



The Hollows

Night comes early to the hollows -- earlier than anywhere else in this part of the world.

The Hollows, Lecount, Cahoon and Newcomb in Wellfleet, and Truro's Brush Hollow, line the great back shore like sentries, from the northern end of the marsh at Fort Hill to the last outpost of high ground at Pilgrim Heights, where land ends, and the sandy Provincelands begin.

Geologists describe the hollows as low-lying depressions in the highlands which stretch across this forearm of the Cape, creating breaks in the cliffs on the eastern shore. But, to those who know them, the hollows are at the water -- scallop-shaped inlets in the otherwise massive shoreline that provide a sense of intimacy -- coves, in a way, that embrace the sea and hold it closely.

Because of the water which runs from the land above, sandbars form at the hollows, creating more breakers, on the whole, than at other points along the back side. The tempestuous surf, combined with the embracing cliffs, along with the almost daily influx of an afternoon fog, provide a sense of belonging -- a scale more suitable to man, a sense of invitation and shelter.

For Graham and me, the hollows have become an integral part of our lives. We've met friends there, have been inspired there, experienced storms and blizzards there. They have become favorite subjects to paint, and a compulsory for the afternoon walk. They've also become a favorite way to simply enjoy the sea at its most dramatic, its most intimate and, ultimately, for us, it's most personal.

I'm drawn most often to Lecount, purely by convenience, which is the most southern of the three main hollows on Wellfleet's back shore. Lecount is, generally, a friendly gathering place, marked by a distant, sweeping dune that reaches south toward Marconi. A dip in the crest, known as Freeman's Bluff, grabs the last light of day, and has become a focal point of many of my paintings. The results have been as varied as the seasons, bearing such names as Afternoon Mist, After the Storm, Leeward, and, most recently Trust. This last title comes from the realization that Lecount Hollow has become a place I've come to rely on -- particularly that bright splash of dune -- a place I've grown to trust. A friend.

At the northeast end of Wellfleet is Newcomb Hollow. This hollow was captured by Thoreau in his essays of Cape Cod, as he spent one of his first nights of his Cape journeys here, at the home of John Young Newcomb, "The Wellfleet Oysterman." It's another hollow, with an embracing shoreline, but altogether different from Lecount. Here, huge, clay cliffs hold the wetness and coolness of a preceding tide seemingly through the hottest of summer days. The clays vary in color from yellow ochre to deep rusts, and all shades of grays and browns. They cascade from high above, falling to mounds of clay and rock at the rugged, sandy base. At certain tides, it's difficult to walk south along the hollow without getting wet. The tides often meet the cliffs -- something which happens rarely at the other hollows, save for major ocean storms. But, all of the hollows share a unique feel.

It is at twilight that I most enjoy these places, walking quietly with Graham. One can feel the waves pound the beach, the spray regardless of direction, and that sound -- that beautiful, mighty sound of the sea, climbing, swirling, thundering, rising high overhead, then coming back around like a repeating chorus.

In the hollows, there's a taste in the air, a freshness, as hearty and fresh as a Wellfleet oyster. To smell, and feel the wetness of the sand, breathing deep the salt air -- is Cape Cod at its finest.

As we walk this night at Newcomb Hollow, at the end of a warm summer day, it is cool and wet at the shore, the sand still warm closer in. Light from the west lingers across the top of the dunes, leaving the edge of the shore in shadow, waves breaking just beyond, catching the last of this day's light. The waves pound tirelessly, ebbing and flowing, echoing above, throwing their weight against the sand.

We walk south from the landing, our footsteps trail behind at the waters edge. The tide is receding now, but, once turned, our footsteps will be swept away. They, too, taken out to sea, all part of a grand and never-ending rearrangement.

Rick Fleury