

REVEALING (REVELING IN) WILDNESS

Artists Walking in Napeague

Ann de Forest

Writer/Walking Artist, ONE LANDSCAPE, <https://www.onelandscape.org/>
deforestann@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Since Fall 2023, I have been walking in the diverse landscapes of Napeague, a low-lying area where the Peconic Estuary meets the Atlantic Ocean on New York's Long Island. As part of the collective ONE LANDSCAPE, I am collaborating with painters, photographers, sound artists, cartographers, and choreographers in creative practices that reveal – and revel in – hidden aspects of a wild and fragile ecosystem that many value solely as “prime real estate.” To walk in Napeague is to observe, experience, and participate in a seascape in constant transition. Napeague means “land overflowing with water,” and that interplay of water and land has formed and re-formed the region for eons, beginning with the long, slow melt of the glacier that first formed Long Island. A beach is not so much a place as a condition, the land an amalgam of elements ground by the water's lapping and pounding. Impermanence defines Napeague, even as human residents build homes they believe are solid and will endure. ONE LANDSCAPE, as the name implies, provokes us to see this profoundly beautiful coastal region not as parcels of property but as an ecological whole. Over a series of residencies, the artists involved have developed practices and processes in response to and in participation with Napeague's wildest places, beaches, wetlands, forests, and dunes. No matter their medium, all the artists embrace the methodologies of walking art -- attentive, embodied engagement with the environment – as a means toward a nuanced, holistic vision of the region. My presentation highlights the various roles walking plays in our ongoing collaborative process – as a form of artistic field research; as locus for conversation and fertile cross-pollinations; and, through score-guided community tours and performative rituals, as its own distinct art form.

ARTISTS WALKING IN NAPEAGUE

Near the far eastern end of Long Island, 112 miles east of New York City, lies Napeague. In Algonquin – the language of the region’s indigenous peoples – the word means land overflowing with water. Napeague is a diverse ecosystem of wetlands, dunes, bays and inlets, forests, marshes, and mucky woodland swamps, and the long sand beach where this fringe of the continent meets the Atlantic Ocean.



Figure 1

Napeague, Map by Margie Ruddick Landscape Design, 2024



Figure 2

Napeague Wetlands

I was invited to walk in Napeague by ONE LANDSCAPE, an organization founded by landscape architect Margie Ruddick, committed to safeguarding wild places under threat.

For ONE LANDSCAPE, conservation is a creative act. And with that in mind, ONE LANDSCAPE invited a group of artists (choreographer Constantine Baecher, painter Vicky Colombet, sound artist Cal Fish, painter Cecil Howell, photographer Tanya Marcuse, mixed-media artist Becca Rodriguez, dancer Rebecca Walden, and me, writer and walking artist) to immerse ourselves with the diverse landscapes of Napeague, and to experience them as an ecological whole. We then responded to our experiences, through our diverse media (a word I use intentionally – because what we are hoping to do is to be mediators between these places we come to know closely and intimately and our audience, so they too can feel a connection).

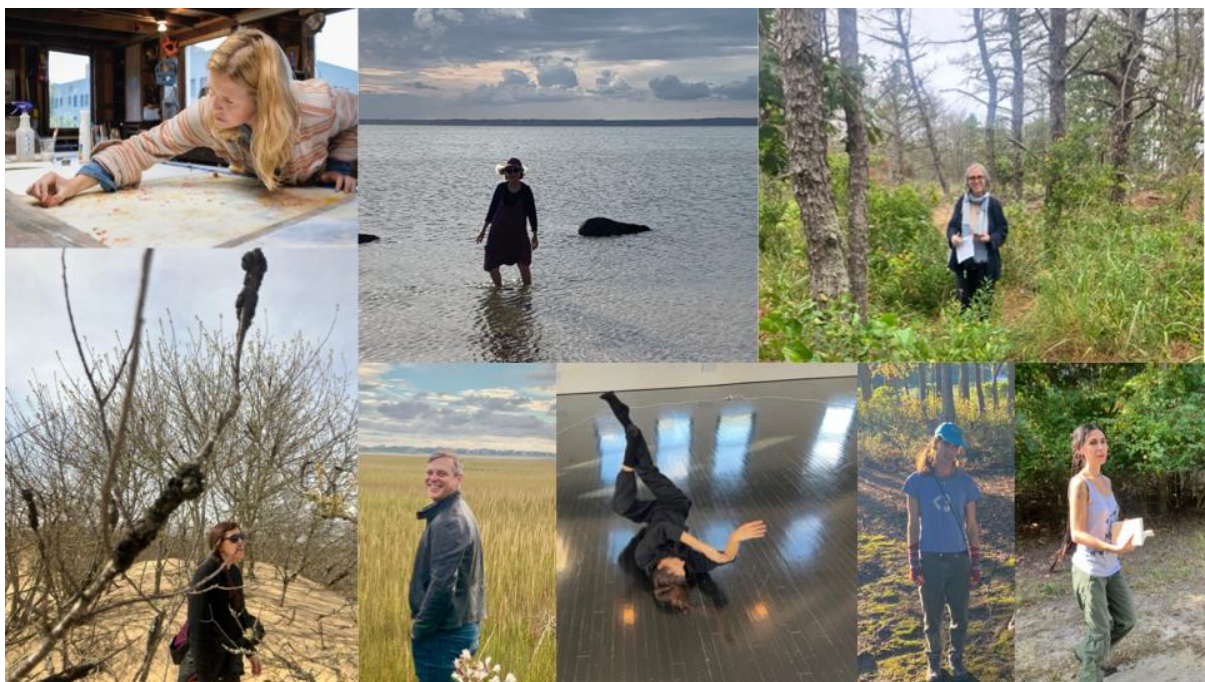


Figure 3

Napeague Collective artists.

Clockwise from top left: Cecil Howell, Ann de Forest, Vicky Colombet, Becca Rodriguez, Cal Fish, Rebecca Walden, Constantine Baecher, Tanya Marcuse

My own medium is writing, tied to a walking practice that is slow, observational, and open to the serendipitous. I walk and I write to see what unfolds: both are means of developing an intimate relationship with the wild, deep, vital essence of a place. I believe our relationships with places are similar to our relationships with other people. Questions that guide my work both as a walker and as a writer, are: Can we know and care about a place as deeply as we do a friend or loved one? Can that relationship be reciprocal?

What follows is a sampling of the collective's work, much of it still work in progress, all of which originated in walking the varied landscapes of Napeague.

A WALK OF CONTRASTS

We walked together in Beach Hampton, a place of contrasts. Originally a resort community laid out at the turn of the last century, Beach Hampton was almost completely wiped out in the Great New England Hurricane of 1938, and later rebuilt. It survives in linear lanes, with a few of the original homes scattered along them, expanded and modified to accommodate contemporary tastes, as well as new homes.

This is prime real estate – multi-million-dollar summer homes for the affluent, –reveal property owners’ paradoxical need for showy grandeur and privacy. Between houses and road, the vegetation, unruly, textured, and multi-colored in mid-autumn, wilds those straight edges. I’m drawn to the contrast and pay close attention to what I call the seams – where two substances abut or sometimes mingle.



Figure 4

Beach Hampton driveway

My first time walking in Beach Hampton, in fall, the intermittent rain, the fleet dark clouds that gather, then thin, then gather again as the wind herds them east, blowing sand over the asphalt, remind us that everything, not just us walkers, is in motion, headed to some destination not yet determined.



Figure 5

Beach Hampton intersection

Viewed from that perspective, homeowners’ attempts to control and “beautify” their plots, to impose permanence, in this place where wild nature spills over –under the threat of flooding and ever more devastating hurricanes, seem absurd.

But one Beach Hampton owner has embraced the wildness. Giraffic Park is a designated wetland in a side yard populated with fanciful sculptures of giraffes made of wood and trash pickings.

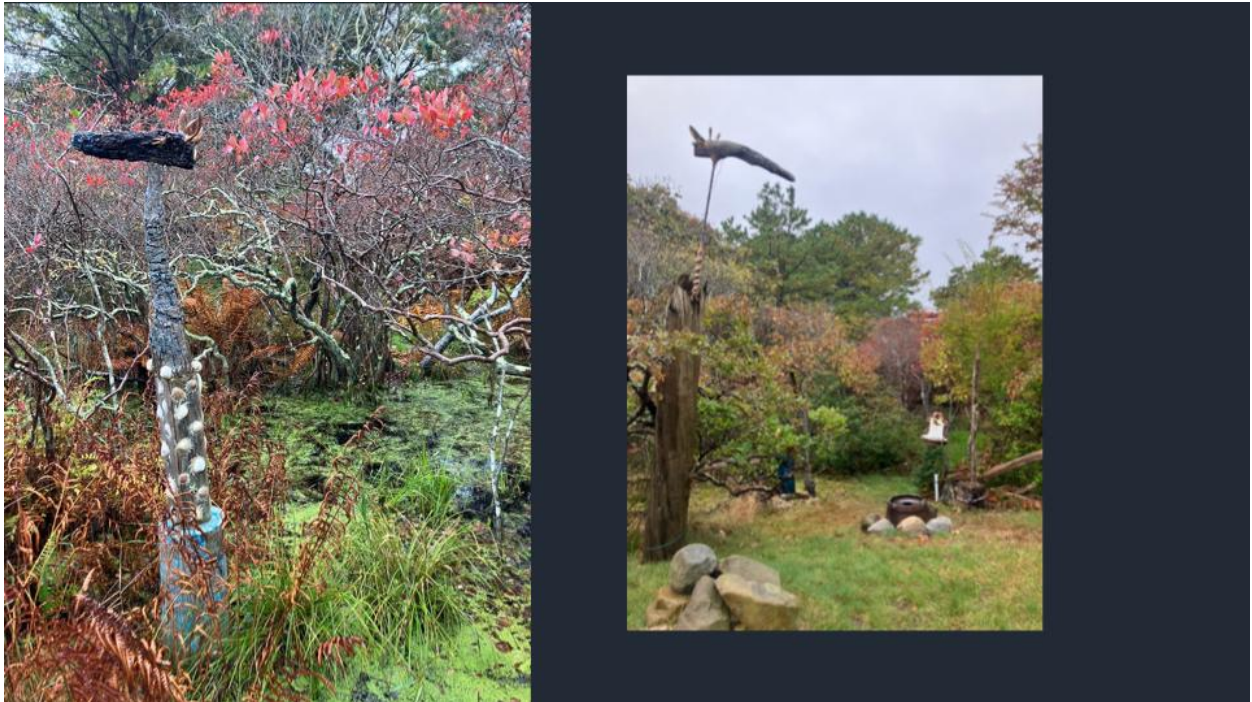


Figure 6
Giraffic Park

The town tried to cite the owner, artist Gus Szabo, for disturbing the natural ecology with his art. Instead, after paying a fine, he transformed the space into a community park where local children, including One Landscape’s Green Squad, can deeply engage with the region’s unique, fragile ecology and biodiversity and the forces that threaten it. When a group of us ran into Gus on one of our walks, he was obsessing about hurricanes. He pointed to the water that flows through his property, and said, “There’s nothing underneath.”

The geology of Long Island is fascinating, and one aspect of Long Island geology is that it has no bedrock. This water that pools through Gus’ yard and sometimes spills over his boardwalk bridges is the Atlantic Ocean itself, seeping up from underground.

Leaving Giraffic Park after talking to Gus, we walked attuned to the ocean right underneath us. A few blocks away we spotted a fist-sized hole in a driveway, into which someone had stuck a pink flag, officially delineating it as a wetland. Sound artist Cal Fish recorded the burbling sound, and Becca Rodriguez honored it with a sketch.

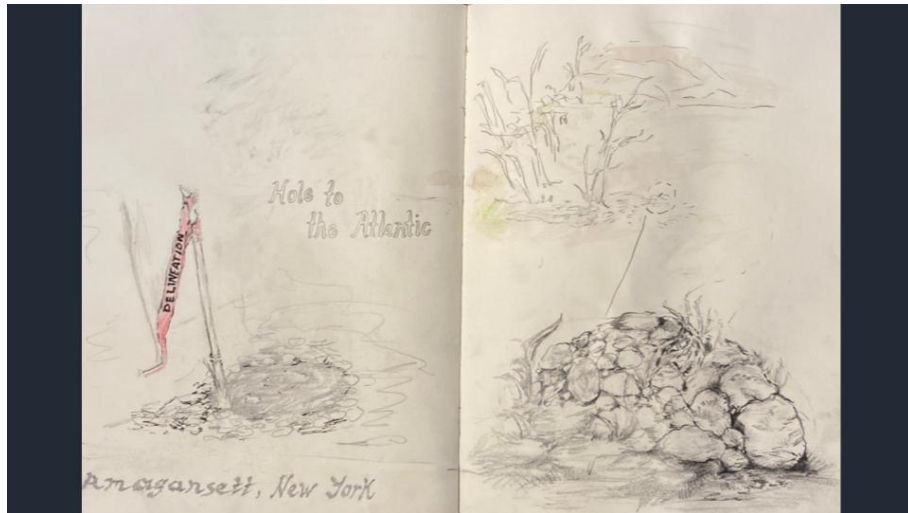


Figure 7

Hole to the Atlantic. Illustration by Rebecca Rodriguez

A WALK OF INTERROGATING FENCES

Walking in Napeague I was attuned to various borders, edges, and barricades, intrigued by juxtapositions and transitions. That led me to develop scores to guide walks in Napeague (and elsewhere). the other artists in some guided walks with a score. Here is one, with my own photographs interrogating the various fences we encountered over my several explorations in Napeague:

Walk until you reach a fence or barricade.



Figure 8

Public Park/Private Home, Springs, NY

Human-environment relationality

What is the fence made of?

Touch the fence as you continue walking along it.

What is the fence's purpose?

Does it protect or defend?

Include or exclude?



Figure 9

Municipal Land off Cranberry Bog Road, Napeague, NY, 2023

Who or what is it keeping out?

Who or what is it keeping in?



Figure 10
Napeague Bay, 2023

What is on the other side?

How is the other side different from your side?

Keep walking...



Figure 11
Bayfront properties, Springs, NY, 2023

How does the fence make you feel?

What is your first emotional response?

Why?

Does the fence remind you of other fences you've known or encountered?



Figure 12

Amagansett Dunes, 2024

Keep walking

A WALK BETWEEN DEVASTATION AND RENEWAL

Swamps and cranberry bogs and forests of mostly oak and pitch pine occupy the narrow inland between the bay of Napeague Harbor and the Atlantic Ocean is a part of Napeague State Park known as Promised Land. Despite its name, Promised Land begins as an unpromising place.

Ominous signs at the trailhead from the NY State Department of Environmental Conservation warn of the dangers of ticks and the devastation caused by the Southern Pine Beetle. The beetles have devoured the pitch pines and turned the forests of Long Island into graveyards, for both trees and the insects who feast on them. The only way to kill the beetles is to cut down the pines.

Painter Vicky Colombet and I embark on what I describe later as a Dante-esque walk, through a Hell forest of ghostly grey trees, into a purgatorial passage of thorn-leafed green oak, and then released into light and water, and an expansive view of Napeague Bay. I annotated the map we picked up at the trailhead with a narration of our journey.



Figure 13

New York State Department of Conservation, Promised Land Trail map. Annotated by the author

Confronting death in the forest had a profound impact on both of us. We were both shaken by the dead trees scattered and heaped throughout the forest. A cloud of mosquitoes hovered over Vicky and attacked her from all sides as we walked. She was the one who labeled this trail Hell. Though she also said, “Man is the creature who causes the most harm.”

But there were signs of life even in the dying forest. This wounded and devastated place refuses to die. In the graveyard of pitch pine, green oak saplings are sprouting.



Figure 14
Promised Land Trail

Human-environment relationality

Back in her studio months later, inspired by walking, Vicky continued in a spirit of play and experiment, drawing on canvas, “a dialogue between painting and drawing, incorporating drawing into a painting format.” Walking inspired her to blur the boundaries of her medium and her accustomed way of working and brought a sense of immediacy to her work. She is also in the process of creating diptychs that juxtapose her abstract images with phrases and sentences excerpted from my written narratives.

NO TRESPASSING

Not far from Promised Land is an abandoned Fish Factory. Just a couple of days before, a friend was talking about how he always views No Trespassing signs as an invitation. And now here we are, Margie, Maddy, her 3-year-old granddaughter, and I walking past those stern words through a breach in the makeshift fence onto the ruins of the former fish processing plant.



Figure 15
Fish Factory

Margie remembers days as a child when the stench of fish filled the summer air, wafting even down to their beach. There is no particular path to follow. The plant’s footprint is a vast collage of cracked pavement, old rail ties, and we cross those surfaces haphazardly, as if the wind is blowing us, toward the raucous water. This space once determined by its very specific function

is now setting for a riotous fiesta of wildflowers, shells, prickly pear, a dead gull. A cricket leaps high, startled by our steps. Maddy picks periwinkle thistles so delicate they have no sting.



Figure 16
Fish Factory

We go down all the way to the water. Cormorants perched on the pilings fly off as we approach. This pebbly strip where water meets land presents another array of manmade materials no longer useful, corroded pipes, nuts and bolts, dissolving into beach – which is not so much a place as condition, an amalgam of elements ground to finer and finer bits by the sea’s steady lapping and pounding.



Figure 17
Fish Factory

On the way back, we find a treasure, a nautilus or conch shell dotted with barnacles, a totem of hospitality? In any case, I give it to Maddy, who clutches it as the day's souvenir.



Figure 18
Hospitable seashell

When I get home, I write down this sentence – Ruin hosts the best parties.

MOVING THROUGH WATER

How did other One Landscape artists in the collective seek out, engage with and respond to Napeague’s wild places?

Photographer Tanya Marcuse set out at different times of day to engage with the swamps and cranberry bogs north of the Atlantic dunes and south of Napeague Harbor. Hers is immersive work, where walking is essential to her process, either to scout locations or to move through the water in high hip waders. She doesn’t just take a picture, she interacts with the landscape, playfully and dynamically, using fog machines, strobes and colored lights, “interventions” that reveal hidden wildness – and revel in that wildness too.



Figure 19

Napeague Swamp

Choreographer Constantine Baecher found in the currents running in competing directions, and the interplay of light on the shallow water a basis for a dance. And he and dancer Rebecca Walden were captivated by the stillnesses as well, the mirroring of water and land, the play of shadows and reflections. These moments that were then translated into movements as the unfinished dance developed and then refined into a dance called *Water Work*, in which Rebecca embodied the tidal shifts and stillnesses of Napeague.



Figure 20

Lazy Point. Photograph by Constantine Baecher, 2024

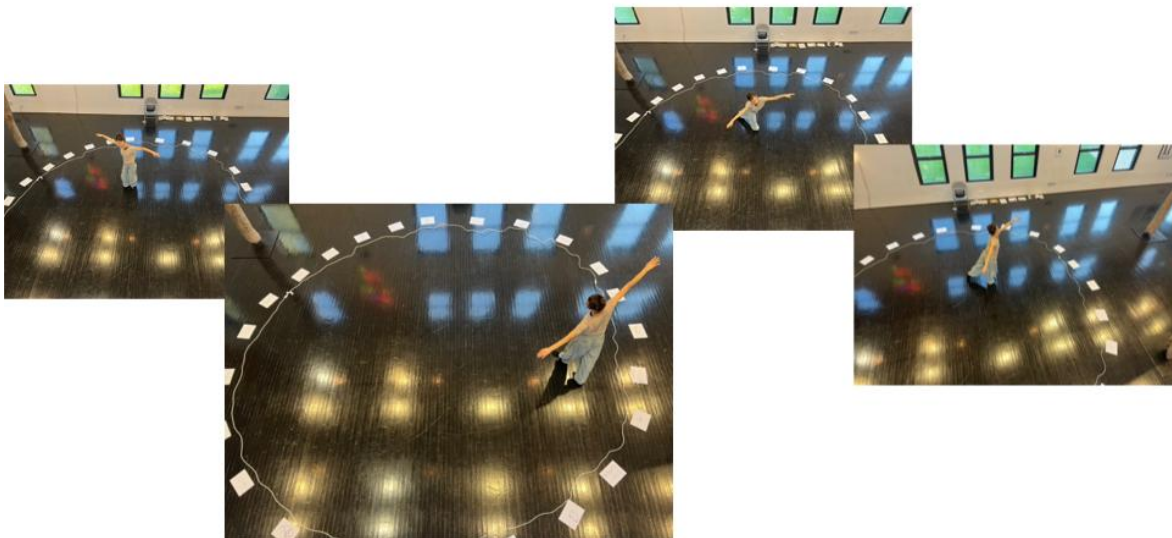


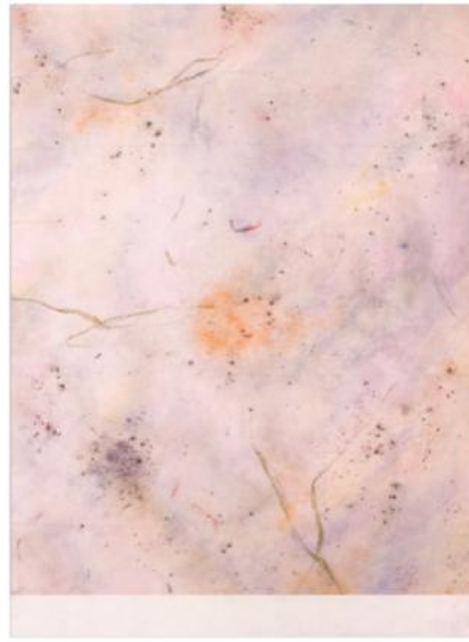
Figure 21

Rebecca Walden, rehearsing Water Work, Water Mill Center, NY. Photograph by Constantine Baecher, 2024

Cecil Howell's densely layered paintings are made, like the beach itself, through a process of accretion and erasure. She's also a landscape architect by training and wanted to shift from that practice's big picture approach to make "very close up drawings of moments on the beach moments that you would never record in any data driven way."



A thing more than it was



Outwash plains

Figure 22

A thing more than it was and Outwash Plains. Paintings by Cecil Howell, 2024

“The beach has so many landforms in it,” she said. “I’m kind of curious of getting that feeling of looking at the ground in such a way that it’s slightly unrecognizable. I’m trying to get at the fragility of life, with one breath it can be swept away.”

Vicky Colombet and I walked together several times, and I sent her narratives of our walks, which she’s incorporating into paintings like this, where she’s expressing the sense of being underwater.



Figure 23

Water and Light. Painting by Vicky Colombet, 2024

Along with her own memories and visual notes, she responds to individual words and phrases in my walk narratives. “A word like ‘glistening’ a word like ‘falling,’ a word like ‘balancing’,” she told me, “gives me images for possible paintings.”

FOLLOWING TRACKS

The places of Napeague invite and encourage play, and I’ve been experimenting with how to write about walking as a witness to place. This piece exists in the “in betweenness” of poetry and prose:

Walking at Lazy Point

Cracked asphalt on the path. White-yellow flowers whose name I do not know bloom amidst scrub pines and tall grass.

In the sand, parallel tracks -- hooves and treads

Dainty hooves – two cloven impressions like an open flower, a cracked mussel or a broken heart.

Wide tire treads -- striped straight, sand ridges form between deep ruts, rubbers’ gripping pattern

On foot, after the fact, I follow the traces of deer and truck, who moved parallel in space but not in time.

As I do now.

We co-exist as records on the sand.



Figure 24

Walking at Lazy Point

The tide has risen since truck's passing. The tire tracks vanish into the shallow bay, though one wheel's impression remains visible under the transparent water, and that becomes my chosen path. Shell-scratched sand scrapes my bare soles, soften to slurry, which swallows my feet as I splash through.



Figure 25
Walking at Lazy Point (video)

Tiny transparencies flick fast as I advance, ephemeral as shadows – shimmery fish, finger-sized, the color of sand. Water come from under and above. The seeming solid ground is hardly firm. As my ankles disappear I suddenly remember my primal fear of quicksand. But feel no panic.

This sinking is a yielding.

Grasses and low pine branches, wavelets and sand, thick blue-black clouds, and even the curves etched in the dried gray driftwood bend in submission to the wind's forming.

Tide keeps coming in. I retrace my steps, some already washed clear. Truck's ruts remain.

For a time.

REVELING IN WILDNESS



Figure 26

Louse Point panorama

Getting to know Napeague as a dynamic ecosystem in the company of other artists has changed my view of the Atlantic, and of this tender, tentative land – part of an archipelago which geologists call the Outer Lands. And the more ecological engagement I do, the more I believe that this is where our attention needs to go. On what's real, what's lasting. To walk as if we are the least significant beings around us.



Figure 27

Napeague Bay

Human-environment relationality

One Landscape hopes that our multiple perspectives and creative responses as artists will shift – or I should say, widen – others’ human-centric perception, to recognize the wildness in us that we share with the land and water and other beings around us, to help others look at this beautiful, fragile place as an integrated whole and not as just parcels of real estate. Because that perspective is our only hope for a sustainable future in which all species flourish.

Anytime you walk, you bring with you memories of other places you have walked through. Now embodied in you, these place memories infuse the new landscape. One thing I brought to Napeague was a word in another language. This is what I wrote:

Bagnasciuga

The Italians have a word for the strip of beach where waves lap over sand and then retreat: *bagnasciuga*. Two verbs – *bagnare*, to wet; *asciugare*, to dry – melded to form an evocative noun.

When I first discovered this word, on the Ionian coast of Calabria, the instep of the Italian peninsula, an American woman tried to pierce my enchantment: “It just means the wet/dry place,” she said. She didn’t understand the shared “a,” which binds two opposites into a singularity, she didn’t note the action inherent in the verbs. And she must not have heard the music of the melding – *bagnasciuga* (banyashooga).

On the beach at Napeague, at the edge of a different continent, I walk on the moist sand and let the water wash over my feet and, recalling the word, whisper in Italian as I follow the rippling lines the waves incise:

bagnasciuga bagnasciuga bagnasciuga bagnasciuga bagnasciuga bagnasciuga bagnasciuga

until the sound becomes an incantation, an evocation, becomes the sound itself of water meeting land, of ceaseless encounter, of beach as a place that is always in between two elements, is always in a state of being made and unmade, of inscription and erasure.



Figure 28
Amagansett Beach