



Newsday Photo / Bill Davis

Ferries from Port Jefferson and Bridgeport pass on Long Island Sound.

Of Sights and the Sound

Seeing nature from both sides of a special body of water

It rained during the day, and the sand is damp and firm, a grainy beige carpet decorated with delicate traceries etched by the receding tide.

Sunlight beats a glistening path across the water and a gull drops a clamshell on the sand and dives down to peck at the animal inside. Instead of the roar of the mighty ocean, I hear the steady lap-lap-lap of a lesser sea. At the same time, I am home and on a distant shore.

My viewing stand is the edge of a great basin carved by a glacier more than 20,000 years ago. A 110-mile-long estuary where ospreys fish and horseshoe crabs mate in the spring tides and lobsters live in the deeps and bluefish leap out of the sea. For as long as I can remember, Long Island Sound has been my touchstone to the natural world.

I grew up on the Connecticut side of the Sound in the Black Rock section of Bridgeport about a mile from a beach called St. Mary's by the Sea. There were more rocks than sand at St. Mary's and even when we went swimming, we wore sneakers. My sister and I collected shells, more concerned with their shape and color than with the mollusks that once lived inside them. We imitated creatures from the black lagoon with seaweed as props and skipped rocks on the dark, cold water. And we watched egrets in a marshy inlet near a place where people I categorized as rich lived in houses far different from mine.

I was about 5 when I saw a dead seagull on the shore. It was my first experience with death. I didn't know much about nature and I knew even less about life. The next year my grandmother died and my mother remarried. Forces beyond my control stormed

across my life. A fury born of my stepfather's drinking rocked our house and a hurricane smashed the seawall of St. Mary's.

I strained my eyes staring at the shore across the water where I imagined that stepfathers didn't drink and seagulls and grandmothers never died. "Over there," my stepfather said one day, "that's Long Island."

No matter where we went, before going home we would always stop at St. Mary's — to look at the stars, to smell the salt wind, to listen to the seagulls. The Sound beckoned and the land mass stretching along the horizon, the place called Long Island, would vanish in storms and fog and summer haze, then reappear like Shangri-la.

The Sound is only 21 miles across at its widest point but I would travel much farther in time and space before I came to live on that distant shore — across my teenage and college years and places as far away as Boston and London and Chicago and Austin. Now I live only a five-minute walk from the beach and my childhood lies across the water. I have watched the setting summer sun paint the sky pink and purple and pale

yellow and stood in foot-deep snow as a nor'easter whipped the water into a white-capped frenzy and raged across the beach.

And if I brushed against nature on the Connecticut side, I have embraced it on my adopted shore. The Sound is more finite than the seemingly endless ocean, but I think of it as the body of water that truly makes where we live an island — and helps define us.

And so on an afternoon when the sand is damp from rain, I stroll along the shore and take joy in the

nature all around me. Laughing gulls let out a burst of ha-ha-haahs as they fly through a cloud-streaked sky and a double-crested cormorant dries its outstretched wings on a barnacle-encrusted rock. Cormorants may be the bane of boaters, but it's hard not to be impressed by a bird that can dive down 75 feet from the surface of the water and shoot through the depths like a torpedo in pursuit of its prey.

It is low tide and jellyfish larger than pancakes lie marooned on the sand. I look at the gelatinous red-speckled blob but don't touch it — even dead jellyfish can have active stingers. The lion's mane, our most common species, has more than 150 tentacles and shoots its stinging barbs like mini-harpoons.

Beach grass rustles in the breeze. The shore is strewn with shells and seaweed and the skeletal remains of life in the sea. The empty carapaces of horseshoe crabs seem omnipresent, rocks that stretch into the water are slick with algae, slipper shells hug one another, razor shells look ready for a barber's hand, a pair of swans bob offshore.

Alonely fisherman casts into the surf. I imagine the rocks rising out of the water are really whales and think about the unseen life in the depths. A captain on the Bridgeport-Port Jefferson Ferry once told me about occasional porpoises playing alongside his vessel. Whenever I take the ferry, I look for them. I'm still hoping to see one.

I know a little bit more now about life and death. I know grandmothers and seagulls die. But I also know something about love and finding at least a small part of your dreams. I've looked at life from both sides of the Sound. I still drive around St. Mary's whenever I go back to Connecticut but now the distant shore, the place called Long Island, is my home.

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