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Mystery Lives Even In New Jersey Jan Wellington

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Jan Wellington

MYSTERY LIVES EVEN IN NEW JERSEY

I. The Delaware Bay

I come from a coastal plain whose mountains are molehills. Digging in the backyard, all I hit is water. Long ago bones have dissolved and the meager pebbles aren't telling, nor are malls or churches resurrected as real estate agencies with startled graves for neighbors. Recency is the theme written by the interstate over burial grounds just real enough to explain freak accidents, miracle recoveries, haloed animals plunging in front of cars in rainstorms and disappearing.

Forgotten places on the bay stutter the older story. Clamshells and pool balls clack in Shellpile; Bivalve's crackerbox churches ring dogged revival. The marshes are quieter but still swish with hints of how time ebbing multiplies seabirds and horse-shoe crabs orgying before the beach was oil. Bobcat, otter, bison, mastodon, a dainty horse pass in front of a car parked on the estuary where rotting hulls knock rotting docks and sad smells grow in the reeds. Roads without names lasso visitors who blunder suspended in the margin, emerging centuries removed from the place they stepped in.

II. The Pine Barrens

Long-A-Coming, Hampton Furnace, Ong's Hat, Shamong—names the stagedriver called swallowed by sand, by pines, by time, shuffled from needle to falling needle unheard, buried with cannonballs and lady's slippers, the civilizing urge's back turned on the howling boredom, the shattering sameness of mile after mile of nothing but sand, pines, and time.

Devils are born in such places of a starving mother's bargain to sacrifice her thirteenth child in a cabin between the black woods and the blinding marshes. One time two or three centuries ago one such monster slashed the womb and fled its bloody nest up the chimney, trailing its lightning tail and cow's feet, thrashing its vulture's feathers, casting its diabolical laugh to the wind and come to rest on baseball caps which sometimes the wind grabs.

Looking up you'd see that cap or a black tophat bobbing on the branch where Ong flung it on being jilted by his faithless bride, just as you'd see Martha or Washington, towns that aren't, gathering matter amongst an illusion of trees. In the middle of a meadow undisturbed by access you'd find the grave of a forge paved with bricks of curious manufacture, rippled iron nails, or a white ceramic toilet standing intact amidst anthills and more questions than courage to answer them.

For most of us the past is a daytrip, for who would be willing to stay past dinner, past sunset, into the starless night under the moaning pines and chance that devil's laugh?

III. Sweetwater

Leave your suburb. Drive dumbfounded miles through the pines to leave this restaurant washed up on a Mullica backwater. Casino they call it—the gamble is which tune the organist will play next in his trance.

Try the oyster pie say the local spirits, old ones who slipped through the trees and never left, couples who talk like pines to river, lap and whisper. No meal compares with this slow feast on the cusp.

Stroll full down the lawn and stand on the floating pier. Watch sunset singe the pines as the last boat chugs home. Move with the river leaving for its millionth tryst with the moon. Some-

thing rushing past in the current urges you to taste water sweeter than you've known.

IV. Trying to Explain about Cape May Diamonds*

is trying to explain how false advertising is true. What is a gem but a stone's talents exposed? Seaward, set in curly kelp or bayward tumbled underfoot, pearls from a necklace flung to feed our excess of lust in the game become addiction. We genuflect for the most curvaceous specimen among millions, taking that irresistible next step beyond reason. It's not a question of market value but the distance passion reels us toward a stone.

*Cape May diamonds are translucent quartz pebbles found on the beach at New Jersey's southernmost tip.