

Cynthia Huntington

Since at least 1899 when the Provincetown School of Art was established, Provincetown has been a summer mecca for playwrights such as Eugene O'Neill and Susan Glaspell, visual artists including Hans Hoffman, Robert Motherwell, Helen Frankenthaler, and Jackson Pollock, and luminary writers such as Djuna Barnes, Mary Heaton Vorse, Edmund Wilson, Alfred Kazin, and Norman Mailer. And not least, the poets: early on, Edna St. Vincent Millay; more recently, the now-departed trio of Mary Oliver, Stanley Kunitz, and Mark Doty, who became full-time inhabitants of Provincetown, and Provincetown, in turn, inhabited their poetry. But with the exception of Frank Gaspar, a wonderful poet and a novelist born to a local Portuguese sea-going family, all these artists were themselves migrants to Ptown, following the lure of ocean and beach and a bohemian, gay-friendly environment to this enchanted spiral of land at the tip of Cape Cod. (As a caveat though: this all-welcoming Provincetown has managed to drive out its resident Portuguese population -- Gaspar, part of that forced emigration, has long lived and taught in California.)

So when Cynthia Huntington, a child of the rust belt, educated in the Midwest, initially an itinerant resident and teacher in California, New York, and other dispersed locales, finally a long-term faculty member and the Frederick Sessions Chair of Writing at Dartmouth College, made her way to Provincetown, first physically, later in her work as well as her spirit, beginning in the mid-1980's, she was following a route that had been well trod by artists and writers for nearly a century. But it is a journey she made in her own way, on her own terms, and particularly in her own language.

While still in her twenties, she and her brand new husband, a visual artist, spent three summers in the primitive dune shacks allegedly only temporarily permitted in the Cape Cod National seashore. A decade later she chronicled one of those sojourns in an exquisite book, *The Salt House*, written in prose, but the beautiful prose that only a poet could conjure. Before that book was written, however, she first published two books of poetry, *The Fish-Wife* in 1985, and *We Have Gone to the Beach* in 1996, which announced clearly to the poetry community that here was a strong, original voice that would surely have to be reckoned with. Many of the themes that she was later to articulate with inimitable ferocity, with linguistic and emotional daring, make their initial, somewhat tentative appearance in these early books: poems of local flora and fauna; portraits of self and family, of neighborhood and livelihood, of sexual desire; but also including several poems set in

Provincetown – not least the beautiful title poem of the first book – as well as many intimations of her inclination, even gravitation, towards open water, oceans, and beaches.

I believe that it is with her next two books of poetry, *The Radiant* in 2001 and *Heavenly Bodies* in 2012, that Huntington assuredly takes her place among the top tier of American poets. In the interim, she had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, her marriage dissolved bitterly, and her poetic language, further annealed by these hard blows, acquired a revelatory, sometimes demonic force. Not for those who prefer hard truths veiled, these later books of poetry took great courage as well as great talent to write -- and also take some courage to read. But do not get the impression that these are bleak, humorless poems. For example, the middle section of *Heavenly Bodies* – the book that made Huntington a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle poetry prize in 2014 when the winner was 88 year old David Ferry, (whom, you remember, read here in Canaan two years ago) consists of an extended witty but searing send-up of the sexual mores of the 60's, particularly as regards male political activists' mistreatment of their female associates, the poem taking the form of a disturbing "memoir" by Frank Zappa's well-known character, the hapless Suzy Creamcheese.

All of this presaged but could not predict Huntington's new book, *Terra Nova*, not least because no one that I know of has attempted such a project since at least William Carlos Williams' monumental *Paterson*, now some 70 years old. The five books that constitute Williams' epic make that somewhat grim New Jersey industrial town the focus of overlapping historical, mythical, geological, sociological, and symbolic poetic treatments. Huntington's range in the much shorter *Terra Nova* may be even greater than this, with disturbing sections set in contemporary Provincetown alternating with imagined or remote histories portraying vast immigrations over centuries, indeed millennia, biblical and mythical as well as historical vectors all somehow converging over vast reaches of time and space onto the new world, *Terra Nova*, with Provincetown at its apex. These are poems of extreme audacity but also supreme craft, a magical mystery tour that I urge you to book (and what a book it is!).

It was, I believe, Cynthia's destiny to write this poem.... and Provincetown's destiny to be written by Cynthia. They've served each other magnificently. And so I am delighted to bring my good friend, Cynthia Huntington, once the poet laureate of New Hampshire but now settled in Vermont, back to the Canaan Meetinghouse.