

February 19, 2004

WHERE I LIVE BY DONNA HILBERT

Iowa by the sea

Real folks stroll Long Beach's peninsula, a secret place that begs to be shared in a whisper.

Donna Hilbert

Six years after moving to the peninsula in Long Beach, my stomach still pitches with excitement when I turn onto Bayshore from 2nd Street, Alamitos Bay on my left, a glimpse of ocean straight ahead. After even a day away, I am eager to get home before sunset. My house on the boardwalk faces south and the ocean, an ideal orientation for spectacular sunsets.

The peninsula is a jewel hidden in plain sight. Given its lack of public amenities and limited street parking, many who live in other parts of the city don't know this enclave exists. Even in summer the ocean beach is deserted until the wind kicks up at 3 o'clock and kite-boarders glide and leap along the water from the west. Across Ocean Boulevard on the bay side, the summer beach is crowded with families, the bay busy with kayaks and boogie boards. Mornings on the ocean, surf fishermen angle for halibut, while on the bay, fly fishermen in waders, hats dotted with lures, stand waist deep in water, patiently casting.

It is hard to imagine Upton Sinclair, in the late 1920s, writing from a summer house here. It must have been hard to hold a muckraking thought while watching a pelican dive for fish. If he were here now, he would be surprised to see the concrete and glass mansion rising next to one of the places where he stayed, largely unchanged since his time. Lore has it that he was visited there by Albert Einstein and Charlie Chaplin. Still, I imagine, he would feel at home on the peninsula, with its small-town ability to embrace its eccentrics.

The peninsula works against my inclination to stay within four walls. The dog must be walked; I can't simply open the door and let her go. I join the unself-conscious parade of humanity along the old wooden boardwalk: the young man with a parakeet on his shoulder, the woman leading her cat on a leash, another woman, probably in her 80s, power walking in nylon shorts and tank top. And, at the edge of the water in a flesh-colored G-string, an elderly man struts.

Here you can wear pajamas to walk your dog without raising an eyebrow. Most of the people walking are regular folks: mothers and babies, retired couples holding hands. If this is Iowa by the sea, then I'm all for it. The beach has a middle-class, middle-aged vibe, no need to be hard-bodied or well dressed to stroll. There is a lack of racial diversity but no lack of cultural diversity, with a rock star living peaceably a few doors from the mayor.

It's two miles around the peninsula, stretching from 54th Place to 72nd Place — ending at Alamitos Bay Park overlooking the channel, where bay meets ocean. In the six years I've lived here, I know many more neighbors than I did in the 20 years I lived in my inland suburban home. It is hard to feel isolated when you can sit on your porch and chat with whomever walks by. Everyone might not know your name, but they are likely to know your dog's name. My dog, Roses, knows where to stop on our walks and wait for a biscuit to be dropped from a balcony, and from whom she can expect a friendly pat.

When I first moved in, the thud, thud of early-morning joggers startled me from sleep. And at night, the breaking waves and foghorns' plaintive wail would punctuate my dreams. Nights, sitting on the porch, I heard a barking, like a child with croup, and wondered if there were lonely dogs on the oil island. Were they on a bait barge anchored near the breakwater or on a cargo ship queued to enter the port? Not until I kayaked to the breakwater that protects the Port of Long Beach and saw its seal denizens did the barking become as natural as other ocean sounds.

When I put on walking shoes to do errands on foot, the neighborhood reminds me of New York. Belmont Shore, just blocks away, bustles with restaurants and shops. The post office is within walking distance, as is Mail Boxes Etc., owned by a retired college English instructor. I can linger over a latte at Polly's, a shore institution, or in a different coffeehouse every day of the week. I might stop at Fingerprints, my favorite music store in Southern California, and buy a CD or even some vinyl, and check out what is happening in the local music scene. I could, but don't, have my nails done on almost any corner. And I needn't leave the neighborhood for samosas, prik king, fish tacos or delectable French fries from Paul's, a corner hamburger joint.

Sometimes I head west on the wet sand, filling my pockets with sea glass, thinking I might stop for a beer at the Belmont Brewery on the pier, or push on to the Long Beach Museum of Art and sip wine outside by the Claire Falkenstein fountain and gaze at the ocean from a different vantage. But I don't. I turn and head back to my own house, sit on my upstairs porch and study the view before me: Catalina, Palos Verdes Peninsula, the Queen Mary and the high-rises of downtown Long Beach, waiting for a friend to drop by for a sunset cocktail. I watch the gathering birds: sandpipers, sea gulls, pelicans. Surely, if I am patient, I will see a dolphin breach the surface of the water.

*

Donna Hilbert is a poet whose latest book is "Traveler in Paradise: New and Selected Poems."