

The Writer's Shack

Finding inspiration in a floating studio BY DEBORAH JOY COREY

FOR A TIME, I rented an old sail loft as a place to write. It sat on rotting pilings near the shore of the tidal Bagaduce River in Castine, Maine. When I first arrived and slid open the weathered glass doors facing the harbor, a black cormorant was floating in the briny June mist. Immediately, he seemed fully aware of my presence, his head turning from side to side to catch me in his peripheral vision. The double-crested cormorant is black with a greenish purple sheen from the oils that keep his wings from drying and has a long neck with an orange throat. No more than a sea crow, I found him exquisitely exotic and gave him the name Jinx.

After two summers renting the sail loft, I vacated so the owners could remodel. During my time there, I had become smitten with the tides that

washed in beneath its pilings and with the flotsam that remained after the tide receded. Often, I collected these treasures and lined them up on the sail loft's win-

Nearby boulders encompass the float like a fortress of grandfathers, their faces cracked and porous, wearing a crown of dense and elegant evergreens that emit a fresh spruce scent.

dowsills: a tiny skeleton of a sculpin fish, spotted moon shells, a speckled lady crab shell, and spiny sea urchins, each holding the power to emancipate me from my daily routine.

On a piling beneath the sail loft, I witnessed a starfish begin to grow a new arm, and the black seeds of mussels, protected by glossy-emerald-colored seaweed, blossom into plump and lovely bivalves. I'd watch the cloudy water of low tide become so clear with the cleansing high tide that I could look down through the floorboards, and see the rocky bottom beneath eight feet of water, those mussels glistening the mauve of a night sky. Once I sat still on a large shore rock while Jinx floated close enough for me to touch him, although I didn't. Instead, I let him hold me in his peripheral vision like a jewel.

I tried to think how I might describe him later, but no words seemed worthy. Then, I was reminded of a quote from Henry Beston: "For the animal shall not be measured by man, in a world older and more complete than ours, they move finished and complete, gifted with extensions of the senses we have lost or never attained."

Leaving the sail loft, I knew that I would miss Jinx, and that I would also miss the buoyant briny air. Sweeping my skin in the early mornings, it felt like a thousand tiny stars landing and then turning liquid, creating the desire in me to breathe deeply. Being present with nature had regulated my heartbeat, eased my anxieties, and it had brought back that exalted feeling that I had as a child when perusing the streams and creeks and rivers of my youth in New Brunswick, Canada.

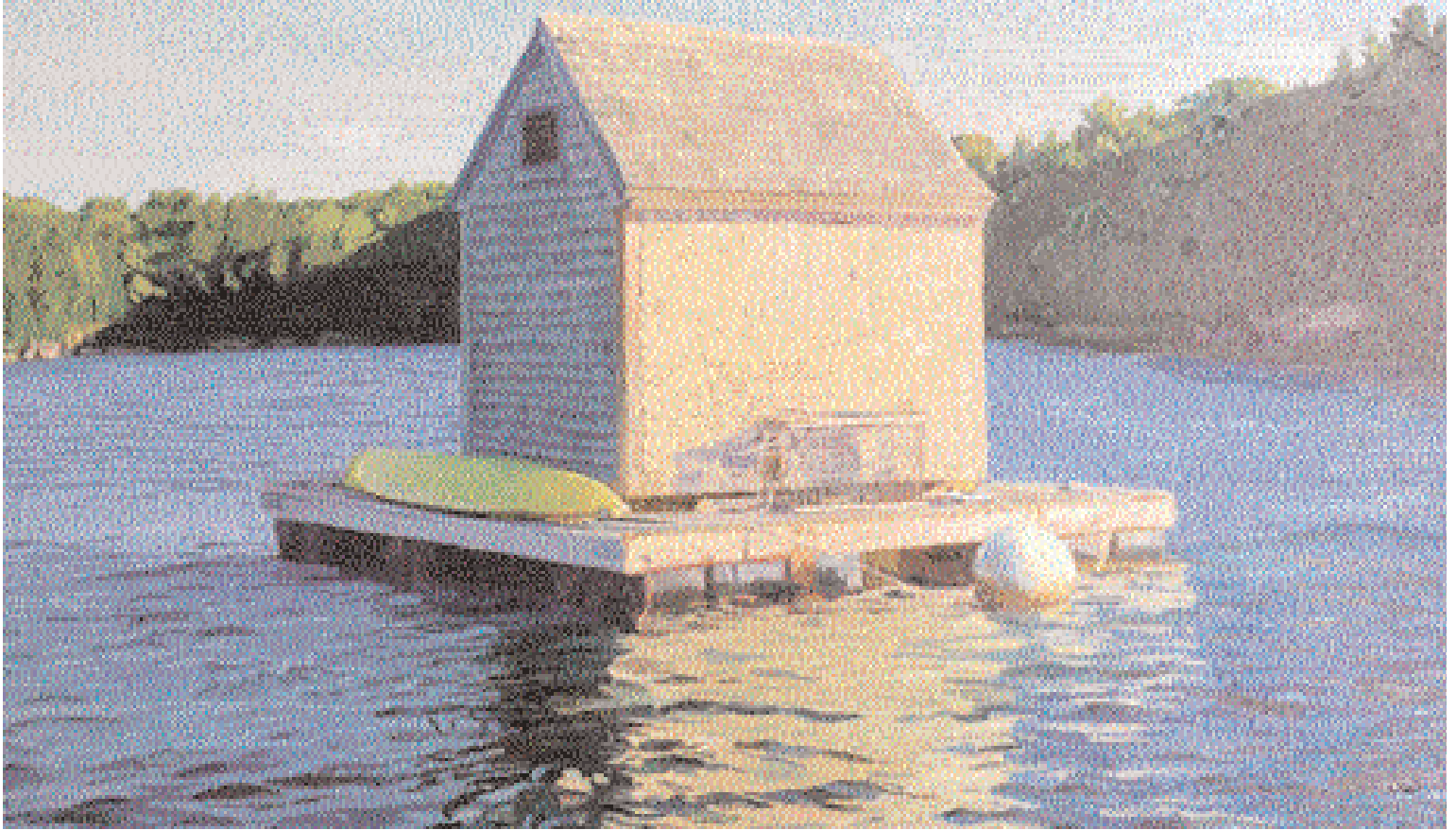
I began to search real estate listings for a similar place. I wanted it to be weathered and on the water, preferably a tidal shore. What seemed like an endless search revealed nothing that I could afford. The following winter, though,



Kenny Eaton of Eaton's Boat Yard (in red) helps launch the floating replica of a fisherman's shack.

Images courtesy Deborah Joy Corey (3)

This painting by Joshua Adam, a friend of the author, captures the authentic feel of the shack on its mooring in Sealy Cove.



with a few rough sketches, and a generous grant from the Canada Council for my writing, I built something of my own. The 10-by-12 fishing shack replica sits on a 16-by-20 foot float and is now moored across from Castine Harbor in Sealy Cove. The shingled shack is built sturdily for wind and all day it turns on its mooring like a sailboat with the tides, my yellow kayak resting on one side like a sleeping sea creature.

Inside the shack is a small loft that can be reached by a wooden ladder. It serves as storage and a hideaway for naps. There is a director's chair that sat on my husband's grandfather's cruiser, which sailed Massachusetts Bay in the 1930s. Over the chair hangs an abstract and torn oil painting that I found in a local antique shop. There is also a pine lift-top desk

from my mother's childhood home. It sits in front of a multi-paned window and is full of sharpened pencils and paper. There is a creek chair for sitting outside, a life ring, a towel, a sunhat, and a butterfly net for catching treasures that float by with the tide. There are binoculars, a one-burner gas stove, an old-fashioned coffee percolator, and two ship's gaslights for when I stay after dark. Tin cups and plates and cans of Bar Harbor Fish Chowder line the beam over the door, along with three tattered and highlighted paperbacks: *The Outermost House* by Henry Beston, *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* by Alistair McLeod, and *Drinking the Rain* by Alix Kates Shulman.

To describe the color of the cove water circling the float on a brightly lit day would be to lessen it. I will only say

that the water seems lit as if a second sun beams up from the bottom. Nearby boulders encompass the float like a fortress of grandfathers, their faces cracked and porous, wearing a crown of dense and elegant evergreens that emit a fresh spruce scent. When the tide washes out and the boulders dry in the sun they turn the coral color of Prince Edward Island beaches. A commanding osprey's nest sits in a pine tree on a nearby point; the mother often fishes nearby, her swoop as broad as any eagle's. Wet-headed seals lift from beneath the water, begging to be spotted and an occasional porpoise makes a playful ripple, each breath echoed from its blowhole like a message from God.

Arriving by skiff each morning, I glimpse Jinx on a buoy not far from my



The view from the writing desk, through the window to Grey Island.

float. It may not be him, but I like to believe he moved across the bay with me. Other cormorants accompany him, standing on nearby buoys like foot soldiers. My neighbors here include Roger and Anne in the red house on nearby Grey Island, and the local fire chief who often visits a cabin cruiser moored nearby. Like the cormorants, we acknowledge one another without intruding. My other

closest neighbor is the Molly B, a lobster-boat captained by Josh Hatch. Over time, Josh and I have learned the daily rhythms of one another. I sometimes check on the luck of his catch or the safety of the mussels that I plan to collect by kayak later in the day; he sometimes checks on my family and writing, or asks if I plan on putting my own lobster traps in soon. Josh and I are bonded by a cove and our

love for it. Each time we speak, it is as if we are taking part in a secret handshake, a nod, a smile, a hushed high-five.

Here on the float, as in the sail loft, the tides give my life a different rhythm. They dictate when it is best to swim or witness or write. Here, I've learned that it is not the house or shack that inspires me; it is my access to nature. I've learned, too, that the sea is a gentle yet firm mother. In howling winds, she demands respect. Most days, though, she allows the cove to be calm. Being here is a departure from my daily chores and most days, it is hours before I settle to write. First I must breathe in the liquid salty air and watch and listen. I must be held in a world older and more complete than mine. If I am lucky, I will hear the breathing of a porpoise or better yet, be held for a moment in the sightline of a cormorant. ★

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