

The Dao of Clamming

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At age twelve, some other boys and I learn to clam from Harry Kreutzberg, who had learned this way of clamming from his brother-in-law whose last name was Griffenberg. It is Memorial Day weekend and we are at Harvey Cedars, Long Beach Island, New Jersey. Five families of us. There are thirteen or more children — elementary school or younger — in one two-storied house. The year is 1966, it is a Saturday and it is damp and chilly. Where the bay (Barnegat Bay) ends and the island begins cannot be distinguished in this thick fog. You can't see much beyond your arm held out, houses are but a faint presence, insubstantial, ghostly, almost nonexistent. To walk we have to follow the road's edge under us.

There is no chance for the hoped for boating that day, nor for much else outdoors. Being able to see so little is our entertainment for a while. Soon though we're down fishing off a dock at the bay half a block down the end of Harry's street. Blowfish — puffers — bite on our frozen squid. There are so many of them, as if an entire school has entered the bay with a huge appetite. Out of bait, they come at bubblegum stuck on our hooks! They attack our bare hooks even! One hour we count over 50 caught.

There're many more than enough. We're told to stop. They're not bad eating.

What we find to do in the fog after that is forgotten. Once the fog diminishes a bit, some of us walk a couple blocks to the island's ocean side where there is a sand beach and we go in water that is 50 degrees (10 degrees celsius). Body surfing.

Next day things clear up. We are going out in Harry's runabout with its Evinrude 35 horsepower

engine. Our life vests are on. We each have a pair of sneakers to clam in if we want but we're told we don't really need them. They are old sneakers and it is okay if they get wet.

There's a fairly strong head wind ; the bay is choppy, the engine gargling and humming. It is quite a ride because we first we have to cross the bay to the mainland side to pick up Griff (Griffenberg), Harry's brother-in-law. Lips get chapped in the sun, wind, and salt air. "Use this," Harry tells us. "Smear some your face too. You'll get windburn. Rub it in good, son." Harry calls me son, calls all of us son.

Just off these shoals we anchor ; "Keep your eye on that marsh island." "You're going have to take off your life jacket." "Face this way ; just swing your legs over the boat side. Butt too. Then lower yourself down with your arms." The water might be up to your chest about.

It's cold at first ; we don't mind it. "Holler if you turn blue," one of the adults jokes. Then let go of the boat. Make your way on in where it's waist deep. No, there are no sharks in this bay.

You can clam better with nothing on your feet. At times blue claw crabs can be seen as well as helmet crab carapace. Once every so often you come across an empty soda or beer bottle, usually unbroken. Oyster crackers can get under foot and are slippery. I'm told these can bite off a toe. Who knows if that's true. They crack open oyster shells so their jaws must be strong.

On the bottom too are shell pieces from dead clams. Worm-rock vermicelli is a meshwork of skeleton worm-tunnels veined all over an arc shells' outside. There is slimy gunk and seagrass undulation. Where you come across patches of clear sandy bottom you feel safe as if coming to a small oasis, but there are no clams there.

Afternoon sun is reflected all over. Treading a quick rhythm keeps a body warm. Keep moving. It's a good feeling being a foot clammer, barefoot, no rakes like professionals use. A clam's bed and garden is gunk on the bottom. When you bring up a clam with its muddy darkness still clinging it has the odor of sulfur. Clamming this way means moving through sea grass roots, decaying matter, liquid black earth. Fetid slime feels good once you're over being scared not knowing where it is you're stepping.

There's a vitality that comes into you from just being outdoors, but there's a certain calm that comes into you from being in this bay. It's different from the surge in the ocean surf the other side of the island which effervesces a spirited joy into your entire being. The bayside doesn't make you want to shout for joy, but it is wonderful in its own quieter way.

It's not a working thing, this clamming ; it needn't be called work in the sense of labor. Nor is it play. Feeling for these semi-smooth shelled living things under foot and ducking under digging them out by hand is not work. It grows through you. It's a passion, this clamming.

You're going to take these home and eat them (chilled raw with cocktail sauce or steamed or barbecued or in chowder, depending on their size) ; that's another scene.

After washing them off good you're going to crack two together right here and now where you're standing waist deep, suck down the raw animal alive along with its juices.

They tell me I'm a good clammer : there are many in my shirt. Looks like I'm pregnant. The usual way would be to put each clam in a basket set inside an inflated inner-tube, but we have none and have no clamming license either so just make a basket of our T-shirts and when that is full take what we have back to the boat, cover them with a wet towel, and go get more. If the marine police come around we can easily drop what we have back into the bay. Griff tells us there is a fine for clamming without a license. Something like fifty dollars for each clam taken!

Maybe clamming is something I can naturally do. It feels as if it's in me, of me. What is there I can do well at that age? I am not very good at sports. A fly ball drops almost right in front of me in my right field position. It is my first year in midget league baseball ; this is my first time off the bench and in a real game. A couple kids my age are in the games regularly.

Coach puts me in right field I guess to see how I do. Probably I don't pay much attention during practice and during the games probably sit on the bench picking my nose and looking at butterflies or lightning bugs. I can't remember a desire to play or a fascination with the game. My father wants me to play. He has me out in our back yard and he is tossing a ball to me. When I take no interest in it — I am supposed to get excited because I'm a boy and this is an activity boys are supposed to be

interested in — or when I shrug and say “not really” when he asks me if I want to have a catch he gets angry. Why do I not want to “be a boy,” he yells. What am I “a sissy,” he wants to know. Do I want to “play with dolls like a girl,” he asks. Maybe I just don’t feel like playing ball. I don’t know. You learn not to be honest.

In midget football — also something I do at my father’s insistence — the boy across from me knocks me down every play. The coach puts me on defense. On the line. I am eight years old. The opponent is David King. He is four years older. I am below the age limit, which is 10, but since I am big for my age my father wants me to start early. So every play Dave King, who later becomes an all-American linebacker at Syracuse, knocks me flat on my ass.

I don’t know what to do, don’t know how to stop being flattened each time, time after time. The coach steps in after each play to encourage me. He tells me what I am doing wrong, tells me what to do. Tears well up in my eyes. It is so frustrating, so embarrassing. It is made into an ego thing about being able to hold up.

On the baseball field when the ball plops down right in front of me I can hear coach Burt Gill yelling something at me. My father is watching. Maybe he is assistant coach by then. I don’t remember. So embarrassed he must be of me. My teammates who are mostly a bit older know what they are supposed to do even if they make mistakes doing it. They are furious and some call me names: Stupid! Dummy! I am confused. I know I am supposed to catch the ball if it comes to me. But I take it too literally. If the ball comes directly to me I must catch it. That is what I thought. Never does it occur to me that I have to move to catch the ball!

The football coach, Mr. Osa Meekins, would come to me after each punishment from Dave King and tell me what I am doing wrong. Weight distribution. Keep my weight under me. Stay low. Move your legs, drive with your legs. Don’t stand straight up.

It is a sour experience until, finally, by lunging forward while continually pushing on with my legs I manage to not get knocked backwards onto my butt. The downside is that, doing so, I lose all sense of what is happening in the game. By standing up I can see, at least for a brief moment, before Dave King knocks me over. I can know what is going on. Being this low down near the ground makes

no sense at all. What fun is there in that ? You can't see anything. You don't know what's going on. Just spiked shoes and legs. A guy's jersey in front of me. Big deal ! What's the thrill in doing this ?

Eventually you get better at it. You become able to sack quarterbacks, cause fumbles. As a blocker open holes for running backs. Knock people around with a forearm jolt. At times flatten people, knock them into the middle of next week.

In high school the team members and coaches elect me along with two others as team captains. During my senior year a regional committee selects me as South Jersey Scholastic Lineman of the Year. Organizations select me for the All County Team, the All South Jersey Team, and The All State Team. Recruiters from universities come pester me at school and at home. Please come to their university.

In baseball come to be able to hit home runs. Coaches select me for an all-star team. I hit two home runs in an all-star game. You can get good at it even though you didn't really want to do it to begin with. You learn to enjoy it because this is what there is to learn to enjoy.

You develop some capacity for it, for this illusory and artificial dimension of life, something that is not necessary for our survival but which is a game we humans make up and dump all sorts of merit on. It's an artificial turf upon which our lives take place, complete with all the commentary, all the awards, and the idea that how we perform in this environment means something, means something about how we are as individuals.

Put me at linebacker at least ! I can develop a capacity to play linebacker too, and at least in that position can see what is going on !

The others are not getting clams. They seem engaged with other things. Horsing around mostly, the young ones. Something or other they come upon. Clamming, it should be noted, is not a traditional "boy" thing where I am from. No kids I know have ever done it. It isn't fishing or baseball or whatever with the built-in cultural associations and acceptability. Maybe that's why the other kids seem inattentive.

Neither are the adults doing well with their clamming though they are concentrating a bit more than are the kids on getting clams. Going at it in a rational, logical way ; wanting to use their brain in a situation that does not call for brainpower. They're at a loss it seems.

Treading along off to myself, being part of all this, in tune with its goings on and going on with it, into its going absorbed, forgetting that the goal is to get clams is the best part of clamming.

It's almost like a gentle trot or a light jog or even a mild form of dance this clamming with your feet. Connected with all that is vibrating in me, being let into it and being as it all is, the many clams are incidental.

If clamming were made an Olympic sport — and who knows these days — I wouldn't be any good at it I think ; probably I wouldn't want to do it.

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