

BY NEECE REGIS. ILLUSTRATION BY ROLAND SARKANY.

CHAPTER I

Sea Change

PROVINCETOWN WAS BORN AS A PORTUGUESE FISHING VILLAGE, HOME TO WHARVES AND WHALERS. BUT FOR OVER A CENTURY, IT'S BEEN CATCHING SOMETHING ELSE: ARTISTS.

Maybe it's the clear light reflecting off the bay, or the wildness of the dunes along the outer edge of the Cape Cod National Seashore. Or perhaps it's the way the land twists its sandy forearm against the cold Atlantic before spiraling back to create a welcoming harbor rimmed with small, shingled houses.

Yet while all of those attributes make Provincetown picturesque, they don't fully explain why a former Portuguese fishing village at the tip of Cape Cod in Massachusetts has been a magnet for artists and writers for well over a century.

spots on earth ... I do not know of a place that is comparable to it, with its vast seascapes, the glorious Cape light, the air that flows in from the sea, and a community of deeply engaged artists."

It's a community that Kunitz helped shape. Noticing that there were many painters in town but not many writers "who had a stake in the community," Kunitz enlisted the help of his pal, painter Robert Motherwell, and several others, to establish the Fine Arts Work Center in 1968. Since that time, the FAWC has provided seven-month residencies and stipends to more than 500 emerging writers and visual artists, many of whom settle year-round in Provincetown or return each summer.

"I felt it was important to have a role in starting a community of artists," Kunitz says. "That, to me, seemed an essential creative necessity if the town was to be more than just a vacation place."

Kunitz celebrated his 100th birthday this summer in Provincetown, in the garden he's been tending since he bought his home more than 40 years ago. Streams of friends passed through to offer good wishes and cheer. (Elise Asher passed away last year.)

"It's curious. I remember coming here from a farm in Connecticut," Kunitz tells me. "I was hearing about the community of artists, writers, and painters, and the next thing I knew, I was here, and I started my garden here, and I've never regretted it."

Kunitz set out to create a community, and on a bright summer day, on this spit of land surrounded by the sea, the community returned to honor him.

JEANNIE MOTHERWELL spent every summer of her childhood in Provincetown with her father, the internationally renowned painter Robert Motherwell, and her equally well-known stepmother, Helen Frankenthaler. In the late 1950s, their circle of friends included luminaries in the fields of painting, writing, and psychology.

A Provincetown Reading List

Provincetown: Stories from Land's End, by Kathy Short
My Provincetown: Memories of a Cape Cod Childhood,

by Amy Whorf McGuiggan

Land's End: A Walk in Provincetown, by Michael Cunningham

The Wild Braid: A Poet Reflects on a Century in the Garden,
by Stanley Kunitz with Genine Lentine

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While their parents worked in their studio, Jeannie and her sister played on the beach with the children of other artists and writers.

"Dad's theory was that this was better than camp," she says.

Motherwell, 52, was raised in a world where creativity and psychoanalysis were part of her daily routine.

"We'd talk about our dreams every morning," she says. "Then, Helen and Dad would ask us to write something and make a drawing out of it. We had no coloring books; nothing was premade. We were asked at an early age to think about our thoughts and emotions."

A seminal moment in her artistic development occurred when Motherwell moved to Provincetown full-time in the late 1970s, when she was in her 20s. As she was riding her bike through town, a local fisherman waved and asked her to join him for a drink.

"He pulled a wad of \$100 bills from his pocket and said, 'I have all this money, and I can't give it away.'" Motherwell remembers.

The next day, his boat, the *Patria Marie*, sank. All that was found was his wallet. Filled with emotion and a sense of loss to the community, Motherwell began a series of abstract paintings and collages of druggers (fishing vessels), which were bought by both local fishermen and art collectors.

"It was my first sense of finding my identity in painting," she says.

In the past decade, she's used collage, digital photography, painting, and text to create complex, subtle works that evoke the Cape's Province Lands. The images straddle abstraction and reality.

She now lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, but returns to Provincetown every summer to exhibit her work and find new inspiration. When asked if it's hard to follow in her parents' larger-than-life footsteps, she smiles.

"My audience is different than Dad and Helen's," she says. "It took me a while to realize I'm not trying to change the world with art; I'm trying to use what I know to make good pictures."

TABITHA VEVERS, 48, says she was "weaned on Cape Cod." Like Motherwell, her parents were part of the Provincetown bohemian arts scene in the 1950s and '60s, and she and her sister spent their summers on the beach.

In her home, she was surrounded by paintings made by her father, Tony Vevers, and the sculpture and collages created by her mother, Elspeth Halvorsen.

"I always knew I wanted to be an artist," she says. "We lived and breathed art. I didn't know any adults who weren't artists or writers. I never saw a guy in a necktie until high school."

The natural environment finds its way into Vevers's work, though not always in a literal way. Her recent work, miniature paintings and gold leaf inside seashells, brings her back full circle to those summers long ago.

"Working with shells — the process of walking on the beach, finding them, and sanding their surfaces — puts me in mind with sea mythologies," she says. "I paint images of people interacting with sea creatures, lobsters, and giant squid. It's more about metaphor and myth than anything else."

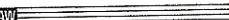
Vevers paints her images on all kinds of shells, including mussels, quahogs, sea clams, and scallops.

"These shells were discarded by nature, but they once housed precious organisms. I make them precious again, like Fabergé eggs," she says.

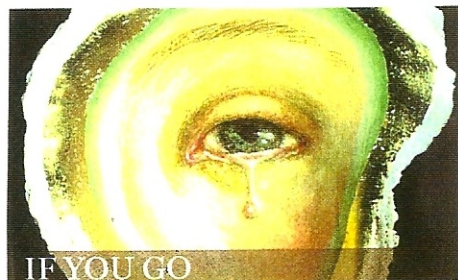
Vevers continues to live part of each year on the Cape and exhibits regularly in Provincetown, where her sense of community and history are strong.

"All the generations interact here," she says. "There's an easy flow between younger and older artists."

Vevers fits squarely into the long line of artists and writers who have found inspiration in this small but vibrant town. There's no doubt she'll keep returning until she and Motherwell replace Kunitz as elders of the community. In this way, Provincetown's artistic heritage is guaranteed to continue.

"The salty air and sun are in my bones," Vevers says. She shrugs, as if that explains everything, and strolls down the beach to gather more shells. 

NECEE REGIS writes about travel, culture, and food for the *Boston Globe*.



Tabitha Vevers's painted shells (like the one above) are at the ArtStrand Gallery, 53 Bradford Street, (508) 487-1153, www.artstrand.com.

Jeannie Motherwell's work is at the Lyman-Eyer Gallery, 349 Commercial Street, (508) 487-3937, www.lymaneyerart.com. You can also visit Motherwell's website at www.jeanniemotherwell.com.

For other artists, visit the Fine Arts Work Center, 24 Pearl Street, (508) 487-9960, www.fawc.org; and the Provincetown Art Association and Museum, 460 Commercial Street, (508) 487-1750, www.paam.org.

American Airlines offers regular service to Boston and to Providence, Rhode Island, both of which are a two-and-a-half-hour drive from Provincetown.