

NANCY LORD

My Life Lagoons

Life on the Alaska coastline

The word keeps coming to me, repeating like a prayer, a song, a circling through air and time. The water sparks with sunlight, smells of slippery banks tossed with clamshells and eelgrass wrack. *Lagoon, lagoon, lagoon*. It takes me back.

In childhood, my favorite book was *Peter Pan*. Not the Walt Disney or another sanitized version but the original by James M. Barrie. I wanted to fly and to live underground around the roots of trees. I wanted to resist adult authority and believe in fairies. I wanted, even, to own the exotic words I read aloud: *cadaverized, succulence, stodge, bacchanalian, rampageous, nippy, brimstone and gall, a scurvy trick*. And *lagoon*. How lovely that one was—that touch against my teeth and then the pullback to pursed lips, the stretchy, extended *oo*. The place where mermaids frolicked.

I had known ponds and lakes and a stretch of wavy ocean that fronted New Hampshire's short coastline. I did not know a lagoon, except in my imagination. I wanted to live there.

Lagoon: a stretch of saltwater separated from the sea by a low sandbank or coral reef. From the French *lagune*, from the Italian *laguna*, from the Latin *lacuna* for “pit” or “pool,” back to *lacus* for “lake.”

Barrie told me, “If you shut your eyes and are a lucky one, you may see at times a shapeless pool of lovely pale

colors suspended in the darkness; then if you squeeze your eyes tighter, the pool begins to take shape, and the colours become so vivid that with another squeeze they must go on fire. But just before they go on fire you see the lagoon. This is the nearest you ever get to it on the mainland, just one heavenly moment; if there could be two moments you might see the surf and hear the mermaids singing.”

I squeezed my eyes. I saw the lagoon take shape, the blues and greens and frothing golds of reflected sun. I took my own leaps into another moment, and another. The surf beating beyond the lagoon, the still water within. And yes, the soft voices of mermaids singing. Mermaids and birds, singing the high notes together. Mermaids sunning on Marooners' Rock, combing out their long, wet hair. Peter and the boys, too, sometimes lounging on the rock, but careful to watch the tide. They knew, and I knew, that cruel captains abandoned their complaining sailors to the rock, to drown when the tide rose over it.

Maroon: to put ashore on a desolate island or coast and leave to one's fate. The origin is French, having to do with “wild,” with being lost in the wild, with being an escaped slave. Sailors were sometimes marooned in the lagoon, in perfect rhyme.

Despite mermaids who could be rude, pirates, one ticking crocodile, opportunities for mayhem, and drowning, the Neverland lagoon in my mind was a place of refuge, a safe harbor. I sheltered in the idea of it, away from the conventions and demands of mainland life. I flew there on outstretched arms.

Unlike Peter Pan, I grew up. And unlike Wendy, who grew up to become a woman who chose a traditional English life, I found my own, literal lagoon.

I came to live by the ocean, where the Alaska coastline is folded with fjords, inner bays, and, yes, lagoons. Where a narrow channel from Tutka Bay opens to a forest-ringed lagoon fed by a salmon stream, I worked at a salmon hatchery, cooking for a crew and caring for salmon eggs and baby salmon. The tide surged in and drained out with the force of a river, leaving Dungeness crabs marooned (!) in the channel at low water, free for the picking, as were the blueberries I gathered by the bucketful. Salmon filled the lagoon, jumping into light, and swarmed the creek. I fished for the trout that followed the salmon. Swallows swirled, eagles screeched, harlequin ducks showed off their clown

suits. Nighttime bears left footprints in the mud. I lived with my tribe by a lagoon as magical as anything I'd once imagined.

Years later, I traveled to the treeless Bering Sea side of the distal end of the Alaska Peninsula, where Izembek Lagoon is home to one of the world's largest eelgrass beds. In beneficent rain and wind I squatted at the shore to watch thousands of brant geese suck up eelgrass leaves like strands of spaghetti. I helped count juvenile birds and, another day, guided flightless, molting Steller's eiders into pens for banding. While the Bering Sea crashed beyond, I exulted in the green, green, green tangles of eelgrass and with the cackling and quacking of geese and ducks. I rejoiced with sea otters, pups clutched to their chests, and with the hauled-out seals resting in curves like little boats. Sandpipers flashed by. My mind embraced all I couldn't see but knew to be—the baby fish, the tiny crabs, the worms and clams burrowed into mud, even the molecules of carbon and nitrogen forming and flowing into the ocean beyond. When I walked away, it was through sedges and mosses and fields of berries, in the deep trenches pounded by generations of bears.

Another time, I visited Point Lay, on Alaska's north coast. That community of Inupiat people fronts on Kasgaluk Lagoon, a long, narrow waterway separated from the Chukchi Sea by a string of barrier islands. When I was there in late June, winter's ice was still fast to the ocean side but the lagoon was blue-water open and villagers were readying their boats for hunting. I joined biologists to boat around the lagoon—to beachcomb, to cross an island on foot, to walk on ice, to glass seals on the ice, and listen to the hollow bellowing of walrus. When the ice began to move off, hunters in their boats made their way through a pass to intercept belugas and herd a group back through the pass, where the animals were trapped in shallow water and shot for the meat and muktuk that sustain the people. At the edge of the lagoon, shares were laid out for everyone in the village, muktuk was cooked up on the spot, and children played with a baby bird they'd found in the grass.

On an August visit to Adak Island, halfway out Alaska's Aleutian chain, I found myself drawn repeatedly to Clam Lagoon, where spawn-ready pink salmon were jamming tiny inlet streams and sea otters lounged. From atop a sand dune not far from the lagoon's outlet to Kuluk Bay,

I watched dozens of harbor seals laze in a line along a bar and a few crease the still water nearby. Grunts and groans floating up made music with the calls of gulls. A mother merganser with seven chicks in tight formation slid past the seals. Beyond them, exposed mudflats layered in algae glowed with an ethereal green light. All around me, the wind, bending and turning grasses, drew with the tips perfect circles in the sand.

In my present life, I watch water climb over gravel, over mussel beds, into the lagoon where I often stay in an old cabin. A kingfisher darts past, ratcheting its call, and the woods around chorus with birdsong. A great blue heron at the edge of the filling basin daggars its bill into the water, each time raising a squiggle of marine worm. If I were closer I would see eelgrass wave in the current, bubbles rise from the clams below, baby salmon schooling. I would see the pulsing of small clear jellyfish. The water will soon reach across the lagoon and into a narrower slough, past berry bushes and the snag where an immature eagle rests, to the mudflat and swamped grasses where a shiny black bear snuffles each evening. I think it would not be too strange to spot a twinkling fairy dipping a toe into the lagoon or shaking the alders. The spruce pollen lighting on the water may as well be fairy dust. When the water rises and floats my boat, I'll ease through the channel and out into the bay. Kittiwakes in silent, sure flight will follow, and waves may break across my bow. The way forward, back to the mainland, the main land, to all our ordinary and occasionally rampageous lives, lies straight ahead.

Nancy Lord, a former Alaska State Writer Laureate (2008–2010), is the author of three short story collections; five books of literary nonfiction, including *Beluga Days: Tracking a White Whale's Truths* (Counterpoint Press, 2003) and *Early Warming: Crisis and Response in the Climate-Changed North* (Counterpoint Press, 2012); and the novel *pH* (WestWinds Press, 2017). She also edited the anthology *Made of Salmon* (University of Alaska Press, 2017). Her work, which focuses mainly on environmental and marine issues, has appeared widely in journals and anthologies and has been honored with fellowships and awards. She teaches science writing for Johns Hopkins University and is a regular book reviewer for *Anchorage Daily News*.