



Boundary Crossings
New Paintings | Bruce Herman

with narrative meditations by
Mark Sargent

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BORDERSTALKER PRESS



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Artist's Statement | Bruce Herman

*Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past...*

*The trilling wire in the blood
Sings below inveterate scars
Appeasing long forgotten wars.
The dance along the artery
The circulation of the lymph
Are figured in the drift of stars*

– T. S. Eliot
“Burnt Norton”
Four Quartets

I live in Gloucester, Massachusetts on a peninsula called Cape Ann which juts out into the Atlantic Ocean north of Boston. The Cape was settled by European immigrants in the early 1620s, but before that time it was a place visited periodically by various tribes of the Algonquin federation—who believed an ancient legend about a spirit-being living on this coastal land who might take them captive if they tarried here. I’ve come to believe that this tale was probably woven by wise chieftains who recognized the dangers of a place of such raw beauty—beauty that might waylay the people who would then be stranded here—a place beset by “perfect” storms. (Gloucester is the setting for Sebastian Junger’s book and the movie by that title.)

And Cape Ann is in fact often hit by violent Nor’easters that can wreak havoc on coastal dwellings. This land was scoured and scraped by the great Laurentide Ice Sheet 10,000 to 20,000 years ago—whose retreat left huge granite boulders and erratics strewn throughout the woodlands, along with exposed ledges and outcrops. A geologist friend says that our property here along Walker Creek, which borders on the Great Ledge, was the stony heart of a mountain range as high as the Rockies—torn down entirely by those glaciers advancing and retreating over millions of years. The highpoint on our land is only about 90 feet above sea-level now, and the coastline (north of where Boston is now) was originally 60 to 100 miles out into the North Atlantic along Stellwagen Bank. Fishing-boats have dredged up prehistoric mastodon tusks there.

I mention all this about Cape Ann because this suite of paintings, *Boundary Crossings*, is about a wandering, peregrine spirit that I feel deeply as a painter—incarnated by those earlier peoples who visited here. I have a sense that my time here in Gloucester (since 1972, now a half-century) is more part of a journey than a settled home. I am headed for another, “better country, and a city whose architect and builder is God.” That journey, that pilgrimage, is also an odyssey of sorts, and the tidal estuaries here on Cape Ann have come to stand for a kind of liminal space along the way—a boundary land that is corollary to that inner spiritual landscape I am always traversing. I am bold enough to believe that this quite personal borderland contains something universal—a kind of internal/external paradox that we all live and share. We are walking contradictions, angel-beasts. Fresh water and saltwater merge here. Land and sea break into each other, and the unique ecosystem that is an estuary is just that—land and sea and sky at the same time. A meeting of heaven and earth.

I feel deeply Eliot’s words about time and his image of our vascular system mirroring that cosmic fractal design that manifests everywhere and in everything—a tree, a river seen from above, the branching of time and tide and human story.

Lastly, I will simply say that for me geological time, tidal time, and chronological time are distinct experiences—yet all three are governed for us by narrative time. Human narrative and divine narrative. The latter is largely unknown to us except in revelation—when the Creator chooses to disclose some fragment of the larger picture. Meanwhile we are left to sort through those fragments and see how they can be collaged into a unity. The liminal space of Cape Ann has become for me a symbol of that grand and costly simplicity, the lineaments of which we only receive glimpses. My prayer is that these paintings offer a celebration of those beautiful and mysterious fragments.





Walker Creek Estuary ©Bruce Herman, 2022. oil on wood panel; 75" × 55"

Walker Creek

Mark Sargent

When I first visited Bruce Herman at his home near Walker Creek, he was standing on its embers.

I had been at Gordon College only a few months when I got word that lightning had hit an electrical line and ignited the blaze. The ground was still soaked from the fire when I arrived to join him with friends among the charred remnants. Only then did I fully realize that the fire had claimed not only his home, but also his studio and twenty years of work. Just a month earlier, he had loaned me a painting for my office—a blue-toned cityscape, fluid lines, almost organic. Over the years it has been hung in several places on campus, and each time I see the canvas I remember that others were lost. As we stepped through the ashes, Bruce told us that “we hold our things lightly”—and repeated it, as if for solace. He vowed to rebuild the home and studio right there, not far from the creek.

I was thinking of those embers as I was driving to his house last May. It has been a quarter century since the fire. For more than fifteen of those years, when we were colleagues at Gordon, Bruce helped me discover new passages in the liberal arts. Colleges are hubs of texts and technologies, and I thought of the visual arts as one of the connecting threads, like the roots of the trees that pass nutrients throughout the grove. This is a new moment for each of us, and a propitious one: we have both just stepped aside from full-time careers in academia. So when Bruce invited me to share some walks in his woods and across Cape Ann, I was eager to see his wilds and his art through his eyes—and to reflect and renew. Sure, it may be a stretch to say, with Dante, that we have reached the “midpoint of life’s journey,” but we always want to keep a pilgrim’s heart.

Someday we may indeed take one of those long, blister-ridden pilgrimages, but we entered our short hikes through Cape Ann with the intent to meander. Hikers on the Camino de Santiago or Via Francigena have scores of spiritual advisors to guide them, whether they opt for St. Benedict, Dorothy Day, or Rick Steves. My guidebook for meandering in New England has been “Walking” by Henry David Thoreau. This was the lecture he loved best, the one he worked over right up until his death from tuberculosis in 1862. “I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life,” he writes, “who understood the art of Walking, that is, of taking walks—who had a genius, so to speak, for *sauntering*.” Thoreau speculates that sauntering originally meant seeking to head “à la Sainte Terre, to

the Holy Land.” The ancient saunterer, he suggests, might have been “*sans terre*,” or without a home—not so much homeless, but at home everywhere.¹ Modern linguists think this is all a dead-end, and often blame Samuel Johnson’s dictionary for getting Thoreau off-track, though John Muir and other admirers have repeated his tale about walking as a time for risk and rumination. I will take the poetry, even if the etymology strays. There’s also inspiration in an old York mystery play: a Roman soldier proclaims that the problem with Jesus was “all his saunteryng.” In the Middle English of the York drama, that’s a variant of an old French word for “musing”—or, if you prefer, “wonder.”²

Our first saunter through the Walker Creek watershed was a blustery one. A week of rain had just ended, but there was still plenty of moisture in the wind. It was early May: the oaks were bare, the trail still covered with branches discarded by the winter storms. We may not have been headed for a cathedral, but a forest behind one’s home will always be a *Sainte Terre*. So much of the green space of Cape Ann has been put in trust, yet I still lament the paving of each new acre. People have been stranded in the local woods, but more often than not the wilds here are like the streets of Venice—a place where you can lose your way without venturing too far from a river, road, or rail. Before departing his studio, Bruce offered a quick glance at his recent work. The large overhead images of the watershed were in process. As always, I was struck by the luminous, buoyant colors. I could trace waterways and deltas and imagine clusters of trees and grassland, though nothing was purely representational. Our path would take us somewhere through this terrain, through the backwoods and the brushstrokes.

The trail quickly goes where all trails should go: to open vistas and the homes of friends. We lingered briefly at the home of Robert and Patricia Hanlon and their Walker Creek Artworks. For years they have made wonderful furniture out of the aged wood of old barns and farms. Walker Creek itself is a short stream; it descends just over two miles from the Haskell Pond Dam, built in 1903 and recently rehabilitated. The first Haskell to settle here—William, a mariner and fisherman—bought the oldest of the seventeenth-century structures still standing in the watershed. A good Puritan, he was fined by the elders for living there without a wife. Companions are no longer necessary if you wish to rent a room in his old home, still open for a night of lodging. Walker Creek once turned a grist mill, and the watershed had a post office and single-room school house. Before the English began felling logs here in 1627, the Agawam also sheltered in these woods, gathering clams and shells at the river’s mouth, much as they did at the Annisquam River to the east. The creek falls within the terrain that the Agawams called “wormesquamsauke,” known as a “pleasant water place.”³ One slice from that word—“squam”—still survives in local place names.



Essex Bay Estuary ©Bruce Herman, 2022. oil on wood panel; 75" × 55"



Autumn Sonata ©Bruce Herman, 2020. oil on canvas; 36" × 36"

As much as we might like to think of the woods as a timeless preserve, we are really surveying nature's scrapbook. Like Bruce, I enjoy looking for the layers of history around us—the civic ones, but also the tales of the earth and flora. Not far into the route we passed a few small water basins, recently topped off by the rain. They were first dug to claim rock and soil for the foundation of the nearby Yankee Division Highway. Of course, no one here calls the road by that name—it's known simply as 128, perhaps out of loyalty to the Red Sox. These basins have now become vernal pools, full of enough spotted salamanders and frogs to win them the protection of conservation laws, even if they owe their origin to a backhoe.

Here and there is an oak or pine that has survived for a couple of centuries or more, yet most of this woodland is second-growth forest. During the years when the Algonquians wandered in this land, one would have found lots of softwoods—black and red spruce, hemlock, cedars and firs—and many harder trunks—oaks, maples, elms, ash, sycamores, beeches, and linden. Several species were eradicated during the leveling of the forests by the Europeans, though some varieties reemerged—especially scrub oaks and pines—when the nineteenth-century pastures and farms were left to return to their untended state. The timber cleared on these lands was mostly used for homes, with more and more cuttings fed into the shipbuilding industries that flourished on the Cape in the century after the American Revolution. Gloucester's allure as a city for artists owes much to the clippers of Fitz Henry Lane and the Luminists. Lane's ships, so often set against the mystical brilliance of dawn, boast of nautical craftsmanship and national promise. Only in recent decades have local histories and public tours fully acknowledged how many of these resplendent sails flew in the Surinam slave trade. It's become one of our greatest tests of conscience: accepting that many aspects of our cultural heritage that we have found intriguing, even inspiring, have their strands of beauty and layers of shame.

If I discovered anything during our meanders, it was Bruce's love of rocks. The trail wove through the trees and the glacial moraine, the granite scraps strewn across Cape Ann by the ice flows. When the oaks have not yet shaded the paths, your eyes are drawn to the crevices in the scattered boulders. A geologist would tell us that the lines reveal weaknesses in the stone; Bruce looked for the beauty in the fissures. What seems arbitrary or chaotic invites new tales, or expands our templates for design. In the early spring, when the granite is moist and not shrouded by the leaves, I love the colors that encase the stone. Small green seedlings emerge from the cracks. Reddish pine needles and oak husks settle

into the cavities or blanket the flat surfaces. Wet granite turns the lichen a rich blue-green. We hopped up on a large, lichen-covered block of stone, one of Bruce's favorite sketching spots, to scan the Essex River estuary. Layers of mud, silt, and peat have been building in the marshlands since the glaciers receded some 20,000 years ago. Our perch was actually an erratic, or part of the rubble carried down by those frozen tides from the Laurentian highlands of Quebec.

These glacial nomads are, relatively speaking, fresh immigrants. The bedrock of Cape Ann, the ledge, had already been here for thousands of millennia. It hardened during the Paleozoic age, well before the continental plates drifted apart. Early in our walk, we ventured onto the monolith simply called the Great Ledge. I am always wary of heights, but Bruce got me to the edge to survey the small canyon below. This is clearly one of his beloved spaces. "These rocks were once a range as tall as the Alps," he remarked, "before these mountains were leveled by the glaciers." About 500 million years ago, when the ocean floors began to expand, we would have been standing on the great microcontinent of Avalonia. As Avalonia split apart, the great mass of the terrain rode on its tectonic plate across the emerging Atlantic. The strand left behind now comprises the northeastern seaboard, creating not only Cape Ann but also Cape Cod, Nova Scotia, and the Newfoundland bluffs. The rest of Avalonia—Cape Ann's migrating sister, you might say—now undergirds the British Isles and the western coasts of Belgium and Spain.

To my eye, the ledge has a blueish-gray or ashen hue, often darkened by moisture and moss in the crags. For the geologist, though, the old stone is packed with the iron oxides that give it speckled, reddish tones, more apparent when the bright sun illuminates the grain and crystals. If we took our chisels to it, we would expose igneous crystals to the air for the first time in several hundred million years. At night on this ledge, we would be able to see the light emitted from stars millions of years ago when the feldspar on which we stood was a smelting whirlpool. I've tried to envision this landscape as it was then, during its molten formation. But it is hard to strip the scene back in one's mind to magma and vapors. Perhaps the only aesthetic that can serve is abstraction.

Bruce's paintings of the watershed are not pure abstractions, but they do share some of the spontaneity and scale of the abstract expressionists. Most of the expressionists—a Pollock or Kandinsky—would undoubtedly want us to see in their pigment the motions of their artmaking rather than a mirror of nature. But we also take our own mirrors to nature. When I look at an aerial photograph of an estuary I can see an expressionist tangle of circular and quilted shapes, seemingly unsorted, even though we know that it is anything but



Autumn Sonata II ©Bruce Herman, 2020. oil on canvas; 36" × 36"



Boundary Crossings ©Bruce Herman, 2020. oil on panel; 30" × 30"

spontaneous, but rather the slow carving of water and wind. After a quick glance at aerial photos of any landscape I find myself seeking out boundaries and shapes. The patches of woodland settle into forms, rivers and sandbars assume rhythms, and we intuit a past. Both imagination and perception covet design.

Bruce's new images take us into that liminal space between art and observation. There's the hint of a copse now and then, a marshland channel, a strand of sand, a few rivulets, and even a road. But we never lose sight of his brush at work—the free play of color, the different pressures and angles of the bristles. I sense a friendly tug-of-war between color and line. Our eyes merge the complementary colors, softening boundaries. The textures, the cross-hatching, and the blending of gradients all intimate different fields of soil and flora, though we can't assign them botanical labels. This is a land known well enough to be reset in dreams.

A few months before our walk, Bruce mentioned the inspiration of Richard Diebenkorn, especially the “Ocean Park Series” completed during the artist's later years. As a marine in World War II, Diebenkorn had drawn sketches of servicemen, and then had seasons when he explored the “constraints” and “concentrated psychology” of the figure. Yet his foremost renown came from the “pure painting” of abstraction, his “absolute faith in painting's near muteness.”²⁴ The Ocean Park paintings of the late 1960s and early 70s followed a move to Santa Monica, made in part to avoid political drifts. The works sport with rectangular shapes and continuities of color. What could be a wall might also be a window frame—or a street, apartment, and horizon beyond. Surfaces are flat, but with illusions of depth. Many of his admirers see the coastal light and bleached shorelines in his palette: the strands of blue, the pastel yellows, whites, and ambers. Layers of paint are thin, and often reveal traces of their own making—their *pentimenti*, or the pencil marks and changes that show through. He worked these paintings over continually, but the radiant arrangements of color and the angular forms still seem like improvisations. They are joyful scaffolds, less structures than a process of becoming.

Ocean Park does help me find my way to Walker Creek. Like Diebenkorn's canvases, Bruce's watershed images have both structure and spontaneity. His colors are bolder, but there is a similar joyfulness. The rectangular forms also invite analogies to windows, or meditations on the light or landforms. Yet I realize that I can't talk about color and form without thinking that, for me, this becomes a proxy for the language of friendship. If I had never met Bruce, I might have still been drawn to the brilliant greens and blues of his work, but those shades are now blended with the many conversations when he has tried to bring new light to persistent dilemmas and lift spirits. Among the new paintings, the

images of leaves, seemingly blackened by moisture, carry translucent lines and patches. As we walked, Bruce would stop to admire the curly-edged lichen on the granite that he called “elephant ears,” dark, crusty, and alive. When you share parts of the trail together, the colors can’t be mute.

In a surprising way, the new works brought me back to the paintings Bruce completed after the fire twenty-five years ago. That series—“Building in Ruins”—is also full of scaffolds, often tilted or in decay, though the vibrancy of the colors and the complex textures also intimate a process of becoming. The loss of his home was always implicit, but the scope was broader, a set of spiritual themes that he had already been contemplating. As the church has declined in the West during the past couple of centuries, artists have wrestled with how to make use of the legacy of Christianity in art. Images and motifs that had once been aligned with devotion or belief were now more widely appropriated for less pious purposes, or given an ironic edge. In his own words, Bruce sought to “evoke the architecture and holy personages of the Italian tradition,” to take stock of its “ruins,” and to reset them in a new collage. “Building” was to be both noun and verb—the remnants of what has been lost as well as a ritual of renewing faith.⁵

There are certainly ruins in those postfire paintings: slivers of Western artistic motifs, sometimes as overt as the rubble of a Doric column or Roman arch. Yet what I found most alluring were the shards of color, often scratched, sanded, and re-coated, full of layers and graininess, with their hints of both erosion and renewal. Those scrapes and textures spread across the figures themselves, giving a *pietà*, a transfiguration, or a climb up Golgotha a ragged vitality. The frayed and robust images call upon the promise of Hebrew and Christian renewal. “The bricks are fallen down,” the author of Isaiah writes, “but we will build with hewn stones; the sycamores are cut down, but we will renew with cedars.”⁶ I recall the time we converted an old gymnasium at the college into an arts center, and we left exposed its old steel I-beams and added classical arches and verdigris panels. Bruce often described the center to me as “found space.” Many remnants simply need a new montage.

Several of the watershed paintings offer their own montage of shards and textures. I find it moving to think how brushstrokes that once evoked cultural disarray can reemerge as interpreters of nature’s abundance. There is often enough of a grid to suggest the value of human endeavor—irrigation channels and marshland canals, stone fences and tended fields. But nature, in its lushness and excess, gets the last word. We see the hardness that offers harmony, even if it anticipates the threats. Some of my favorite memories—and most fruitful conversations—with Bruce have been breakfasts at Lobsta Land when we



Cielo ©Bruce Herman, 2020. oil with 18k gold leaf on panel; 36" × 30"



Terra ©Bruce Herman, 2020. oil with silver leaf on panel; 34" × 30"

talked about faith, family, and vulnerabilities, even as the morning light filled the saltmarsh beyond. Walker Creek sits at the base of the Great Marsh, one of the most remarkable wetlands in America, a long strand of islands, marshes, and dunes that runs well into New Hampshire. But it needs vigilance to preserve it from hasty development. An estuary, after all, is one of the most fragile and fertile places on earth. It is liminal space: land and sea merge here, neither one securing the upper hand. Salt and fresh water blend. The constant push-and-pull of waves and streams deposits so many nutrient-rich sediments at the mouth of the river. Cordgrasses, muscled out by the salt hay on the drier slopes, will flourish in the moister lowlands since they dispose of salt more readily through their leaves. Many invertebrates—mussels, fiddler fish, oysters—thrive in brackish waters where the salinity is lower than the sea but richer than the freshwater streams. With their thin legs and feet, herons and egrets can traverse the wetlands without sinking into the mud and peat.

After leaving the woodland trail, we made our way to the thin strand on Clammer's Beach, and glanced back over the mouth of Walker Creek. The late-afternoon winds had turned colder, so we kept our stay brief. As we walked over the last stretch of the road, we discussed the loss of liminal spaces in current cultural debates. There is so much reason now to mourn the current divisiveness. The bruising partisanship, the refugees abroad or at our own borders, the disparities and injustices throughout our communities. Too often ambiguities justify tribal loyalties, rather than invite inquiry. More and more, people bond around grievances. During our time in academia, we have shared some remorse over the divisions that have caused many others pain, and lamented our own failures to provide remedy. In the face of conflict, I realize all too well the tendency to enter into the middle only to curry favor on both sides rather than helping the new plants gain strength.

Some of those challenges stayed in my mind as we reached our final stop, a quick detour to the Sumner Street Cemetery on the creek's edge. With good humor, Bruce pointed out the gravestone for a Sargent—actually, just one of the nine Sargents buried here. This is the old cemetery in town—founded, according to its sign, in 1850, though we found a few graves from earlier decades. As in many old New England graveyards, the stones tilt and some inscriptions have crumbled. Burnt-orange mosses cover many of the bleached markers, and several of the lost stones have been replaced by marble cubes, machine-cut and far more prosaic. A tall and aged oak spreads its canopy over at least a quarter of the cemetery; its roots have now tangled with some of the remains below.

Standing here, among the weathered markers and the unraked leaves, I recalled the opening of Mary Oliver’s poem “Praying”:

*It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch
a few words together . . .*⁷

There were small stones here, and some stray weeds. Rather than an iris, there were late crocuses along the stone walls and violet forget-me-nots on the patchy grass. Walks can be like praying—a familiar path becomes a kind of liturgy, a quiet stroll almost always a meditation. I realize that what I have been doing, as I have been layering these reflections, is trying to patch together a few words about our pilgrims’ lives ahead. My prayer, Bruce, is that we will still find beauty in the fissures. That we will gather the hewn stones and plant new cedars. And that we will have greater courage to enter the liminal spaces and to do the hard, regenerative work of seeding the most fertile soil.

In the spring of 1844, less than a decade after nineteen-year-old Abraham Sargent was buried beside Walker Creek, Thoreau accidentally started a fire in the Concord woods. He was cooking fish in the midst of a dry spring, and some embers caught the grass. The blaze spread over 300 acres, threatening the town and consuming hundreds of young trees. For many months, irate townsfolk would call him a “damned rascal,” but Thoreau, in his irascible way, managed to enjoy the “glorious spectacle” of the flames. He accepted no more responsibility than “as if lightning had done it.”⁸ I’m less likely to give him a pass, perhaps because I live in California, where several careless campfires and loose electrical lines have scorched redwood groves and left thousands homeless. We no longer have the nineteenth century’s sense of a boundless forest. Now, when we pick up Thoreau, we read not just to imagine an escape in the wilds, but to contemplate how to live during a time when our own indulgences can burn the globe.

I may be a New Englander *sans terre*, but I am grateful that Bruce has always helped me, a sojourner now, to feel at home in his own terrain. I expect to be back at Walker Creek to take another path or two. These days I have more time for discovery, for contemplation, but I also fear settling for a quiet haven. I will still need friends to walk me to the edges



Liminal Boundaries ©Bruce Herman, 2022. oil on wood panel; 75" × 55"



Choate Island ©Bruce Herman, 2022. oil on wood panel; 38" × 59"

and seek out new vistas. I want to see more of the light on the coastal headlands, and the flights of herons above the marsh. I want to linger near the young mosses and pine seedlings emerging from the crags. I want to meander beyond my usual trails so I can listen more, for both harmony and dissent. I will still read Thoreau to watch him grow beans and marvel at the song of the blackbird, but I also want some of the angst that made him fume about slavery and the Mexican War. Sauntering requires motion, both the musing and the wonder.

A good walk usually calms one's spirits. The best walks—like the most scattered prayers—can also stir them.

Notes:

¹Henry David Thoreau, "Walking," *The Atlantic Monthly* 9, no. 56 (June 1862): 42.

²York, *The Crucifixion (The Pinners)*, *Medieval Drama: An Anthology*, ed. Greg Walker (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), line 69.

³See, for instance, Frank T. Robinson, "The Quaint North Shore," *New England Magazine* 10, no. 6 (1894): 665.

⁴Quoted in Dan Hofstadter, "Almost Free of the Mirror," *New Yorker* 7 (September 1987): 60.

⁵<https://www.bruceherman.com/gallery/building-in-ruins/>

⁶Isaiah 9:10.

⁷Mary Oliver, "Praying," in *Thirst: Poems* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 37.

⁸*The Writings of Henry David Thoreau: Journal*, ed. Bradford Torrey (Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Co., 1906), Vol. 2 (May 31, 1851), 23–25.

My Father at Bass Rocks

Mark Sargent

For more than twenty years I kept a photo of my father on an office shelf. Dad is standing with my two boys—Bradford and Daniel, both elementary age—on Bass Rocks in Gloucester. It is a gray scene, an hour or two before dusk. Sherman’s Point and Good Harbor stretch in the distance, but catch no distinguishing light. The evening is cloudless, but also colorless, the ocean more ashen than the sky. The photo was taken in 1996, our first year in New England and my parents’ initial visit. A wave has just hit the rocks, and the white spray is still rising. This breaker poses little danger to the three of them as they hold their places on the bronze-colored stone, but it strikes close enough to promise future peril. My dad is in his early sixties but youthful: an ivory jacket with sportive trim, a full head of dark hair, secure in his stance. The boys, less certain on their feet, hover near him. I love the look in their eyes, their childlike thrill of risk completely overmatched by the assurance that their grandfather is holding on.

Many of the most spectacular pictures of Cape Ann have been shot near these rocks by photographers risking their footholds in the midst of a storm. They have given us the brutal beauty of Nor’easters: waves that vault off the boulders or blizzards that hammer the old, Victorian porches of the cliffside houses. We had parked for our photo in front of the historic Ocean House Hotel, known locally as the Wedding Cake House, not just for its whitewashed clapboard and tiered design, but also because it was once a gift to a young bride. That bride never chose to live here; the place was too isolated, too forlorn. In the late nineteenth century, an enterprising local businessman, George Rogers, had thought differently, and threw over a hundred thousand dollars into his vision for turning Bass Rocks into a summer retreat for Bostonians. Although he died before he could make a full go of it, he had, according to one contemporary historian, “discovered the purpose nature had in view for pushing this part of Cape Ann out into the Atlantic Ocean.” Here, on this elbow into the sea, a midsummer resident could feel the warm winds blowing across the bluffs and escape the “horrible moral consequences” and “corrupt summer atmosphere of the large cities.”¹

On many evenings in California, my parents took my two brothers and me to the beach, possibly to evade the moral consequences of the inland heat. As I watched Dad scamper with Bradford and Daniel on Bass Rocks, it wasn’t hard to recall climbing with him on the jetty at Newport Beach or walking the pier at Huntington. My father never really enjoyed fishing, yet he was always easy with strangers, and he would check in with the anglers on the pier about their choice of bait or their afternoon’s fortunes. There was usually supper at a firepit, though we always jumped into the water first. Dad taught us to love the ocean



Laity Lodge Meditation: Frio River ©Bruce Herman, 2022. oil on wood panel; 75" × 55"



Frio River Canyon ©Bruce Herman, 2020. oil on wood panel; 59" × 38"

because it reinvented itself with each wave. We dug forts in the sand for the sole purpose of waiting in them until the water came crashing in. On almost every stroll along the surf, Dad would collect pieces of the sea's refuse. Driftwood became ornaments for the garden. Seashells lingered for months in our glove compartment. I always loved the sand dollars, the skeletons of sea urchins. They were rare enough on our beaches that we would always save what we found. My mother stored them with her china.

I took that Bass Rocks photo on our last camera that required film. The picture has faded over time, but I could probably reproduce it once I hunt up those old negatives. Back then, before all was digital, we regularly had prints of the children made from the negatives to send back to our families in California. My father was never fully reconciled to our move to Massachusetts, as it took grandchildren to another end of the continent. Outside of a few college years, he had spent his entire life in Southern California. I always sensed that the parts of New England he liked best were the ones that evoked his own youth near Pacific beach towns. He would even remark on how much Gloucester Harbor looked like the old ports-of-call in his native Long Beach. Your hometown, I suppose, remains your life's template.

Dad did take to Rockport and Gloucester; Cape Ann had the blend of art and ocean that reminded him of Laguna Beach. We would drive to Laguna quite often to picnic on the bluffs, climb over the outcroppings, and then check out pottery or paintings. For a child, those trips to Laguna felt long and adventurous, especially since back then the canyons and chaparral still separated the town from the rest of Orange County. During his own high school and college days, Dad had started to paint, largely teaching himself. He favored oak trees, still lifes, and harbor scenes, quite often fishing craft at the dock or rowboats near the surf. If nothing else, Cape Ann would always have a special allure for him since it had been home, if only briefly, for one of the artists he admired most—Winslow Homer. In 1873 Homer spent a summer in Gloucester, and he returned in 1880, choosing a more secluded life on Ten Pound Island in the harbor. These were years when Homer was moving more and more toward watercolor, the genre Dad loved best. Looking back, I can see ways that my father tried to imitate Homer's Gloucester scenes: the looser brushstrokes and clear pencil marks, the use of negative space, and the obscure or averted faces. Most of all, he shared with Homer a fascination with hulls and sails—and boyhood. By the time he got to Gloucester, Homer was well known for his Civil War tableaus and for the rural scenes that viewers often equated with postwar hopefulness. But the Gloucester images are far more pensive. More than 150 of Gloucester's fishermen perished at sea in 1873 alone. Many of the boys Homer painted on the harbor fronts now lacked a father.

I kept my father for many years, but the final loss is never easy, regardless of age. The last photo that I took of Dad in New England found him standing once again alongside my son

Daniel at Bass Rocks. It came five months after my mother's sudden passing, and just about the time we started to detect Dad's slide into dementia. He had made the cross-country flight to be there for Daniel's high school graduation. Knowing how much Dad always loved the ocean, we opted for a post-ceremony drive along the Gloucester shoreline. He was largely silent during the trip, perhaps wistful, more likely confused. Perhaps that drive brought to mind that earlier photo with the boys along these boulders. Or maybe it revived scenes of the Newport jetty or the coves at Laguna. I know that the ride did not achieve what I had wanted—to help him find more words for his thoughts. We left the car only briefly to survey the seascape, and I took a photo, using the last camera that we purchased, an Olympus Camedia with thin memory cards the size of the old Blue Chip stamps Mom would paste in booklets. Dad would pass away before we had the chance to capture him on the iPhones that we have used ever since.

There was a brilliant sun that afternoon, and a calmer sea. The waves only gently filtered through the rocks. Gone were the restless ocean and pallid sky that gave the earlier photo a certain eminence. Instead, the later image reveals my father standing there, roadside, looking forward stoically, too uncertain in his legs to venture near a rock. This time it is Daniel steadying him. Admittedly, it is not great camera work. The photo caught too much of the sun. The figures are in shadows and the faces obscure. But it still encases a memory, one of the last of my father before he lost track of who we were. This was his final endeavor, despite his frayed neurons, to be there beside his grandson, even if it was a far different shore than the one he knew as home. I know that with some good filtering I might be able to redeem the overexposure. Someday, perhaps, I will try to do so, though I will need to find the image on one of the many old memory cards now scrambled in an office drawer.

Note:

¹Benjamin D. Hill and Winfield S. Nevins, *The North Shore of Massachusetts Bay. An Illustrated Guide and History of Marblehead, Salem, Peabody, Manchester-by-the-Sea, Magnolia, and Cape Ann* (Salem: Salem Observer Press, 1880), 74, 73.



Frio River Canyon: Blue Hole, Early Morning ©Bruce Herman, 2022.
oil on wood panel with silver leaf; 48" × 72" Collection of Nancye and Steven Drukker

Postscript: Laity Lodge

Bruce Herman

There are places to which we return time and again over the course of a lifetime because we have something like a homing signal in us corresponding to those coordinates. It's as though such a place holds an enchantment or "charge" that replenishes our soul—a place marked on our inner map as sacred. Laity Lodge is one of those places for me. Nestled in a quiet canyon of the Frio River in the hill country of Texas, the Lodge and its companion buildings almost seem to disappear among the live oaks and cypresses—a perfect place to slow down, breathe, look, and listen again.

The Frio dreamily snakes through the canyon with its plentiful (and ancient) catfish and bass lazily swimming through its emerald forest of river weed. A friend and naturalist, Nancye Drukker, challenged me to paint a favorite spot on the river called Blue Hole. We agreed that it is a *thin space* within that sacred place and that at certain times of day the scrim veiling heaven gives way.

At dawn water and sky become twins, earth and heaven joining to welcome wanderers home.

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Mark Sargent

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Steve and Nancye Drukker



photo credit: Bruce Herman

Mark Sargent...

served as provost of Gordon College from 1996 to 2012 and Westmont College from 2012 to 2021. Mark and his wife Arlyne enjoy teaching and consulting internationally. They have three grown children, Bradford, Daniel, and Andrea—and now live in picturesque Morro Bay, California.

Bruce Herman...

has exhibited his art nationally and internationally for decades and his work is represented in major museums as well as many private collections. From 1984 to 2022 he taught at Gordon College (where he and Mark Sargent met, becoming fast friends). Bruce is married to Meg, and they have two grown children, Ben and Sarah and five grandchildren—and they live amidst the raw beauty of Gloucester, Massachusetts.



photo credit: Meg Matthews Herman

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