



A Wash-Ashore on Cape Cod

by Geraldine Mills

Sitting on the west coast of Ireland at the edge of the Atlantic, as the tide turns back to lap the shores of Monument Beach, a little piece of my heart goes with it. I am reminded of the phrase "wash-ashore."

I learned the phrase during my visit to the United States last April. As part of a book tour with Connecticut poet, Lisa C. Taylor, our final readings were held on Cape Cod.

In 2009, Lisa had travelled to Connemara to work with me on the Irish-American connection and we wrote in a small stone cottage at the edge of the sea every day. The resulting collaboration called 'The Other Side of Longing,' has the Atlantic Ocean as the central metaphor.

This was not the first time for this "wash-ashore" to cross the Sagamore Bridge. I have been here in the summer when the osprey is lording its nest over cars and pedestrians. I have been here in the fall when the trees are awash with a painter's palette of claret, ochre, crimson and vermillion.

This, however, was my first time to see jonquils push their heads from the sleeping earth at the edge of gardens, and to watch a little bird, its beak full of nesting material, fly to a secret place behind a crate at the Cape Cod Quahog Company. Like the osprey I had just seen over Eel Pond, it was good to be back.

America has always played a huge part in my life. This very ocean saw my great grandmother travel to Massachusetts just after the Irish Hunger. She couldn't settle there and going against the tide bought a passage back across the Atlantic to rear her family in her home place.

Being such a small island, emigration has always been a part of Irish culture and the next generations heard the same call. My aunt Lily settled in the Bronx, New York in the 1920s and brought over nieces and nephews to find work for them, especially in the hungry 50s and 60s.

My own sister emigrated in 1962 and sent back dollars every week to keep the family going. We awaited with great excitement the American Parcel that came every couple of months. When our mother opened up its cardboard flaps, all hands dived in to unearth untold riches from the New World.

Fast forward to 2004, and I am in Joyce Flynn's car on my way from her home in South Yarmouth to the Provincetown Theater to see the premier of my short play, 'This Is From The Woman Who Does', directed by Judith Partelow and starring the Irish born singer/actor Aoife Clancy.

My friendship with Joyce Flynn and her husband Professor Philip O'Leary was forged while they were on sabbatical in my hometown, Galway, in 1999.

It was Joyce's encouragement that pushed me to enter my play. It was at the Provincetown Theater Festival that I first met Jacqueline Loring, president of the Cape Cod branch of the NLAPW, as well as many others.



Geraldine with her friend Jacqueline Loring at Böll Cottage, Achill Island, Co. Mayo.
Photograph courtesy of Jacqueline Loring.

Readings are always very special on the Cape for this "wash-ashore" because it is a way of keeping valuable friendships alive and the chance to develop new ones. This tour allowed me the great pleasure of reading with Lisa at the Cape Cod Cultural Center and meeting up again with its director, Lauren Wolk.

The reading at the Falmouth Arts Guild was a new experience for me. What made it so special was that we read with poet and professor, Daniel Tobin, while Alice Kociemba (director of Calliope, Community of Poets) introduced us.

Alice, Lisa and I first met at the 2008 Cape Cod Writers' Conference when we all attended Daniel's poetry workshop. What a homecoming. Like the Cultural Center, Falmouth Arts Center is a haven for artists and I am very grateful to Suzy Beckman for hosting it.

All those place names, like small exquisite poems, are now part of my vocabulary: Cotuit, Clay Pond, Woods Hole, Mashpee or Pocasset where I had the unexpected pleasure of meeting photographer Robert Manz at his studio and hearing about his connection with Ireland. I was drawn into the world he has captured with his camera and it wasn't long before we found that some of his images resonated with some of my poems.

Once again I had found a consanguinity of place and form.

Feasting on clam chowder and stuffed quahogs in true Cape Cod fashion in the home of Jacqueline and Gary Loring while hearing the inspirational stories of members of the Cape Cod branch of NLAPW showed me how important this organization is for artists.

As I listened to how each woman worked her talent to put words on a page, a brush across a canvas, a needle through silk, or melded handmade paper to steel, I became very aware of the significance of each individual voice that is nurtured by the collective.

I came away from my trip realizing that art knows no boundaries and that we can achieve extraordinary things within the common ground of ocean.

POEM BY GERALDINE MILLS, REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION

Conquistadores

Docked on the table's oilcloth
like a ship at some foreign port,
the American parcel landed
to whoops of delight.

Our mother unhitched each cotton knot,
unfurled the sails of strong black paper,
tore back the cardboard flaps,
letting all hands dive in, plunder.

Banners of lollipops and sweets,
Betty Crocker Muffin Mix
plaid pants, rainbow ribbons, things we never dreamed of -
eyelash curlers, nail buffers,
'he-highs', 'standy-out slips'
so beautiful they made us believe
we could be someone else.

Dressed in what we now became,
she frog-marched us across the floor,
our eyes full of stars,
our faces spangled with sugar,

the New World scent
conquering the kitchen,
more exotic than jasmine,
than spikenard.

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from *The Other Side of Longing* by Geraldine Mills and Lisa C. Taylor (Arlen House 2011)



Photograph by Peter Moore

Geraldine Mills is a poet and short story writer and lives in Galway, Ireland. Her poetry collections, **Unearthing your Own** (2001) and **Toil the Dark Harvest** (2004) were published by Bradshaw Books. Arlen House has published her two short story collections **Lick of the Lizard** (2005) and **The Weight of Feathers** (2007) as well as her two poetry collections **An Urgency of Stars** (2010) and **The Other Side of Longing** (2011)

She was the Millennium winner of the Hennessy/Tribune New Irish Writer Award and was awarded the Patrick and Katherine Kavanagh Fellowship in 2007.

She travels regularly to the U.S. to teach and give readings. Her poetry and short stories are taught at the University of Connecticut and Eastern Connecticut State University.

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