

Introduction from *Blue Nights*: by Norman Mailer

I had an agreeable return of memory when I looked at these photographs. They brought back an exceptional walk on a night in Provincetown during my first visit in June of 1943, an occasion that was right after I finished senior year at Harvard. Having heard now and again about a unique village of fishermen at the tip of Cape Cod, I decided to celebrate there for a weekend. The town was near to deserted, and what I recall most clearly is the darkness of the streets after twilight.

The Second World War was on us then with all of the shadow it could cast over nocturnal activities. Many of us shared an intensified sense then of events to come. We anticipated the possibility of air raids and German landings, conceivably, on the shores of Cape Cod with its open beaches and lack of fortifications. Of course we were three thousand miles away from Europe, and the U.S. and British Navies were there to protect us from U-boats, but that offered no certainty in those days. Everyone's experience then was existential. No one knew yet how the war would turn out, and as a corollary of these various forebodings and cautions, the towns of Cape Cod shut down all outdoor lighting. The streets were dark. So, too, were shades drawn on the windows of every house.

In the evening, therefore, one had to make one's way in Provincetown down the narrow thoroughfare of Commercial Street, then called Front Street, with no more guidance than was offered by the moon. That faint glow lay on the parchment of the window shades in those houses not completely unlit within. What prominence that gave to the pale illumination overhead. I do not know that I have ever been more aware of the presence of the moon. One's sense of time now seemed more sensitive to the past, so much so, indeed, that one could suppose oneself returned in some small measure to events gone long before one had entered one's own life.

So, as I took these steps through the dark dimensionalities of the subtle light provided, I had a rare pleasure. It took no leap of the imagination to think that I was walking down the long lonely street of a Cape Cod town in the years before the American Revolution. Each small house I passed now stood out like an eighteenth-century abode. For an hour or more I was returned to the past. It was as if a tangible element of those long-elapsed years had just seasoned my psyche. I was endowed with a close intimation of what it might have been like to live in New England then. I had received a gift. I now had some living idea of that colonial era when the roots of my country were first readying themselves for a mighty future.

Let me offer here a weightier example of this kind of experience. On one now famous literary moment, Marcel Proust dipped a madeleine into his tea. The taste of the wafer brought back floods of memory sufficient to liberate *la recherche du temps perdu* (*Remembrance of Things Past*), his seven researches into time that was lost to him, yet now was never lost.

Obviously, my moment on first encountering George Hirose's photographs is not to be compared in intensity or magnitude. Nonetheless, his prints offered an epiphany. I was brought back to that night in Provincetown some sixty-four years ago, and Hirose's collection soon stimulated my friends, Michael Lennon and Christopher Busa. They, too, agreed that the work is most special and should be put out as a book. These prints have so much to say about the quality of nights in Provincetown today. Indeed, such a book might yet be seen as its own kind of counterpart to Joel Meyerowitz's remarkable daytime shots in his book *Cape Light*. We certainly had no doubt that this work could bring pleasure to all the year-rounders, summer inhabitants, and first-time day-trippers who fell under the legitimate spell of our streets.

Let me offer, then, my praise to these photographs. If they offer, as I have indicated,

a magical recall of a night back in 1943 that provided me in turn with a sense of an eighteenth-century evening, this is not to suggest that that is how the town appears today. However, it is true that Provincetown has not changed as shamelessly and as corporately as other American small towns in these last decades; it did not go along with their conscience-less devotion to stucco office buildings, parking malls, and condominiums with in-built monotones. Nor do we have new glitzy hotels ghastly in their lack of imagination. High-rises and supermarkets do not dominate the core of the town. Our place is still unique, and late at night, in quiet off-season time it can still stimulate some reminiscence of our past.

Nonetheless, George Hirose's photographs are contemporary. After midnight, many lamps are still on in town, and one can often see in his prints a line of light etched by a car as it comes around a turn. The composer of these photographs was ready to accept whatever unforeseen changes occurred after opening his camera shutter, as his pictures often required a many-second exposure. Hirose works only with available light; he illuminates none of his settings with auxiliary aids. Like Joel Meyerowitz, he is a photographer with the instincts of a hunter. One stalks the desired result, one waits, one does not dictate the given, one looks rather to meet it.

I think these photographs are exceptional. They capture Provincetown at night, and each occasion is there in all its privacy, its mystery, its past for, yes, some of these photographs do retain echoes of how the town looked then in 1943 and yet they are always contemporary. Rare,

then, is the print in this collection that does not speak of years gone by as well as of the present.

BlueNights. The blue of night spans past and present. How fine is George Hirose's work.

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Blue Nights: Photographs by George Hirose  
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Provincetown Arts Press

Blue Nights: Project Art Statement

When I first visited Provincetown several years ago, I felt immediately that it was an exceptional place; a complex integration of social, political, and artistic communities set in one of the oldest, and most beautiful European settlements in North America. I became fascinated by its strong connection to the past, its enduring and historic architecture, and the energy of its contemporary society.

Although I've been traveling to Provincetown since the 90's, I first began photographing the town at night in 2003. Provincetown became a visual magnet, and I came to know its streets and homes as identified by the darkness. I would sometimes feel surreally transported as I walked through the town late at night, searching for quiet signs of life; houses with lit windows or open doors, ghostly figures, streaks of headlights, and other mysteries that emerge after dark. History seems omnipresent in this town, and in the clash between new and old, the ghosts of the past persist - especially at night.

George Hirose      5/07