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Anna C. Mullen
Middlebury College

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ANNA MULLEN

A Roof of One's Own: Widow Walking in the Anthropocene

On a midsummer night in 1819, some six hundred nautical miles north of the barrier islands of my childhood, Nantucketers on their rooftop walks trained their spyglasses to a patch of night sky torn by an unusually bright comet.¹ This comet, like most others, was interpreted as an omen portending the unfamiliar at best and the calamitous at worst. I say six hundred nautical miles north (*as the crow flies*, so to speak), but in terrestrial terms, this measurement is not so simple. The so-called “coastline paradox” cautions the fractal nature of coasts and the challenge of measuring them: as we move down scales towards the smallest rocks, we crash against a fractal math that renders the coastline at once indefinite and infinite. Besides, it’s only legend that bewildered sailors released crows to find the straightest path to land. What’s more, there’s nothing straight about a seabird that hugs the coastline: its flight is perhaps the truest calculus, its infinitesimal accuracy dependent on its desperate avoidance of wayward winds.

Nearly two centuries later, in midsummer, I am landlocked and looking for a place to roost. I crave a space from which to observe and record the daily phenomena ranging from the miraculous mundane to the horrifyingly ominous. This space is not with other people, but it is certainly not alone. These days, I find myself looking down at my hands, and feeling they are apart from me. I often drift astern of my body. In the evenings, I pace the length of my house in the woods in the hopes of finding a way back in.

I want to practice staying in one place, watching that which is animated move about me, and recording their subtle animal changes. I seek the solitude of a cave, but am afraid to nest underground.

I say two centuries later, but this is perhaps just one day and one night in the life of a boat sunk off the continental shelf, or some two hundred and eighteen humpback whale pregnancies.

I find myself sitting with sweaty palms inside the Tent of Casually Observed Phenologies: a heavy canvas dome sitting patient as a sand dune in the green lawn of an art museum downtown. Inside, the tent is lined with a patchwork of oddly textured rainbow fabrics that I

¹ The account of Nantucket in 1819 is found in Nathaniel Philbrick’s *In the Heart of the Sea*.

figure are meant to remind me of the womb and make me feel safe with the man about to perform a card reading based on an intimate question I have about climate change. I do feel safe. Somehow, even under the amalgam of purple and red velours, it is cooler than it is outside the tent. I think of animals that stay cool under the weight of sand and the color of seaside sun filtered through blood vessels of closed eyes. How do the stalked eyes of ghost crabs adjust to the sun and subterranean as they move so quickly between the two? I tell the man (he is a performing artist) that I've narrowed it down to two questions.

One: *Should I have children?* It's the question I feel obligated to ask.

The second is: *What will become of the barrier islands of my home?*

I feel that they are more or less the same question.

Laughing, he tells me a dozen women my age have asked the first question, but no men.

"Okay, then. Let's go with the second question."

He will divine an answer with the help of Tarot cards. He tells me to conjure the senseworld of my childhood realm on Carolina's Outer Banks. Glassy green-black walls of saltwater that I slip over on my cheap foam bodyboard before they crest and break, like an egg over the rim of a bowl. Strange shadows of minnow flocks and lightplay in tidepools. Digging up busy coquina clams as they feed rhythmically with each wave tonguing the beach. The forbidden lips dunes I was *never* to enter, even if I had lost something I loved in their scrub: a kite, a sandal, or the sudden flash of a fox. Behind the dunes: houses. Houses whose garishly painted wood was sticky to the touch from sea air, houses that squatted on pencil stilts, houses whose docks and porches splintered my sunburned feet. Houses with names. Behind the houses: the lighthouse that was, by means of hydraulic jacks and steel beams, rolled sixteen hundred feet inland when I was six. This is how it was salvaged from the sea.

Apparently, I have drawn cards from the Tarot deck while recollecting these coastal ranks. We look at the first card together; it features a bull impaled with ten swords, one of which skewers cleanly through its eyes. The man explains that it is a card illustrating extreme loss.

"Looks like it," I say.

"I'm sorry," he says.

"I'm not."

What he's trying to say is *I'm sorry your home will be lost*. He thinks the barrier islands are where my family has made their home, where they have paid someone to fashion for them a house on stilts.

"I never *lived* there. My family doesn't own property there. It's more of a spiritual or artistic home. . . . But I was conceived there. Figure Eight Island."

He seems relieved.

Since I was young, I have fetishized that space just between apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic. When I consider the fate of the Outer Banks, the images of barrier islands wiped of their houses and abandoned by human inhabitants does not make me sad, nostalgic, or concerned, as I usually expect it to. Instead, I feel a perverse longing for a clean slate in which human arrogance is corrected as the Banks resume their old ecology and measured westward migration.

I know this is a fantasy seashore tableau. I know I look bad rooting for the sea, especially when the sea's rise is a symptom of her sickness. If a sick sea triumphs, is it still a triumph for the waters? I'm not casting the sea's rising in terms of revenge; that's not what this is to me. But I can't shake a sense of justice about it, and I'm eager for a loss that I imagine will teach a crucial lesson. My childhood brain has always rendered floods romantically, choosing to ignore the facts of black mold, drowned pigs, lost livelihoods, and sudden death. Floods dirty before they clean. I am truly a child of the inland Appalachian foothills, one who only vacations on the coast.

"Oh. I thought this was the place where you grew up."

"It is, but only for one week out of the year."

"Well . . . this bull, the Ten of Swords, is in the place of Blessing. That means that some aspect of this horrible loss will be a blessing."

"I see."

On a vague, fantastic, and abstract scale, I get giddy when our species has its greed checked. On any smaller scale, I am distraught when the gluttony and rashness of those *most* responsible for global sea level rise claim the lives worldwide of those *least* responsible. If only the sea's reach could be more selective, perhaps only targeting second homes . . . I am angry about the construction of delicate coastal economies dependent on the contentment and currencies of those who, like my own family, are mere visitors to a habitat.

Here in this hot canvas tent, the man explains that maybe it will be a blessing to be forced to relinquish our barrier island homes. He says what I don't have the guts to say, but in a much gentler way. We are both sucked in by the callous riptide of the abstract vision of a humanless seascape. Yes, a blessing.

As I configure this humanless seascape from above, a speck comes into focus. With time, it becomes clear that she is a woman pacing on her widow's walk. She is perched in a small fenced square, set atop the roof of a shingled house balancing on nine delicate pilings staked in the sandy soil of a shifting island. I am impressed that she keeps her balance. The joke is, of course, that she does not know she is a widow. She scans the Atlantic eagerly and routinely for a Love lost at sea; we watch her from below and murmur to one another.

“This is the Daughter of Swords.” The card shows the plate-faced barn owl clutching a sword in her talons. “It’s about being a novice.”

He suggests that we are in a nascent stage as a species in which, perhaps, we are not fully equipped to even make sense of the changes our fevered planet will continue to suffer and the symptoms this suffering will engender.

“Maybe we do not even understand what is happening yet. We are still struggling to articulate it,” he muses.

I am not convinced. The Widow, though in denial (or maybe simply in the shadow of the truth), is no novice. Widow’s walks were built primarily as a place from which to pour sand down a chimney in case of fire. When this happens, the Widow turns on her heel and does just this. As the smoke trails off on the seaward breeze, she follows it, resuming her watch. Her eyes flit between shore, horizon, and the sky directly above her head. What a lovely place to await a long-dead Love! What an odd place to await an encroaching sea! She knows this will be a slow, hard learning for her species. But what is she mourning? Of what has she been bereaved?

From her perspective, she knows a ship scuttled is a sadness repurposed, in time, by reef-life. The Widow’s walk and her deceased Love’s crow’s nest are one and the same; the barrier island she rides is a more-or-less moored, half-sunk sediment ship whose sanded deck is sculpted by aeolian rules and whims. She tends this place carefully: it is her own. She replaces salted, rotten beams and rusted nails as needed—not simply to pass the time until her Love returns, but because the platform requires maintenance. She is grateful, since, after all, Penelope had to spin her wool and silk into tapestries while a swarm of suitors surrounded her. The Widow, however, can tend to her wooden railings in relative quiet and privacy.

“This one signifies sacrifice,” he says, shattering my privacy.

I look down to see a lamb with four swords hovering above its head.

He interprets this card to mean those of us attached to life on barrier islands must relinquish the idea of these islands as human habitat. This is a relatively easy exercise for me. Though deeply sad, I do not feel bereft at the thought of being unable to revisit my childhood habitat. Something about predictably losing my grooved etchings in the sand to high tides has made my seaside childhood feel like an early exercise in grieving things inevitably lost. I harshly remind myself: *Easy for you to say! You are not raising children there. You have no relatives buried there. You do not return home daily—or even seasonally—to a house you have built on the Banks.*

“Yes, but imagine!” the Widow shouts down to me.

I can only hear her; to look in her direction I am staring directly into the sun. I can hear that she is fixing a railing that has weathered loose.

“Imagine what?” I shout up.

“That ship scuttled: put to rest at sea, hosting a green and invertebrate bloom of life underwater!” She pauses to hammer, then resumes, “. . . This very house I stand on could be reclaimed by termites, roaches, rats, and raccoons! Isn't that what you want?”

She spits over the weathered railing in a sacred kind of way.

Her walk, of course, is at once material, metonymic, and figurative. She really does sit and pace up there, bereft but hopeful, like a lightning rod as storms gather about her. I worry about her. Her daily work is the patient maintenance of a small railed square she stewards on the top of an ever-rotting, slowly sinking house on stilts. She has the luxury and burden both of a unique vantage point that affords her prime habitat for a phenologist. I know she knows the islands are narrowing, so I wonder why she insists on scrupulously maintaining the floor and railing of her walk. She must have a knack for restoring irresponsible architecture.

She once watched quietly as new, artificial dunes were conjured and engineered by humans eager to protect Highway 12 midcentury. She knew this interrupted the Banks' natural sediment deposit mechanism on the west side of the islands. Her barrier islands are dynamic geological entities bereft of their westward migration, and she herself knew this particular frustration of being a slow wanderer confined to a small place. Of all those paying attention, she perhaps best understood how human development had encumbered geological movement, though she herself paced nonstop on the pinnacle of her species' stupidest construction endeavor.

I have always wondered *why* she stayed way up there.

“Why do you stay up there?” I shout up.

“I'm keeping watch!” she shouts down. Her voice sounds younger than I expected.

I want to ask her how this is different than keeping time. Her shadow spins around her feet slowly over the course of the day. It is only a matter of time. What does her vantage point offer her? What more is she than a sad sundial measuring out the time in which the sea is forced to swallow up its islands?

Perhaps she is waiting to see the comet again. The orbit of the Great Comet of 1819 is parabolic, sitting between a closed elliptical orbit and an open hyperbolic orbit, meaning it will almost certainly not come back to visit.

“Are you waiting for the comet to circle back? I don't think it will.”

You can tell this to the Widow, but she will pretend not to hear you. She knows her husband is long gone, but she has other waiting to attend to, and a sea to watch rise. I suspect she is mourning the arrogance of her kind, perhaps their fate—but I do not want to presume. Grieving

the inevitable is important work that demands the stewardship of a modest space to pace with rails to lean against. And we are far behind schedule with our grieving.

When everyone else evacuates, she will remain to record precisely how the world fell apart under her feet. It is a risk to be way up there on a moving, bereft island, fixed to the very symbol of human carelessness—but it is also the highest ground, I suppose. It is also what she knows best; she will be able to tell us in detail where we began to go wrong, and how the sea began to respond. Her voice will, along with those of all the other attentive roof dwellers pacing and keeping notes, help to demystify the inscrutable.

I come to in the red and purple velvet patched cave of the Tent of Casually Observed Phenologies three hundred feet from the bank of the Connecticut River. This man, like a wandering mollusk, carries his interpretive shell with him as he meanders from museum to museum, offering guidance on navigating a broken climate. I smile and thank him; he has crafted a lightweight cave to treat heavy matters. I walk out into the white-hot sun, thinking I would prefer to grieve in one place, wondering where I can build my widow's walk: a roof of my own in the thick of it—not to wait out the flood, but to, minute by minute, bear witness to this strange sea change.

ANNA MULLEN is a poet from the North Carolina Appalachian foothills now living in the Connecticut River Valley of Massachusetts, where she is a co-owner of a print collective. She edits poetry for *The Hopper*, an environmental literary magazine based in southern Vermont.