

The Whiteness of the Isle

Strange, but when I returned to Muskeget this past summer in the company of my grandfather “Bumps” and his dog Hershey, the island had the same unique look that I remembered from many years before... a white, washed-out, almost alien beauty. We arrived in the afternoon. Carl, the Madaket scalloper, brought us up to within jumping distance to the shore, and, under the watchful eyes of several grey seals, we splashed ashore with food and gear in tow. Carl would be picking us up in a mere 24 hours, but, as he threaded his way back through the shoals towards Nantucket, a remoteness and separateness enveloped us. It was different from being deep in the backcountry or high up on a snowy mountain; we were out in the open, exposed to the Atlantic Ocean, and there was simply no way off this island.

No docks, no boats, no electricity. Just us, several hundred acres of sand, sea grass, and poison ivy, a prodigious avian population, an allegedly unique vole species, one tree, and one weathered, no-nonsense shelter. We headed straight for this shelter, our shelter: “camp.” As we schlepped between and through thickets of poison ivy, I examined the sand around us, recalling, now, another one of my impressions from childhood: I had not then nor to this day have I ever seen such a profusion of bones and shells. They are everywhere on Muskeget, cracked, brittle, and bleached. Crab shells, seal bones, bird bones, and who knows what else. Nothing disposes of them, and they don’t appear to disintegrate very quickly. Dig up a handful of sand, and you’ll unearth more. Like everything on the island, they are what’s left, what’s left after millennia of winds and waves, salt and sun.

The island is remarkable for the way it survives and persists. Muskeget contains nothing superfluous, even visually. The color gets washed out of things, the elements bleach them: the sand and the shells, the seabirds, the frothing sea and scudding sky, even the light itself, in the hazy salt air. It’s a pale, wild place, and its wildness isn’t one of teeming, green abundance but rather one of rugged survival and, most of all, of death. Not sad, dark, decaying death, but real, weighty non-being. The sand and the bones – even the sky and wind and waves – are all death’s constituents, symbols of the deadly concert playing out on this island.

The stakes are high for everything, and the odds are never in life’s favor. Entire sections of Muskeget’s beaches are subsumed and re-landscaped by the ocean every year, animals live and die by the hand of each other, the weather, or a shotgun – even we aren’t safe. Our house-shack was built more than a century ago by life savers who would paddle out to save sailors shipwrecked in the treacherous, shallow passage between Muskeget and Tuckernuck. It was set right on the beach, with steel railway

ties for its boats that led straight from the “garage” into the surf. A century ago, there were twelve other house-shacks on the island, now there is just ours. Some got washed away in rising tides, some were splintered by lightening, some fell into neglect and got the full Muskeget treatment. Ours, thanks to its sound, solid construction, survived for many years but would have ultimately succumbed to the rising sea if it hadn’t been moved to higher ground, and then moved again. Life clinging stubbornly to life in the face of death.

We arrived at camp that afternoon and unlocked the century-old cabin to find more whiteness: bird shit. In a bold and opportunistic move that one should expect of Muskeget natives, a group of starlings and barn swallows had entered the house-shack through the garage’s misaligned double doors and proceeded to roost, shit everywhere, and die. After removing the rancid dead birds, we took up our main task with wordless consent: scraping off the white, caked-on layers of droppings that covered every conceivable surface. Anywhere else, and this would have been odious; on Muskeget, things felt different. I had become a participant in the deadly dance, and all laziness or disgust fell off me: this, like everything worth doing on the island, was something that just had to be done.

Naturally, this task turned into a larger project, one of cleaning out and organizing the entire “garage.” Gas canisters had to be checked for levels and consolidated, hoses and cordage and rope had to be recoiled, decades-old bottles of various lubricants and sprays had to be sorted, nails and nuts and bolts were reorganized – and, still, the shit had to be brushed off of everything. As I sifted through the stinking, mildewed debris, I began to take an interest in the wooden planks and screws, ropes and clamps, oil and rust removers. I listened as Bumps explained the purpose and function of these DIY essentials, many of which dated back to his father, “Too”. What I had thought of as cluttered bric-a-brac was actually what kept camp and the people in it up and running. It was all necessary, otherwise it wouldn’t be there. And it constituted an integral part of this brief, resilient chapter in the larger struggle for survival that was always taking place on Muskeget.

Everything in that house-shack was also tangible, artifactual evidence of a family history. Later that night, after the cleaning was done, the worthless was buried, and the valuable was reorganized, Bumps and I stood on the deck, watching the sunset, grilling steaks on an old, green Foreman, and talking. WWII and the Cold War, proposals and divorces, sports and journalism. The island we stood on kept coming up. My great grandfather returned from WWII a pilot and war hero and immediately bought land on Muskeget. He began taking his sons duck hunting here... and here we

are today. We talked into the night. The free and easy conversation of non-adjacent generations. Finally, exhausted, we eased onto couches and the chatter of a handheld radio lulled us to sleep, like we were soldiers in some 20th-century war.

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Some weeks later, I finally read *Moby Dick*. Herman Melville was a lifelong denizen of the South Shore, the Cape, Nantucket, and their neighboring waters. Indeed, if he hadn't set foot on Muskeget, he certainly saw it and knew of it.

At the early stages of the novel, the white whale is an unknown quantity, an evil, fear-inducing creature; but by the end, we gain a measure of respect, admiration, and even sympathy for the whale. It is easy to fear Muskeget (as many Nantucket natives do) – it is a treacherous, barren, white unknown, set out alone in the ocean. But it grows on you. Its stretches of poison-ivy-covered sand were never meant to be settled; nonetheless they play host to a few intrepid survivors.

In today's age, the island feels like a last frontier. The Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgaard writes that death is our last great unknown and that it has consequently been hidden away – to our detriment. On Muskeget you experience a wild closeness to this natural, ageless element. Muskeget, like the white whale, is epic and death-haunted. To set foot on the island is to visit another world, to take off your “colored and coloring” glasses and to see what the world looks like when light acts “without medium upon matter” and just looks with its own “blank tinge.”