

## IDEAS

# A week at the beach, all the way back in August

I was the monarch of all I surveyed — the sand, the ocean, the lobsterman hauling his traps. How could that already feel so far away?

By **Stephen O'Connor** Updated September 23, 2024, 3:00 a.m.



A turn-of-the-20th century postcard of Rye Beach, N.H. NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

*Editor's note: This essay is part of an occasional series *Globe Ideas* is calling *Genius Loci*, featuring writers' explorations of the importance of place.*

So you're on your way to work and you're trying to remember everything you have to do. The staggering list is stacked like a column of teacups in your mind, wobbling and threatening to tumble and crash. You can see the faces of the people you have to please. Did you get a chance to fill out that workshop evaluation? Have you responded to the questions on your yearly review? Have you met your quota? Have you achieved your company goals? What about your personal goals?

Oh yes, personal goals. To pick up the clothes at the dry cleaners. To get a bulb for your broken taillight before the cops pull you over. To get your kids to their dance practices, soccer games, and piano lessons. To clear a space in the garage for the cars before the snow surprises you. To get away from this person who is tailgating you on the Southeast Expressway. I know. I know.

I need to revisit that place where I was — could it be just a month ago? Yes, it was. And that place was so different. It was nothing like this place. It was known by a single soothing soft syllable: beach. It's early. I'm going to take a walk down to the sea before the beachgoers arrive. Come with me.

The rest of the family is asleep. Open the door quietly. Slip on the shades. Pick up that folding beach chair and bring it along. At dawn, the air is fresh and crisp — the sky a vast blue bowl. Ocean Boulevard is quiet as I ramble past the Atlantic Four Winds Motel. A young woman jogs by, flashes a warm smile, and offers a bright "Good morning." Everyone seems a little friendlier because no one is wound up at the beach. No one is ever wound up at the beach.

Petey's Red Roof Market is already open, and I have a few bucks in the pocket of my bathing suit, so I'll take a coffee and a newspaper to the beach. I lean the folding chair against the wall and go in. Petey, an affable townie with more hair on his face than his head, and most of it gray, greets me like a long-lost friend every time I see him, which is about seven days a year for the last 12 years. "Hey, how are ya? Oh, you got a great week this year. Gonna be like this all week, too."

Those words fall on my ears like gentle rain on a parched field. “I’m starting to unwind, Petey.”

“Oh yeah, well, it’s something about the ocean that does that. Even people from New York tell me that.”

I pick up a Globe, and we talk while the coffee brews. “Petey, I want to go out to the Isles of Shoals this afternoon. What’s the best boat to take?”

“Well, you can take the Thomas Leighton out of Portsmouth Harbor. Do you want to cruise around them or do you want to get out and visit?”

“We want to get out of the boat and look around.”

“Then you should take the Uncle Oscar out of Rye Harbor, with Captain Sue. Leave around 3 and come back just after sunset.”

“Sounds good, Petey,” I say as I pick up my coffee and pocket my change and head out. I throw the chair strap over my shoulder and cross the street to the short road that is technically a dead end but is in reality anything but. It’s a very alive end, because its end is the beginning of the beach.



Looking north toward Rye from North Hampton State Beach, at dusk. KEVIN HARKINS

Halfway down that short road, I spot a stretch of brilliant blue ahead, the sun hanging over it, in the words of the old song, like a red rubber ball. Some mornings it rises into ribbons of pink, and then I think of Homer: “When Dawn spread out her fingertips of rose . . . ”

But this morning there is only the great disk of the sun standing in the blue field of the sky over a sea exploding in a swath of light that dances all the way up the wet sands over which the tide has retreated in the early hours. And it is not Homer’s words I think of today but Joseph Conrad’s: “Before us stretched the interminable waterway of the Atlantic.”

There is a light sea breeze today that ruffles the American flags on two or three of the houses along the curving beach. A long, low red tanker sits offshore, waiting to crawl on

the full tide into Portsmouth Harbor. And floating forever like a mirage on the horizon, the storied Isles of Shoals: Appledore, Smuttynose, Star, and the rest.

A woman walks the shoreline, where gulls leave vanishing tracks on the wet ribbed sand and rise at her approach, creating the eternal harmony of gull cries and breaking waves. It is a sound that was ancient before humans walked these shores. The woman appears half in light and half in dark silhouette against the sea, and I think if I were a painter I would capture that image, but I would still not be able to reveal her secret to you, because only she knows her thoughts as she traces the edge of our continent, her bare feet in the waters of the Atlantic. It is part of the mystery of all things this August morning.

I stuff the newspaper into the pouch on the back of the chair, kick off my sandals, and set off over the cool sands, feeling, as Thoreau once wrote, “the monarch of all I survey.” There’s a lobsterman hauling his traps near a small turtle shell of a rock, and I can just hear the low growl of the winch. A man walking with a golden retriever throws a tennis ball into the water, and the dog races after it, ears flying backward, plunging into the ocean. He’s a retriever, by God, and this is his chance to prove it. He almost seems to be smiling when he emerges with the ball locked in his dripping maw, shaking a spray of sunlit droplets from his coat.

The monarch of all I survey. My heart is beating in time with the waves that roll lazily off this placid ocean, slapping the shore like a woman slapping a man she loves, in jest, only pretending to be annoyed. I close my eyes and breathe the salt air deeply. Petey is right. There’s something about the ocean.

I climb an empty lifeguard chair and sit, sipping my coffee, but what I’m really drinking is the sea, the light, the rocks, Appledore, the entire scene, fixing it in my mind forever, for all the mornings of the other days of the year when I’ll be running to my car, late, when I’ll realize I’ve forgotten my cellphone and my kid is supposed to call me for a ride when — well, you know when. Every working stiff knows when. And that’s the time to



walk this beach, the beach in your memory. That's the time to gaze on that interminable waterway inside.

Everything is here. Earth, air, fire, and water. Look, no walls of a cubicle hem you about — only the blue curve of the earth and the white curve of the beach. Breathe the pure air rich with sea spawn; listen to the waves and the gulls. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be.

It's August again in your mind. Yes, there's something about the ocean. The sun will be warming the sand by the time you finish reading the paper. The good vibrations are rolling in from the deep roads where the whales sing, and there's no static at all.

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