

UO Creative Writing Program

Sara Elizabeth Johnson Writes About Her Year at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown

2009—2010

The Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown is an amazing place, especially in the winter, once all the tourists have left. There are eight new artists and eight new writers (four in poetry, four in fiction), plus two second-year artists and two second-year writers. Everyone receives his or her own apartment, which can get lonely, but the center also has a common area and a lounge (including cable television, which I don't even have at home), and we used them well. We had a "silly" ping-pong tournament and a vampire prom. Fellows also introduced me to awesome cultural treasures, such as *Demolition Man*, in the TV lounge.

The communal atmosphere there generates lasting friendships. We poets would get together at least once a month at someone's apartment and share and critique work, and artists would invite writers into their studios. Everyone spent the days working, and then we'd all get together at night. There were many artist talks and readings, and always potlucks and parties afterwards. In April, we went on an incredible whale watch; it was a gorgeous day and whales, dolphins, and seabirds surrounded our boat on all sides. It was nice to share that experience with other fellows.

Because the whole day was basically mine to do what I wished, I wrote intensely and often. I would take long walks to the beach by myself or with another fellow, or walk to the beech forest (where birds eat seeds from hands, so they'd follow me everywhere looking for food). I'd bring a notebook and sit for a while, then come home and write or revise. It was such a blessing to not only have that time, but also that beautiful space in which to work. Living in Los Angeles is just not the same. It's loud and busy. I feel I'm rudely awakened every morning by some machine rattling or banging. Provincetown felt almost like a summer camp, or a long retreat; it was very quiet and the community very close-knit.

Cape Cod was also good for my manuscript, which has seafaring motifs. The whaling museum featured a wealth of cool artifacts (binnacles, compasses, spears, quadrants, whaling captains' logbooks, etc.), and then there was the constant, battering wind, the smell and sound of the ocean, the rainstorms, and the whale, seal, and dolphin watching from the shore. I think the place in general has had a big influence on me, crea-



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tively speaking. It also felt good to be back in New England. It felt good for me, and for my writing. It was refreshing to live in a place with all four seasons. It was probably the first time in my life (except when young, with the promise of school closings) that I welcomed a blizzard, and the autumn months are really beautiful with all the leaves changing and the whales migrating and seals gathering on the shore.

The Provincetown community is welcoming towards the fellows; some businesses even offered discounts to us. All the bars but one close in the dead of winter, so that's where the town tends to gather on January nights. We'd go there for "Drag Karaoke," karaoke hosted by a drag queen named Dana, on Saturday nights. That was always fun, though I never sang. Winter is also the clamming season in Provincetown, and the Fine Arts Work Center has a couple permits, so we'd go clamming (and have huge clam and mussel potlucks afterwards), and sometimes the locals would make fun of us because we were using the wrong rake or wearing the wrong boots.

Even though I generally had a positive, productive experience, I will also remember Provincetown as the place of intense stomach upset. In March, I came down with the stomach flu for the first time in my life, and in April I got food poisoning (from oysters). I don't think I've ever been so sick!

All in all, it was a really wonderful fellowship and I feel so lucky to have experienced it.

S.