

Kim at Menemsha

David Bradley

Where the hills come down
Away to the west on the Vineyard,
Is the tiny harbor we'd beat
All day to reach. Tack, tack
Back and forth
In sou'west smoke and heavy tide,
Past West Chop and Middle Ground
Past the great sand banks
The stack and rusted fly wheel
Of the vanished brick factory,
Cramped and cold
In the upended cockpit
While our pretty sloop
Drove its way, scuppers foaming
And lee shrouds spouting.
But now we could make out
The low beach, the smudge of jetties,
Dunes, and a scattering
Of cottages behind.

The land runs farther west, to the upsurge of Gay Head, then plunges down in streaked cliffs to ice-age boulders and Devil's Bridge where the red clay bleeds into the scouring tides. But our work was done. Under the headland the gusts came dark and sudden, and lovely warm. Sensing at once her release, our sloop tripped along the shoreline in a rush, chortling at the chop.

Late afternoon. A beach gone cold,
Children and wives of summer artists
All back in their vacation cottages.
Only the twin jetties ahead to see to.
From the western rocks came
The needle-jab of a spindle light.
"You wouldn't guess it, Kim,
But there's a neat little harbor
In there, over the dunes."

Many times I'd seen Menemsha, as a boy off on codfish trips. It was called The Crick in those days, being a mere wide eddy in the slue where the sea pours in and out of Menemsha Pond. Local lobstermen and swordfishermen built pole wharves to tie to. Visitors had to anchor where they could. They spent the night swatting mosquitoes while their vessels traded paint. The hurricane of '38 swept the harbor back to sand, boats and fish shacks heaped up in the Pond. After that, a proper basin was dredged to one side of the tide-run, jetties built seaward to protect the entrance, and the harbor renamed Menemsha Bight.

"Go forward, Kim. Make sure
The anchor rode is clear
To run."
Always excitement
Making port.
You're on parade.
This is a working harbor,
The fishermen won't appear to notice you,
How you handle your boat,
But beneath those long-billed caps
They will miss nothing.
I knew our sloop could do almost anything
If I didn't get in her way.
I also knew the old saying:
"Nothing like sail
To show a man damn quick
What a fool he is."

The two jetties parted and opened up a narrow channel of gleaming tide. A bar made across the entrance. We could see the sudden greening of the water and the standing waves inside. Tide running in, wind about sou'sou'west, and a mite south of that: barely enough for us, sheeted down flat to slip through between the lanes of rock and pinch her by into the basin.

"I see boats."
A barefooted shivery little foredeckman
In a yellow slicker, long hair blowing,
Kim held a weather shroud and peered
behind the taut jib.
"Masts anyways. Masts all over the place."
The hairs on her slim legs
stood out glistening in the wind.

Old men and boys had come down to the jetties to fish, streaming their lines from the outermost blocks of cut granite. They squatted like mountain marmots on the gull-splashed rocks. The flood was flowing heavily into Menemsha Pond, curling around the western jetty. We'd go in a-flying. Oh, I was no Josiah Cressy driving the *Cloud* through the Golden Gate, 89 days out and a record from New York City. I was no Harold Vanderbilt banging his J-boats around like Frostbite Dinghies. But this was a lively little sloop—not an eagle maybe, but a gull that would come sweeping into the basin and settle her wings in a quiet spot.

So we tacked to fetch:
 Up came the bottom
 Firm and patterned as mackerel skin,
 Scattered with shells,
 Ink-blotched with weed.
 "All set, Kim?"
 "Yup. All set."
 The rush of our bow
 Jammed into the tide,
 And echoed loud from the jetties.

Too late—too late I recognized that mass, seconds too late, how it heaved around the western rocks and piled up on the eastern, felt it grab our keel, haul us leeward, felt the sails go limp, the rudder dazed, heard the awful sucking sound of a river in rocks, saw the black underwater blocks rushing at us with mouths full of weed and the smooth shadow of our hull on the bottom coming up in whirls of sand—

"Hold tight, Kim."
 Shecouldbe—

A shaking gust took us abeam, slammed the sails full, knocked us over, almost snagging the rocks, the mainsail passing like doom's shadow over the old fishermen, ducking and holding their hats—over the boys scrambling crabwise, all eyes and legs.

Then
 She
 Lifted
 Cedar and oak and a one-ton keel
 Lifted on the piled-up water,
 Just grazing
 Just
 Easing by,
 Sliding off into the channel.



The sloop—a Herreshoff S—double-reefed, rounding Juniper Point in a no'theaster, ca. 1935. Like all Herreshoff boats she trips along daintily in light airs, and yet is all there joyous and able in heavy going. Her homeport is now Brooklin, Maine.

I could have stepped ashore anywhere. The little foredeckman had been bending down to watch the routed fishermen; now she turned aft, laughing:

“Boy, that was Neat.”

In a moment we were bearing away into a basin already crowded, past the fishing boats, pole wharves, stacked traps and buoys, the shacks and nailed-up swordfish tails, into a quiet berth, into the blessed stink of lobster bait.

Neat!
Dear God, what words we mortals use
When things have got beyond us
And fool misjudgments
Promise shipwreck—
Except for God's grace
Or sense of humor,
and the luck
that frail winged creatures have:
a wooden boat, say,
or a girl.

David Bradley summered with his family in Woods Hole in the “Airplane House” which was built for his parents by his grandfather, Charles R. Crane, as described in *Spritsail*, vol. 4, no. 1. A sailor, author, teacher, and state legislator, Bradley wrote to *Spritsail* in 1990 describing his boyhood summers on Juniper Point: “I knew then that God made Woods Hole first and Heaven later with the left-over parts. I was right.”