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Norman Mailer's Provincetown

The Wild West of the East

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Norman Mailer's Provincetown

The Wild West of the East

*(Five Evocations of Provincetown
from the Writings of Norman Mailer)*

Edited with an introduction

by

J. Michael Lennon

The Provincetown Arts Press

In cooperation with

The Provincetown Repertory Theatre

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Norman Mailer and Provincetown: The Wild West of the East

In August of 1960 Norman Mailer drove from his summer home in Provincetown to the summer home of Senator John Kennedy in Hyannis. Kennedy was seeking the Democratic nomination for President and Mailer was there to interview him for *Esquire*. It was a heady time for Mailer, who was impressed when Kennedy said he had read Mailer's third novel, *The Deer Park*. The piece that Mailer wrote about Kennedy, "Superman Comes to the Supermarket," appeared a few weeks before the election and certainly aided Kennedy's successful campaign. Mailer met Jacqueline Kennedy that memorable day in Hyannis and she asked him what Provincetown was like. "It is the Wild West of the East," he replied. Mailer has emphasized the quirky energy and unpredictability of Provincetown or P-Town, as the locals call it, many times over the years—in interviews, essays, letters, casual conversation and in several of his published works. He has also called it "the last democratic town in America. Everybody is absolutely equal here." Now Mailer's permanent home, P-Town is where he has spent 45 of the last 60 summers, and written all or part of three-fourths of his forty-odd books. Here are just a few of his insights on the town at the end of Route Six: In a *Boston Globe* interview (22 June 2003) with Joseph P. Kahn, Mailer said that during the summers of the early 60s "bikers would come roaring into town on Saturday nights. Parties would start on the beach. Fights would break out. It was a period of wonderful drunken nights and wild parties. At least ten times a summer you'd see the sun come up over the flats. The town had a sometimes rich and sometimes sinister sense of impermanence to it, too."

In an interview in *Life in Provincetown* (14 August 2003) with Tim McCarthy, he expanded on the idea of P-Town's mutability: "The bars would empty at midnight, because that was the curfew then. Everyone who was working at the bars, everyone who was going to the bars would head up in the hills behind the Patrician. Howland Street didn't exist then. It was a trail up into the woods. There were a few shacks up there as there are now, and guys who had the shacks would open them up and people would come in. You'd find a mother who couldn't get a babysitter come in with two kids, holding one in each arm. You'd have drinkers like myself, who'd hold a bottle in one hand and a glare in their eye ... You had marriages break up in those woods at night around 2 or 3 in the morning. You had marriages begin. It was wild, absolutely wild. There were fights. It was an absolutely extraordinary period." Provincetown's "purpose," he continued, is to "be the one town on the Atlantic coast that's just absolutely freer than others, where people can go and find out what they're really made of, because they can't quite find organized society agreeable enough to keep going. They want to search out the possibility of being themselves, whatever that self is... Years ago it was bikers and guys who were really part-time criminals, drug dealers, gamblers. Then there was a period after that when the gay revolution began and then solidified in the last 10 or 15 years. So today Provincetown's a gay town, but so what? In the next 25, 30, 40 years, it will become something else again." It would not be difficult to point to a dozen other utterances in which Mailer identifies Provincetown as a kind of nutty, ghostly carnival, a whirligig where identities are lost, found, created.

There is more: In a 1999 interview with Christopher Busa in *Provincetown Arts*, Mailer goes beyond his characterization of Provincetown as the freest on the Atlantic coast. He says, "Provincetown has always been ahead of the rest of the nation. One of the

things I love about this town and that I always tell people who haven't been here, is that this is the freest town in America. People can argue. But it's free now with the gay population, and it was free long ago when the artists came here. You could live with whomever you wanted and in any combination that you wanted. To have sexual freedom has always been terribly important to artists." The artists and writers—John Dos Passos, Eugene O'Neill, Kurt Vonnegut, Hans Hoffman, Mary McCarthy, Robert Motherwell, Jack Kearney, Franz Cline, Peter Busa, Helen Frankenthaler, are some of those he mentions in these interviews—relished the freedom of the town, but though the 1960s they had to contend with what Mailer calls "an ongoing tension" with the Portuguese, who dominated the fishing industry and much else in the town. On the one hand, he says, "Some of the Portuguese fisherman were wilder and stronger than any artist you'd ever find. We'd get drunk together and have arm-wrestling contests, often. I remember Bottles Souza was the one guy nobody could ever beat." On the other hand, "the Portuguese were Catholic and observant and very family-oriented, prodigiously family oriented, and the artists, who came every summer with a different mate, sometimes a different kid. Of course, we were smoking pot. It was all right to get drunk in town—but not pot. That was the tension then."

Finally, he gives a cluster of assets that fills out his portrait of the town: "The fishermen were much respected in those days, and properly so—they were real, and artists tend to have a tropism toward the real. Provincetown was not only most agreeable to the eye, but it was real, with real people. It had been a whaling town. It was real enough that when the Pilgrims came here, they decided to move on because it was a little bit too real."

There's no easy way to sum up all that Mailer has said about P-Town, especially since in my gleanings I have scanted Mailer's comments on the town's beauty, noted in passing in the previous quote as "agreeable." The best course is to turn to the sharp evocations of the town in his writings, but first I'll name what I believe to be the five ineluctable elements of his unstated definition of the town: 1) freedom (personal, artistic, sexual); 2) mutability (of an existential sort); 3) tension (historical, cultural, creative); 4) beauty (natural and architectural), and (5) a haunted atmosphere, amenable to ghosts and witches. These qualities can be seen in the five chief evocations of Provincetown in Mailer's work from 1958 to 1984. The first is from "Advertisements for Myself on the Way Out," a story that originally appeared in *Partisan Review* in 1958, and was then collected in *Advertisements for Myself* (1959). It was intended to be the prologue to a long novel, one never written. The house in the story belongs to the central character, Marion Faye, and is based on the former Hawthorne house Mailer lived in at the top of Miller Hill Road. In the 50s it was the only house there; there are a dozen or more there now.

It is time now to say a little about this house and where it is situated. The peninsula of Cape Cod is perhaps eighty miles long, and bent in its middle like the knotty, no longer agreeable arm of an old man who was once strong. To the forearm and hand of this coast is given the name of The Upper Cape, and it is pleasant land if one's humor is mournful—wind-swept with barren moors, lonely dunes, deserted ponds and stunted trees; its colors are gray and dun and the foliage is dull green. Off the arterial highway with its savage excremental architecture of gas stations, chromium-paneled diners,

*on the crest of the h. h. —
a dozen
or
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(to make
a dozen?)*

souvenir traps, fruit stands, motels, blinker lights, salt-eroded billboards, all in cruel vision-blunting pigments, in contrast to this highway garish in its petrifications of the over-extended American will, the side roads are quiet, hardly more than lanes, with small mouse-gray salt-box houses inhabited for the most part by retired Protestants, decent, lean, spare and stingy, gray themselves for the most part with a mouse gray.

There is no excess of life in the fall and winter, and it is country, which can be recommended for the solitary—the lonely walks on sandy trails by cranberry bogs whose thorny undergrowth is violet in color against the lavender hues of the dunes when the sky is gray. Near Provincetown there are a few miles of empty sand between the bay and the ocean which have the sweep of the desert—the dunes rise into small hills and fall away to valleys where one could believe oneself lost in the Sahara—I have heard of people who wandered about in circles over one dune and down, never reaching the ocean and never finding the bay, at least not for hours. There are few places on the eastern seaboard where one could bury a man as easily and leave one's chances so to nature, for the wind could leave the corpse under twenty feet of fill, or as easily could discover the cadaver before the cells were cold.

Beyond this desert, at the tip of the Cape, in the palm of the almost closed hand, is one of the last great fishing villages of the world, the place called Provincetown, in winter 3,000 population, its situation one of the most easterly promontories of the Atlantic Coast. Three miles long and two streets wide, the town curls around the bay on the skin of the palm, a gaudy run with Mediterranean splashes of color, crowded steep-pitched roofs, fishing piers and fishing boats whose stench of mackerel and gasoline is as aphrodisiac to the nose as the clean bar-whiskey smell of a nightclub where call girls congregate.

*months?
weeks?* It was in Provincetown where the Puritans landed and held to a starving bivouac for three months before they broke the encampment and moved to Plymouth Rock. They were without food and beside there was the spiral to wear them down: The Cape from the wrist to the fingers curls like a snail shell, the harbor and eye of water in the center, and one's sense of direction is forever confused. Without looking at the sun one could not point across the bay in the proper direction to Boston, Portugal, or the shores of Barbary. It is a place that defies one's nose for longitude and latitude, a cartographer's despair and a Puritan's as well. (The character of narrow intense faith is rectilinear in conception, which is why the clitorine cove in the facade of most New England churches is triangular or icepick steeple in its form rather than obeying the feminine Catholic arch of almost equally narrow Gothic faiths.)

The house Marion purchased was on a sand dune behind the last hill overlooking the town, and it was isolated, especially in fall and winter, reached by a sandy road that dipped down one dune and up another to give a view of rolling furze, rain water ponds, and the ocean and beach of the back shore. In bad weather the wind was a phenomenon, a New England wind of the lost narrow faiths that slashed through open doors, tempted shutters loose from their catch and banged them through the night, vibrated every small pane in every Cape Cod window and came souging out of the sky with the cries of storm water in its vaults—on such nights the hundred years of the house were alive with every murderous sleep it had ever suffered: it was the kind of house in which the dogs barked insanely in bad weather, and the nurse could not rest, and the baby awoke in hysterical terror at one in the morning while the mother would feel dread at the hundred rages of

her husband beside her in marriage sleep, and the house shifted and swayed to the wind like a ship in the north Atlantic seas, yes it seemed to contain every emotion that had died a frustrated death in its rooms and walls through a hundred New England winters, each ghost of emotion waiting to seize the storm feelings of the present; it was a house that had the capacity to set free, one upon the other, the dank sore-rotted assassins in the dungeons of a family's character. A storm at the wrong time came on with the horror that this was the night—and indeed there had been one killing there, an unexplained nineteenth-century crime, an old captain's widow who had worn a rectangular trough in the planks of the widow's walk at the ridgepole center of the steep roof. She was found dead on a late February night after three days of rain, the wind howling like a wounded shrew.

The second excerpt is from the coda to *Of a Fire on the Moon*, Mailer's 1971 nonfiction narrative of the first moon landing. Titled "A Burial by the Sea," it describes a quintessential Provincetown event, or happening, as they used to be called, in the late summer of 1969. It is narrated in the third person, Mailer describing himself as Aquarius.

His friends, the Bankos, buried a car as Labor Day approached. They had purchased a heap for the summer, purchased it with a request of the salesman that he sell them a piece of well-used automobile that would mange to survive through August and into the first weeks of September, but it died before Labor Day was on them, bearings gone, valves gone, oil pan cracked, and broken crankshaft—it was gone. Something in the mood of the summer brought every neighbor in for the burial. The sculptor Jack Kearney became the master of the rites, and poets living near became sacramental officers of the day. Friends came with drinks, while Harold McGinn, local contractor with bulldozer and earth digger, was there to scoop a hole six feet by eight feet by eight feet deep. A rope was put up to hold the neighbors and children from cavorting too near the abyss. And the car, a two-tone sedan of apricot and cream of a long-gone year with mourns of chromium now pitted by salt air and eight years of sun, such faded vehicle, was pushed back by the pallbearers, Aquarius among them, to land with its rear bumper, trunk and differential in the hole and its hood to the sky. The bulldozer leaned it up to a near vertical, and the pallbearers shoveled in earth and tamped sand at the base of the hole. Children ate candy and cake. A boy dressed in the black robes of a Byzantine priest read somber verses from Virgil, the Latin passing like a wash of coagulants over the car still settling in its half-buried grave, and Heaton Vorse in a cape and long-brimmed loose-hinged hat read from the Song of Solomon, sounds of mirth going up as the lines fell like hoops on the promontories of the apricot and cream Ford.

I compare you, my love,
to a mare of Pharaoh's chariots.
Your cheeks are comely with ornaments,
Your neck with strings of jewels.

Vorse was the son of Mary Heaton Vorse, a lady radical who had participated in such events as the Patterson strike now fifty years gone, and Heaton Vorse had a long Yankee nose that virtually touched his plank of a chin. He read to the Ford:

Your navel is a rounded bowl,
 That never lacks mixed wine.
 Your belly is a heap of wheat,
 encircled with lilies.
 Your two breasts are like two fawns,
 twins of a gazelle.
 Your neck is an ivory tower.
 Your eyes are pools in Heshbon.

The crowd applauded and Aquarius felt the proper warmth a funeral should evoke, a sorrow in the pit of merriment and the humor of the very sad—all these Provincetown neighbors out to applaud the burial of an old oil-soaked beast, and the Bankos circulated beer while children ran around the edge of the event, impatient for the ceremony to cease so that they might begin to paint the half of the auto protruding from earth. A child reached through the open window and turned a switch. The windshield wipers went on in a flick. "My God, it's not dead yet," said a voice. But as if in a throe of its last effluents, the washers began to spurt a final lymph.

Eddie Bonetti read his poem, "Duarte Motors giveth and terminal craftsmanship taketh away." Bonetti had worked all summer on a truck, finding the pieces he needed in the town dump, had worried over the Chevrolet manual for pickup trucks of the year of his buy the way a medical student in first-year anatomy class goes through strings of flesh that might be nerves, Bonetti had lived with the mysteries of a working transmission through all this summer, a dungeon of grease by evening to the groans of his pale blonde Missouri wife, and Eddie read in his deep cockeyed booming voice, eloquent as the wind that announces a shift in the omens, played with his poetic humors, which moved ponderous phrases through turns of silver by the shift of weight, and his poem continued, honoring this buried friend, conceived in cynicism and sold in exhortation on the floor of Duarte Motors, agent of promises too huge for its fealty to the domains of work, too large for its embarkation back into the particulars of the spoil. It was a heroic poem for the occasion (bound to have been printed if it had not been lost) and Aquarius, finding himself drunk unexpectedly on this afternoon of curious frolic, unable to resist the noise and calls of the last of summer and the ferments of the town, had come wandering out of his studio to attend half aghast, half sympathetic, to the idiocies of his friends—they would chop up a lawn mower to serve a salad.

The last of the poets, Walter Howard, was reading Numbers 16.

But if the Lord creates something new, and the ground opens its mouth and Swallows them up, with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into Sheol, then you shall know that these men have despised the Lord.

The children were out with brushes and paints, drawing figures, figure-drippings, and inchoate totems on the vertical roof of the car, and Kearney was liming the exposed bottom of the crankcase with lights of green luminescent pigment in slashes through the grease, hints of war paint—slowly the radiant ribbings of an insect's belly emerged from the dark and open works.

And as he finished speaking all these words, the ground under them split asunder and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up with their households. And all the men that belonged to Korah and all their goods.

Now children were slinging paint through the open windows onto the vinyl of an old upholstery. Aquarius watched his wife at the other end of the lawn and knew again as he had known each day of this summer that their marriage was over. Something had touched the moon and she would never be the same. The sense of love as a balm for the vacuums of the day was departed from them—they were sealed from one another, a run of seven years was done, and his heart throbbed like a bruise in the thigh.

So he mourned the hour as well as any man would when his pains were not small, even mourned for the beast who cried out in Banko's half-buried Ford, mourned him like the skull of poor Yorick, and came back often in the next day and the next to watch Kearney the sculptor work with his torch and goggles to weld bumpers and angles of chromium into mandibles and legs while insect's antennae reached up in a mute's catalepsy to the sky. And they put floodlights at the base. The funeral had ended in an artifact for the summer of the moon in the East End of Provincetown not a hundred feet off the street that runs around the bay, not a half-mile in from the edge of town, Metamorphosis, titled by Kearney, a massive Yorick of half a Ford standing twelve feet high, first machine to die with burial in the land of the Pilgrims and the cod.

Next, a preface Mailer wrote for the 1977 Berkley paperback reprint of his 1967 novel, *Why Are We in Vietnam?* As will be seen, his initial intention was to set it in Provincetown.

This is the only novel I ever finished under the mistaken belief I was writing not this kind of novel but another. Living in Provincetown on the edge of those rare, towering and windy dunes that give the tip of Cape Cod a fair resemblance to the desert of the Sahara, I had begun to think of a novel so odd and so horrible that I hesitated for years to begin it. I did not like the story; it came to me with fear. I imagined a group of seven or eight bikers, hippies and studs plus a girl two living in the scrub thickets that sat in some of the valleys between the dunes. Only six feet high, those thickets were nonetheless forests, and if one could find a path through the thorns and cat briars, nobody could track you, not in a hurry. So I peopled the thickets with characters: my characters were as wild as anyone who ever came to Provincetown. It is not a tame place. ~~Years ago a First Lady was once told it was "the Wild West of the East," and that is not a bad description.~~ The tip of Cape Cod curls in on itself in a spiral—the long line of the dunes comes around like the curve of one's palm and fingers as they close into a fist—it is one of the very few places in America where one comes to the end of the road for a more profound reason than real estate ceasing to be profitable. In Provincetown, geography runs out, and you are surrounded by the sea.

So it is a strange place. The Pilgrims landed there before they went on to Plymouth—America began here. The Pilgrims lost interest in scrub pine, mournful winds, and sand in the land. They moved on, left ghosts. Whaling captains settled in, left ghosts. In winter the town is filled with spirits. One can go mad in that rainy climate waiting for

March to end. It is a place for murderers and suicides. If decades went by without a single recorded homicide, that record ended abruptly with a crime of true carnage. A few years ago, a young Portuguese from a family of fishermen killed four girls, dismembered their bodies, and buried the pieces in twenty small and scattered graves.

That catastrophe was a good deal worse than anything I had already contemplated for my gang, since I conceived of them making nocturnal trips from the dunes into town where out of the sheer boredom of an existence not nearly intense enough to satisfy their health, they would commit murders of massive brutality and then slip back into the dunes. Motiveless crimes. I saw a string of such crimes.

I was, as I say, in fear of the book. I loved Provincetown and did not think that was a good way to write about it. The town is so naturally spooky in the mid-winter and provides such a sense of omens waiting to be magnetized into lines of force that the novel in my mind seemed more of a magical object than a fiction, a black magic.

Nevertheless, I began the book in the spring of '66. It attracted me too much not to begin. Yet because I could not thrust Provincetown into such literary horrors without preparation, I thought I would start with a chapter about hunting bear in Alaska. A prelude. I would have two tough rich boys, each as separated from social convention as any two rich boys could be—Texans I would make them out of a reserve of memories of Texans I had served with in the 112th Cavalry out of San Antonio. The boys would still be young, still rather mean than uncontrollably murderous—the hunting might serve as a bridge to get them ready for more. They would come back to the hunting trip ready to travel—Provincetown would eventually receive them.

Cavalry

Now anyone who reads the book that this preface serves will see that nobody ever gets to Provincetown. The chapter on hunting becomes a half-dozen chapters, a dozen chapters, it ends up being all the book. If I wrote those chapters wondering how long it would take to extricate myself with novelistic integrity from all the elaborations of the hunt I seemed more and more bound to get into, it was not until those boys were back in Dallas and I was getting ready to move them East that I realized two things.

(1) I had nothing further to say about them.

(2) Even if I did, I could not longer believe that Tex and D.J. could still be characters in the Provincetown novel. They had another quality by now.

So I lived with my manuscript for a few months and ended by recognizing that I hadn't been too bright. I had written a novel not a prelude. The book was done. Later, a number of readers would think *Why Are We in Vietnam?* was far and away my best book. I thought I had never written a funnier one.

In retrospect, I was less certain, however, of the humor. For when Sharon Tate was murdered in the summer of '69, and the world heard of Charles Manson, I could wonder what state of guilt I might have been in if I had written that novel of desert murderers. How then could I ever been certain Manson had not been sensitive to its message in the tribal air?

The fourth excerpt is from *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, Mailer's 1984 murder mystery set on Cape Cod, mainly in Provincetown. Arguably, he has never surpassed this meditation on the town, taken from the opening chapter. It is narrated by the protagonist, Tim Madden, who is as gloomy as the town is empty. His wife, Patty Lareine, has recently left him.

In summer it might have been more obvious to others what a sorry hour I was in, but this was late in the fall, the days were gray, the town deserted, and on many a shortening November afternoon, you could have taken a bowling bowl and rolled it down the long one-way lane of our narrow main street (a true new England alley) without striking a pedestrian or a car. The town withdrew into itself, and the cold, which was nothing remarkable when measured with a thermometer (since the seacoast off Massachusetts is, by Fahrenheit, less frigid than the stony hills west of Boston) was nonetheless a cold sea air filled with the bottomless chill that lies at the cloistered heart of ghost stories. Or, indeed, at many a séance Patty and I attended at the end of September with disconcerting results: short and dreadful, it ended with a shriek. I suspect that part of the reason I was now bereft of Patty Lareine was that something tangible but indisputably repulsive had attached itself to our marriage at that moment.

After she left, there was a week when the weather never shifted. One chill morose November sky went into another. The place turned gray before one's eyes. Back in summer, the population had been thirty thousand and doubled on weekends. It seemed as if every vehicle on Cape Cod chose to drive down the four-lane state highway that ended at our beach. Provincetown was as colorful as St. Tropez, and as dirty by Sunday evening as Coney Island. In the fall, however, with everyone gone, the town revealed its other presence. Now the population did not boil up daily from thirty thousand to sixty, but settled down to its honest sediment, three thousand souls, and on empty weekday afternoons you might have said the true number of inhabitants must be thirty men and women, all hiding.

There could be no other town like it. If you were sensitive to crowds, you might expire in summer from human propinquity. On the other hand, if you were unable to endure loneliness, the vessel of your person could fill with dread during the long winter. Martha's Vineyard, not fifty miles to the south and west, had lived through the rise and fall of oceans, the life and death of great forests and swamps. Dinosaurs had passed over Martha's Vineyard, and their bones were compacted into the bedrock. Glaciers had come and gone, sucking the island to the north, pushing it like a ferry to the south again. Martha's Vineyard had fossil deposits one million centuries old. The northern reach of Cape Cod, however, on which my house sat, the land I inhabited—that long curving spit of shrub and dune that curves in upon itself in a spiral at the tip of the Cape—had only been formed by rain and wind over the last ten thousand years. That cannot amount to more than a night of geological time.

Perhaps this is why Provincetown is so beautiful. Conceived at night (for one would swear it was created in the course of one dark storm) its sand flats glistened in the dawn with the moist primeval innocence of land exposing itself to the sun for the first time. Decade after decade, artists came to paint the light of Provincetown and comparisons were made to the lagoons of Venice and the marshes of Holland, but then the summer ended and most of the painters left, and the long dingy undergarment of the gray New England winter, gray as the spirit of my mood, came down to visit. One remembered then that the land was only ten thousand years old, and one's ghosts had no roots. We did not have old Martha's Vineyard's fossil remains to subdue each spirit, no, there was nothing to domicile our specters who careened down the two long streets of

our town that curved together around the bay like two spinsters on their promenade to church.

Finally, a poem, one of Mailer's favorites. It first appeared in his 1962 collection of poems, *Deaths for the Ladies (and Other Disasters)*. He reprinted it in his huge retrospective collection, *The Time of Our Time* (1998), and again in his second collection of poems, *Modest Gifts* (2003). It is titled "The Harbors of the Moon."

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The first edition of this pamphlet consists of 1500 soft cover copies and 26 lettered copies bound by Harcourt Bindery of Boston, Massachusetts.

J. Michael Lennon is the President of the Norman Mailer Society and Emeritus Vice President of Wilkes University. He has written and edited a number of works by or about Mailer, including Mailer's *The Spooky Art: Some Thoughts on Writing*, published by Random House in 2003. He and his wife Donna Pedro Lennon reside part-year in Provincetown. An earlier version of his introduction was presented at the annual meeting of The Norman Mailer Society, November 2004, in Provincetown.