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A P A R A L L E L P R E S S C H A P B O O K

Sand Island Succession



POEMS OF THE APOSTLES

POEMS BY JUDITH STRASSER

JUDITH STRASSER recently retired as a senior producer and interviewer for *To the Best of Our Knowledge*, a nationally-distributed public radio program. She is a free lance writer and an interviewer for *Out Loud*, the audio feature of the Poets & Writers website (www.pw.org), and conducts poetry writing workshops in Wisconsin and elsewhere for adults and children. Judith's poems and essays have appeared in *Poetry*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Nimrod*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Witness* and other literary magazines and anthologies; her book-length collection, *How To Stay Alive*, has been a finalist in several national book competitions. Judith has been awarded writing residencies at Hawthornden Castle (Scotland), The Helene Wurlitzer Foundation (New Mexico), Vermont Studio Center, The Ucross Foundation (Wyoming), and Norcroft (Minnesota), and was Artist-in-Residence at Apostle Islands National Lakeshore in the summer of 1998. She has received awards for radio production and for poetry from the Wisconsin Arts Board, and recently published a chapbook, *Poems for the Parks*, under a grant from the Dane County Cultural Affairs Commission.

Judith has two grown sons, Jed Ela, a visual artist, and Nate Ela, a Peace Corps Volunteer in Mozambique.

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Sand Island Succession

POEMS OF THE APOSTLES



JUDITH STRASSER



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on Sand Island during which these poems were drafted, and to the Apostle
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Apostle Islands Jitters

It's the caffeine that has me tossing
and turning, traipsing back and forth
all night along the muddy trail, pulling
the garden cart to the cabin, mosquito netting
draped over the bill of my cap
to keep it out of my eyes; and wondering
how many long-sleeved shirts I can pack
to protect my arms (I have a work shirt,
but maybe I should stop at the mall
unless it's cool enough in June for cotton
turtlenecks); stuffing a ream of paper
and volumes of Proust into canvas sacks;
hefting the Smith-Corona my ex-husband
took to college in 1955; thinking of food
that will keep (coffee, of course, but
how many nights can I eat ramen for supper
before I turn into a noodle, contract scurvy,
or decide I'd rather starve?); and all the while
I'm thinking, will the lake warm up
just enough for quick dips to wash off the DEET
every day or two, because there's no plumbing,
not to mention no people most of the time,
just the two-way radio I find on the screened-in porch
on which I hear the poems I promised to write
if they would only grant me three weeks
on this island paradise.

Shipwrecks of the Apostles

A mile off Outer Island, the *Merlin*
shudders – turning starboard,
turning port, throttle
at normal speed.
Our stomachs list
like the *T.H. Camp*,
sunk in thirty fathoms,
her cargo – twenty tons
of logging supplies –
shifted on her deck.

*D.P. Owen, Noque Bay,
Pretoria, Marquette*

Our skipper suspects
a U-joint. No emergency.
Hearts gear down.
Merlin limps toward port,
sluggish,
like the tall ship *Moonlight*,
seams split by a pounding storm,
or the burned-out *Herring King*,
trawling the sandy bottom
of Lake Superior.

*Manistee, Ozaukee,
Prussia, Ottawa*

We're passing Hermit Island
when the wind picks up.
The radio crackles.
The skipper backs off
on the throttle
to silence the engine roar.

Merlin drifts
toward jagged rocks
that necklace the closing shore.

*City of Ashland, Mary Cargan,
Fedora, Antelope*

Every Apostles wreck
becomes a much-told tale:
lighthouse keeper Emanuel Lueck
watching the steamer
Sevona break up
in a September gale;
the cases of bootleg Scotch
that went down in '27
with the barge *Ontario*;
the crew of the schooner *Lucerne*
climbing the masts to escape
the lashing November waves
and how their bodies were slashed
from the rigging, coated
with layers of ice.

*R.G. Stewart, M.R. Warner,
Ira H. Owen. . . .*

Our day is warm,
the sky, benign.
The skipper gentles the throttle.

Merlin shivers
comes about
takes up the slow course
home.

Apostle Islands History

I spend the morning reading scholars' accounts of people early to these shores: Ojibwa who moved to Chequamegon Bay the decade Columbus "discovered" America; the trappers, traders, voyageurs who paddled the unsettled lake; 19th century masons who quarried brownstone in eight-by-four blocks and shipped it off to Milwaukee, Chicago, Detroit, as far east as Buffalo. By noon I am weary of driving stakes for pound nets, cleaning lake trout, felling white pine, stripping hemlock bark. I need a nap. I am drowsy from sawdust history and growth-of-industry fact.

I go down to the lake to haul water for washing dishes. Wind drives three-foot breakers onto the shallow beach. Rollers slosh in and out of my brown Rubbermaid pail. A wave breaks on the rocks and soaks my boots, my socks, my jeans, the sleeve of my polypro fleece. Fog drips from the balsam branches. Nothing will dry today. I have a change of clothes, a roof, a fireplace. But what of the voyageurs, rushing to rendezvous? And the loggers, swarming the smoky cookhouse in sweat-drenched trousers and shirts? How wet does a fisherman get in November, racing the making ice to pull his herring nets? This is the story. The sun disappears, Ojibwa children shiver, a gale howls from the northeast.

*“Farms Follow Stumps”**

Boosters promised great things for the far-north Cutover lands: fields abundant with grains; orchards laden with fruit; the island air a tonic for settlers and tourists alike. Local papers reported *farm products of mammoth proportions*: three-pound tomatoes, squash that tipped the scales at seventy pounds apiece, a cucumber four feet long. The Superior growing season, stretched by hope and autumn’s lake effect warmth, matched mundane locations hundreds of miles south.

High noon on the summer solstice, a chill comes off the lake. We’ve had decades of global warming; still I pull on my fleece. The old come-ons didn’t mention snow that buried log cabins up to the eaves, how wives and kids would leave to be near the mainland school, the days when ice was making and you’d need a club to break it in front of your boat. Frank Shaw, who told the *Bayfield Press* he’d raise a flock of sheep – “give the woolly animals a fair, impartial trial” – sold out to be near a doctor when his wife began to fail. Boosters never said you’d hay at night, the flies would be so thick.

I walk the path from the campground to the old Noreng farm. Mosquitoes billow from alder thickets. Bear scat marks the way. The trail breaks from sodden club moss to slightly higher ground. Beyond a meadow of orange hawkweed and knee-high buttercups, waterbugs skim the scummy surface of an unlined earthen well. An acre of blackberry brambles and a lone crab apple claim a clearing in the woods. At the fringe of the oncoming forest, raspberries trellis the curves of rusty cultivator tines.

**University of Wisconsin Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin* no. 332 (1921)

Island Eyes

I know the merganser
more by its low, quick quack
than its crest; I need dark glasses
to locate the ore boats
against the winking glare of the lake;
my bifocals smooth the cobbles
to a flat and blurry beach.

It takes several days
to acquire island eyes –

slowing down enough
to see the trace
of an abandoned school house path;
learning that islands
come into focus
when the day is gray and flat;
finding patience to wait for dark
and the blink
of the Raspberry Island light.

What the Poet-in-Residence Brings to the Beach

Daybreak: Her journal, a pen,
her glasses – reading
and sun. A pail
to haul water.
Binoculars.
The park-issue radio.

Sunset: A mug of hot chocolate.

Always: The sense that someone
is calling, although
there's no telephone.

County Road

The settlers are gone, cabins
rotted or burned. What remains:
the school house foundation,
moss-garden-capped concrete;
a Model T, sunk to its fenders,
kneeling under the trees.
A trail –

choked with balsam and alder,
roadbed rutted, muddy, sodden,
a permanent bog of memory
bordered by sentinel trees.

*Penny candy from the co-op;
Noreng's berries, big as
hens' eggs, too juicy to ship
anywhere; dances – pump organ,
squeezebox, fiddle, everyone
at the school; crossing the ice-
bridge for mail; Mrs. Hill's
famous ham; the nor'easter
that took Harold Dahl.*

Crawl over tree-trunks,
muck through jewel-weed,
tread bear scat in blackberry brambles,
swim sedges over your head.
Lose the trace in the marsh. Turn back.
This is no wilderness. Still,
you've come to the end of the road.

SAND ISLAND
APOSTLE ISLANDS NATIONAL LAKESHORE

Sand Island Succession

River bottom

Glacier

Island

Beaver

Trapper

Voyageur

White Pine

Logger

Scrub alder

Ojibwa camp

Surveyor

Farm

Iron ore

Freighter

Lighthouse

Box social

Hard times

War

Lake trout

Trawler

Lamprey

County road

Park

Wilderness

Waiting for Moon-Rise

Walk the shingle for beach glass
etched to pale turquoise, watery mauve
by the actions of time and wave.

Last night the moon was full,
two knuckles over the island
when you found her at Julian Bay.

A bluebird feather washes
out of the surf. The clouds yield
pink pearlescence to a seagull gray.

Scan the horizon, catch her
coming over the mainland –
lake-rinsed memory
of orange hawkweed –
through a scrim of isinglass haze.

STOCKTON ISLAND

APOSTLE ISLANDS NATIONAL LAKESHORE

Nomenclature

Without names, I am reduced
to domestic analogy.
Shelf fungus arches its chalky throat
to a shallow bowl
striped brown and gray, fine
as the hand-thrown stoneware
I bought for Berri's wedding.
Tiny blueberry turbans nod
above a tufted emerald bed.
A bloodless plant parts duff,
nubbled, conical
as a doll-house Christmas tree.
Toadstools, frilled like pinafores,
flaunt the poisonous yellow
of my mother's kitchen walls.

No wonder God assigned Adam
the no-nonsense task of naming.
Boys carve initials in heartwood;
grown, whet hatchet and saw.
Tagged, the world's clear-cut,
slashed to its essence,
open and bare as the understory
in this second-growth forest
of maple and birch.

OAK ISLAND

APOSTLE ISLANDS NATIONAL LAKESHORE

Blood Rites

I share mine
with the tick
I can feel
when I brush
my belly
with my hand
in the dead
of the night.

(A dream-man
perhaps, a
young woman,
fertile as
yesteryear.)

Come day-break
I hold it
with tweezers
and douse it.
Iodine
runs red-brown
down my leg-
crease to stain
white cotton
underwear.

Wellish Cabin Visitors' Log

1. The Sand Island Lighthouse Volunteer

Two years ago, her second husband died. Lung cancer. "Love is so blind," she says. "Until we were married I never saw that he smoked." She was a nurse in Chicagoland. She cared for him, changed his dressings, gave him back rubs until his death. "I loved that man dearly," she tells me. "But Harold, forgive me, I'm glad that you're gone." She lives in a lighthouse. No plumbing, no electric. Propane on the blink. Tourists arriving all hours. "He'd never put up with this." She wouldn't have it otherwise. The virgin pines. The solitude. The sunrise and sunset views.

2. The Hummingbird

It takes a week to get up the courage to swim in the June lake. The best times are mornings: the sun's on the sand and often the breeze is offshore. I choose the moment carefully, put on my suit, load up with books and sunscreen, mosey down to the beach. Perfect. I wade in up to my waist, splash chest and arms... I'm in and out in less time than it takes a hummingbird, later, to buzz the porch fuchsia and find it's just my old Speedo, hung from a nail to dry.

3. The Summer Resident

He knocks on the kitchen door to invite me to see the caves. We go at dusk, in his rowboat, the lake calm as a kitten lapping milk. He tells me about his grand-dad, selling insurance

when the Depression hit. No one was buying.
Ludwig went to a wholesale grocer
for a year's worth of flour and salt,
moved the family out to Sand Island.
They had the time of their lives:
chinked a borrowed log cabin, felled
fuel with a cross-cut saw.
Bessie – who'd grown up on Sand,
her step-dad commercial fished – baked
bread in a cast-iron wood-stove, traded
for butter and cream. The kids missed
a year of school. One boy trapped weasels
all winter; the ermine brought in
his first-ever real bank check.

It couldn't last. Times improved.
Ludwig picked up the insurance game.
The kids went back to the books.
Later, my oarsman says, they bought
the land for back taxes – thirteen acres,
280 feet of lake-front, 75 post-war bucks.
By then the cabin was hopeless: logs rotten,
roof collapsed, broke as the fishing business
lost to the lamprey eel. Herman Johnson,
up the way, had reeled in the last of his nets.
They bought his frame two-story, moved it
to their place, fed the cabin to the lake.
The family's come back, summers, for
half a century. But now that it's part of the Park,
the islands returning to nature,
Ludwig and Bessie's great grand-kids –
the fifth generation – will likely be the last.

The story fades in the hollow boom
of the sea caves' echoing drum. We glide
through keyholes and sandstone arches,
beneath vaulted ceilings supported by pillars
turned on the lathe of waves. The cool,

dark chambers embrace us. I think *Lascaux*,
Mesa Verde, *Betatakin*, *how they sheltered*
community, as we round a corner, into a rubble heap –
stone jutting in all directions, a chaos
of slabs and boulders, brittle points, sharp edges.
An entire cliff, collapsed.

4. The Deer

One evening, I'm having dinner, sitting
on the porch. There's a crash in the brush.
A full-grown doe tears a mouthful of leaves
and stares at me through the screen.
I can see the white hairs that circle
her soft brown eyes. We gaze at each other,
chewing, until the radio crackles. Some boat
reports its position. She startles, but holds
her ground. A ranger calls in to Headquarters
for a new campsite permit. She swallows
and disappears.

5. The East Bay Volunteer Ranger

Laura, a scant two decades, the age of my younger son.
She's leaving chemistry for French (*more time for fun*)
which is why she sits at her picnic table, trim in shorts
and tank-top, thumbing Larousse and daring the biting flies.
This morning some guy said, "You're the right age to be confused."
He's 28. Like he has his life figured out! I hate to be patronized.

At twenty, I dreamed of a job in a fire tower, alone
above the trees. I imagined it as heaven, space
and a summer to write, but I never applied, worried I'd lose
a boyfriend or find I had nothing to say, certain I'd miss
the curl of smoke that signaled catastrophe. Thirty years later,
shaded by quaking aspens, I look out over Justice Bay.
Sons grown and gone. No man to speak of. A harvest of poems.
A fire of fruiting bodies that sets the emerald moss ablaze.



SAND ISLAND SUCCESSION

by Judith Strasser

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