myth, some ancient story of heroes, villains and journeys that somehow captures the themes and patterns of our longings, of what we chase after, of what we run away from. I think of the endless cycle of the mudflats- their disguised and hidden presence beneath liquescent ocean waves, lulled to sleep, both here and not-here, mystical, and how later, somehow, within this very same day, they reappear with their characteristic unmistakable openness and exposure, laid bare, within reach, tactile and awake. From the mysterious- unknown, enigmatical, obscure, hidden, secret, incomprehensible- to the exposed- bared, unearthed (unsea-ed), unmasked, conspicuous, lit up. Concealment, revelation: Is this the story of my life? Tidal, cyclical, drawn by the moon?

The Brewster mudflats are an intertidal environment, exposed at low tide, usually twice per day depending on tidal timing, and then completely covered by ocean water at high tide. The mud of the intertidal flats is deposited by the ebb and flow of tides, and is made up of estuarine silts and clays as well as the detritus of marine animals. The color of these flats is, on the surface, a light shade of tannish gray. The mud of the flats is saturated with water. If you were to dig a hole on a sand bar, the color deepens to a darker gray, and water quickly wells up to fill the hole as you dig. Wet and soft, fine-grained, it is difficult to walk in some areas without sinking- effortful steps are met with sucking release of mud. The sandbars that rise above tidal pools and channels are exposed to sun and wind, and dry out to some extent; these are more firm to walk on- soft enough to hold a footprint, firm enough to allow ease of walking. The marks of current and tide shape the surface of the flats into rippled, dimpled, contoured, undulating configurations, and these are reformed at each sea change. No journey is the same- this territory lacks map, compass; its only boundaries are the changing coastline and the pulsing waters at the sea's edge.

The mudflats are home to all sorts of living creatures. Airholes abound- these bubble, suck, sometimes spout, proclaiming life below the surface. We'd watch for the spray, and dig

down, rapidly, to find sea clams, quahogs, razor clams, or sea worms. I remember the joy of the chase and the triumphant holding aloft of a muddy, spurting, hefty specimen, something to take home for dinner. It's important to carry a bucket on these walks.

Snails, too, leave their mark, with an indented rippled trail, curving and meandering along the mud surface. A mounded area at the end of the trail indicates the snail's present placement, not too far below the surface. Snails dig surprisingly quickly, though, as do razor clams, and it was a thrill to best them in their own environment.

Throughout the mudflats are carved-out spaces holding pockets of seawater: tidal pools, full of life. Hermit crabs, in borrowed shells, scurry clawfooted, withdrawing into their containers with any sense of danger. Sea shrimp tickle my toes. Fiddler crabs dance, claws up, ready for a skirmish. Or, my biggest fear, they snuggle just beneath the surface of the mud, invisible, at the ready to pinch a toe if disturbed. Seaweed, sea kelp, ribbons and chains, spongy and elastic, bob gently in the water.

What is the meaning of the *stuff* of those tidal flats? Mud: mire, sludge, ooze, silt, clay, dirt, soil. This is the substance of *prima materia*, the stuff of creation myths. In the Innana myth, the sky god forms two helper beings from the dirt beneath his fingernails, and sends them into the underworld to assist Innana in her return. In the Old Testament, God creates Adam "from the dust of the ground." In the creation tales of the Shilluks of the Nile region and in West Africa, humans are formed out of clay. The Blackfeet tribe tells of how the "Old Man" shapes the first woman and child out of clay; for the Oneida nation, red clay was the substance from which man was created.

The Greek word *pelos* pertains to clay, mud or mire. Emerging out of this ancient language is *pelomyxa*, a giant amoeba that lives in the muddy bottoms of freshwater ponds, thriving in the muck of it all. I imagine into the feeling of wet clay, slippery yet substantive, sensuous and primal. Of the earth, waiting to be shaped, molded, hardened in the magic of fire. I sink into womblike, mud-mother mudflat with her shades of browns and grays, gently undulating, her sweet stink of salt water, mud, seaweed, and decaying organisms. The muck is alive, alive: sucking, breathing, spurting, heaving. She is primordial. What was dark and hidden is now seen, exposed, part of an endless cycle of ancient rhythms, and somehow resides, ebbing and flowing, within my body.

What I gathered there: Sea glass. Sea shells. Claws of crab. Sand dollars. Strings of pulpy seaweed, burnished brown and gold and deep green. Starfish. Black horned purses of horseshoe crab egg casings. The smell, the taste of salt brine. Bits and pieces of my deepest self.

What I knew in my body as a child, I hunger to apprehend as an adult.

Three decades ago, when I was 26, in a marriage that was falling apart, with cross-country moves and job changes in the picture, I underwent my first breast cancer diagnosis and mastectomy. The day after my surgery a kind nurse gently removed the protective padding of gauze, which was mounded in a soft suggestion of breast. I looked down, terrified, and was surprised to encounter something familiar: my girl-chest, flat and tomboyish. I don't remember long I was away from work then, but I do remember how incredibly raw and fragile I felt when I did return, altogether too quickly, how alone and lonely I felt within it all, how everyone around me wished it all into "all better", how I strived to make it "all better" for them, and how the insides and outsides did not match. I was stumbling around, seeking higher ground, with my shock and my grief buried in the mud, tangled up in weeds, hidden by the swell of normalcy, tumbled by the currents that surged beneath the surface. There were no edges; everything blurred and bled together. I felt compelled to move quickly into normalcy, seeking reconstruction to expand the flatness of my chest into mound of breast, silicone simulation at that time satisfying, turning away from that glimpse of familiar landscape toward something artificial.

I am drawn to edges in landscape. Coastal spaces, marshes, edges of forest, ecotones. That place where two different elements meet, the neither-here-nor-there space, liminal, transitional. "Edge" may be an unlikely term, as it somehow connotes something hard and fast and linear, something distinct. No, I refer to a space that blurs and bleeds, that has curve and movement and give to it, a space that is more verb than noun. There is a push/pull here. It is not static.

Ecotones, edges: these are liminal spaces. They are like entering a dark interior space after being outside in bright sunshine- the pause after the threshold, a blurring of vision, the space that seems not quite solid and real.

The liminal space can be a dark space, a place of breaking down and disintegration. It is both sacred and dangerous: there is instability here, the risk of change. What normally protects us, covers us up, is no longer present. We are exposed. How long can we allow ourselves to linger here? We might become transformed, or, perhaps, we will wiggle back into our shell, known territory, even if it is too small, too tight.

There is a tribe native to western Canada. The Haida tribe lives along the beaches that hold the space between ocean and rainforest. They call their world *Xhaaydla Gnaayay*, "The Islands on the Boundary Between Worlds." The Haida live in an interstitial realm between the waters of two different worlds, the salty water of Ocean and the freshwater that falls as rain in Rainforest. Their myths and spiritual beliefs are birthed out of this land-between-the-waters realm, out of this liminal immersion within shifting and fluctuating borders. The gods of the Haida live beneath the ocean waves, and creatures such as the orca, the salmon and the sea lion are seen as spirit-beings. These are border animals, as are seals, crabs, shorebirds, frogs, dolphins and whales, those creatures that belong to this in-between realm.

The Haida have an interesting way of beginning their tales. Akin to our familiar “Once upon a time...,” Haida tales begins with a human character who takes a small step sideways. This opens up an entryway into the mythical realm. Once this step is taken, we know that anything can happen. This makes me think of the curious sideways scootle of crab, pincers raised, as it moves from watery realm of tidal pool to burrow into the mud, blending into the next world. It is curious how a simple sidestep can bring us into another world. Imagine, not stepping back, into the past; not stepping forward, into future; but stepping sideways into a new view of the present.

Following my second cancer diagnosis and second removal of a breast, I spent several weeks in a space that Megan O'Rourke, who in her book *The Long Goodbye*, about her mother's Alzheimer's, calls the "otherworldliness of loss." It was January, in the depths of cold and snow. I cocooned myself apart from the world, layering soft silk and bamboo fibers against that raw open space of my chest, tucked into afghans and looked out into our backyard, keeping an eye out for that red-tailed hawk that seemed to be keeping watch over me over those few weeks. It was quiet. I would drink tea, do my stretching exercises, read books on nutrition and integrative healing, write occasionally. I let my husband field phone calls, sent out a random email about my progress, but mostly I kept to myself. There was something about that "otherworldliness" that became central to my healing process. I became hermit(crab), burrowing into the shell of silence and solitude, buffered from the world, until the raw vulnerability of my body felt a readiness to move back into the land of the living. In the saltiness of my ocean, things were muffled; I was rocked by the rhythm of the waves, unseeing; life was suspended. Somehow the second time around, at twice the age of my first diagnosis, I accepted the invitation to live within a messy, muddy liminal space. I dove into the depths of the waters as I pleased, when I needed; I gathered mud by the handful and plastered it all over my body; I surfaced to touch earth yet stayed there at the edge, allowing this in-between space to have its own presence, its own place of aliveness.

Sometimes there are those childhood experiences that loom large. Larger than life, they inhabit our narrative, enliven it; they become the brightest and most textured thread of our life story. How did my body choose to reenact that revelation of low tide, counterpoint to the layered ellipses of high water marks? I marvel at the tidal flats of my chest post-mastectomy, this mystery of raw carved beauty exposed, while my heart beats beneath what was before, what is after, what remains. Ah, I think, that's it- this pale white light of lunar glow, an eclipse from the fullness of breast to this luminous emptiness. Tidal flat of my chest, gentle undulation of tissue above muscle, above ribs, above heart that beats and lungs that breathe.

#### **References:**

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