Remembering Catharine Huntington

by Betty Jean Lifton

I woke one morning on the coast of Cozumel—at dawn—with these words: I remember Catharine. What did it mean? It had to be Catharine Huntington, my close friend from the Provincetown Playhouse on the Wharf, who had died the year before at the age of one hundred. Was this a message from somewhere—from her?

"Betty," she had said, after her retirement from the stage—her rich voice giving that plain name a touch of elegance, and even mystery—"Betty, I should like to write my memoirs."

It was 1974. She was in her late eighties then, but one didn't connect Catharine with age. We were sitting in the drawing room of her house at 66 Pinckney Street on Beacon Hill in Boston. A life size portrait of her as a young woman hung over the divan. One could recognize the delicate oval face accented with high cheekbones, the luminous blue eyes, looking even then into some private space of their own. I didn't know her in that earlier period when she was a founder and actress with the Boston Stage Society and the New England Repertory; only later when she was working with the Poet's Theater in Cambridge.

"You should dictate into a tape recorder every day," I told her, knowing even as I spoke that she wouldn't do it without me. But I was living in New York. I couldn't help her with this; I could only offer encouragement. She and co-owners Virginia Thoms LePeer and Ed Thommen had just sold the Provincetown Playhouse, which they had run for over thirty years. She would be living here year around now with her feisty cat, Moonlight. I sensed that she felt a bit of despair. What had she accomplished? I had my books to show for my labors; but a play disappears like a dream once the curtain has gone down. I knew Catharine was wondering if she had dreamed her life.

I became close to Catharine Huntington when the Provincetown Playhouse produced my adaptation of a Japanese folktale, "The Twilight Crane." A Japanese actress played the crane, who metamorphoses into a beautiful woman to reward the poor farmer who rescued her from a hunter. Catharine had the same unreal quality as the crane wife. She was mythic, with a child-like sense of wonder and enthusiasm: she clapped her hands with glee when she was happy. Yet, she also had a practical side that fretted over costumes, props, and balancing the small budget. By day, when she was not in rehearsal, she would pound out press releases on a battered typewriter for the local and Boston papers. During intermissions, on the evenings she wasn't performing, she would appear in a broad-brimmed hat and a long gown to serve tea with mint from her summer garden. Standing there on the wharf with the sea as a backdrop, the audience as her guests, she might have stepped out of an O'Neill play.

There were two Catharine Sargent Huntingtons: the dedicated actress who spent her summers among artists and writers at the Provincetown Playhouse, and the Beacon Hill lady who was active in the Garden Club. As we talked those long afternoons into the night, the young Catharine,

A Note on the Provincetown Playhouse on the Wharf:

When the original Provincetown Players dissolved in 1922, after introducing Eugene O'Neill to American Theater, Jig Cook wrote, "We give this theater we love good death, the Provincetown Players end their story here."

Historically, two other wharf theaters continued to produce plays in Provicetown. In 1940, after Mary Bicknell's Wharf Players Theater was destroyed by a storm, the Provincetown Playhouse on the Wharf was formed by Catharine Huntington, Edwin Pettet, and Virginia Thoms, who had produced plays by O'Neill and Susan Glaspell for the New England Repertory Theater. After seeing one of these plays in Boston, the Provincetown painter Heinrich Pfeiffer invited Miss Huntington to start a theater in the building on his wharf at the foot of Gosnold Street.

Between 1940 and 1972 the group staged 192 plays, 39 of which were written by O'Neill. Each season was initiated with a play by O'Neill, and in 1966 the entire season was dedicated to producing 10 of his plays. No one who was there will ever forget the significance of that last performance of O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*. Among the 80 other playwrights whose work was produced by the theater, Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, and Eric Bently were especially close to the group.

Miss Huntington loved working by the water, which embodied the theater's unique relationship to the town. She especially cherished the wooden deck where the actors often rehearsed. It was so close to Commercial Street that it was convenient for people to wander in and become involved with the theater. Her last performance with the Playhouse was in 1969 when she appeared with Richard Gere in Tennessee Williams' play *Camino Real*.

In 1973, with the understanding that a theater would remain on the property, the Playhouse was sold to Adele and Lester Heller. Productions continued until 1977 when the structure and its contents were destroyed by arson. All that remains standing is the old box office, now the Julie Heller Gallery. A sign no longer points the way to the alleyway off Commercial Street where the Provincetown Playhouse once flourished.

Catharine Huntington was over 100 when she died in 1987, shortly after being honored by the City of Boston for a life which "nourished and inspired a generation of theater artists." Edwin Pettet, the first director of the Playhouse, eulogised, "Hers was the greatest gift of all gifts: the ability to make others greater than they were."

– Gail Cohen

the source of them both, slowly emerged.

Born near the end of the last century into a prominent minister's family in Ashfield, Massachusetts, she was a bohemian long before it was permissable for girls to put on makeup and go on the stage. After graduating from Radcliffe in 1911, she became a Suffragette, struggling for the right of women to vote. She believed passionately in justice. Saving Sacco and Vanzetti was to her generation what ending the Vietnam War to to mine. Their execution was one of the sorrows of her life. When we marched together in Provincetown in anti-Vietnam or anti-nuclear demonstrations, she would often refer to Sacco and Vanzetti—as if a victory for our cause would work retroactively as a victory for them.

She never married, though she told me once that she had been in love for years with a newspaper man who would not leave his wife. She didn't dwell on it. She was drawn to men who lived for their art, such as the short story writer Arturo Vivante, who had a house in Wellfleet, and shared her love of poetry. Her preoccupation with him was almost an obsession—as if she had known him in another life. Alas, she had accumulated too many years by the time they met to make any claim in this one. "How is Arturo?" Catharine would ask whenever I arrived in Wellfleet for the summer, even though I usually had no more way of knowing than she. "He is fine," I would say. "He always asks about you."

It was known that Catharine revered her worldly brother Constant (her favorite of five), who founded the Putnam Publishing House in London. He had broken their youthful pact never to marry, but she was devoted to his daughter, Alfreda, and her children and grandchildren. I had a hard time keeping the vast clan straight when she described family gatherings in the 18th century Colonial manse in Hadley, Mass., where she had spent her summers as a child. Acquired by the bishop grandfather, the Porter-Phelps-Huntington House, or Forty Acres, as it is called, is open as a museum part of the year. I wasn't able to accompany her there, but I particularly liked hearing about the ghost who inhabits the top floor, leaving its imprint at night on the bed, which must then be remade every morning. One night, alone in the house, Catharine became so frightened she brought her horse inside to protect her.

Every winter I would try to stop over in Boston on my way to Thanksgiving or Christmas on the Cape. She was always ready to take off on a moment's notice to a play, even though her eyes and ears were beginning to fail her. Once, she agreed to an evening at theater even though she had recently had a cataract operation. In the taxi, she confessed anxiously that she had lied to the doctor. "I told him I was 88," she said. "I could not admit I am really 90."


Gail Cohen

When Catharine was a senior in Radcliffe, she became close to Katherine Butler Hathaway, who would chronicle their friendship in her memoir *The Little Locksmith.* As an incoming freshman, Katherine Butler first saw the "beautiful and distinguished and talented" Catharine Huntington standing on a platform making a speech as head of the dramatic society. She recognized in her something that I would discover so many years later: her ability "to discern in an obscure person something rare and important and to make other people see it too—above all, to make the person in question feel it and be it."

Katherine Butler's growth had been stunted by a childhood malady. During the years she lay strapped tight to a stretcher on a hard sloping bed, she identified with the misshapen little locksmith who occasionally came to her home. One of her few joys was to play with the delicate toys and wooden boxes that a family friend brought from Japan. She painted miniature water colors on rice paper with bamboo-handled paint brushes.

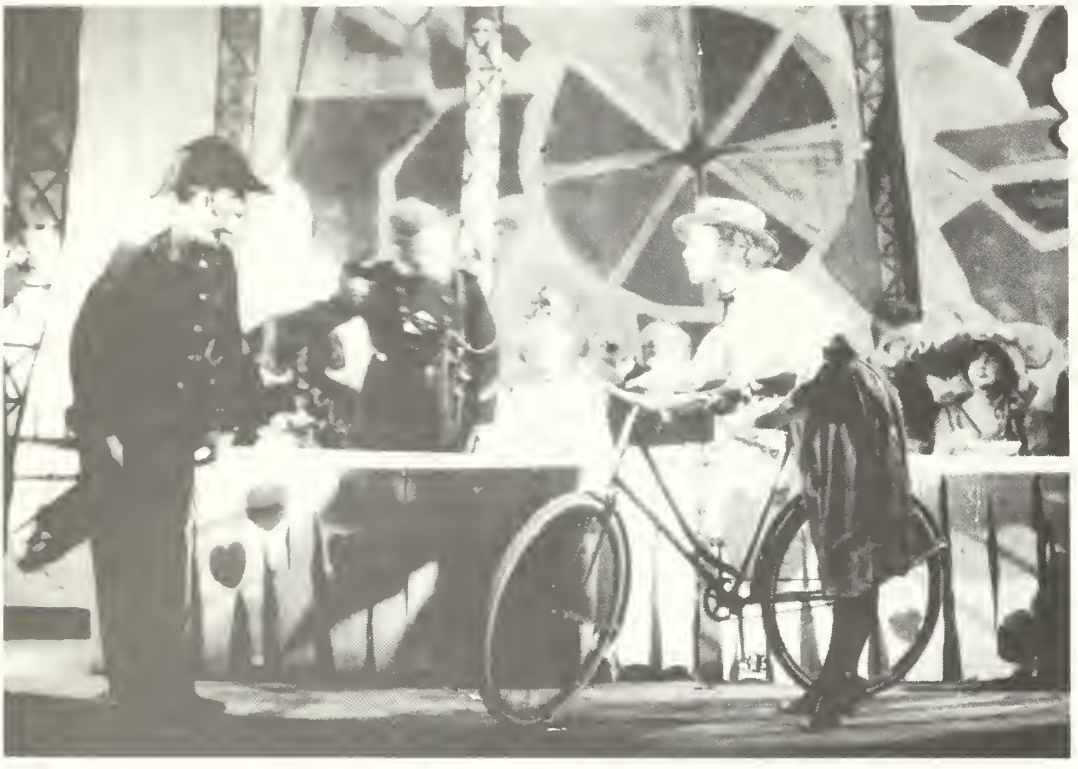
Already in love with Japan, Kitty, as she was known, fell in love with two Japanese art students, one right after the other. She filled pages describing them to Catharine. The second love, Taro, spoke of marriage. They spent the summer of 1929 together in her home in Castine, Maine. They read Lafcadio Hearn and haiku ("The fisherman's coat is wet, but not so wet as my sleeve with tears.") When Taro was summoned home by his family, he promised to send for her. A few months later, she received a letter from him saying that he was married. Through all the tears, Catharine Huntington was one of her mainstays. Their correspondence has been collected in *The Journals and Letters of the Little Locksmith.*

Both Taro and Kitty had died some years before I met Catharine, but she had not let go of the thread that bound them all together. Now I was about to become enmeshed in their web. The Japanese believe that once you have touched someone's life, you are always part of it.

"Why don't you look up Taro's widow," Catharine suggested when I told her I was leaving with my husband for two years in Japan. She wrote a letter of introduction to pave the way. Taro's wife proved to be an elegant Japanese woman, who spoke English, and was active in the dance and music world. We did not speak of Taro. In Japan one does not need to articulate what one is feeling for the other to understand. "Thoughts without words" was the title of the painting Taro had left with Kitty.

It was from another member of Taro's family, who would become a close friend, that I was able to piece together his story.

Coming as he did from an old, distinguished family of great wealth, it would have caused a scandal had he married outside his class, let alone a foreigner. A dutiful son was expected to accept an arranged marriage that was more about the needs of the clan than about love. Taro sacrificed his two loves—painting and Kitty—to carry out his filial obligations. He retired early from the world of finance, and spent his last years in seclusion. He shared with no one the depth of his depression; to the end his thoughts were without words.



courtesy Pilgrim Monument and Provincetown Museum

Catharine Huntington (as the cyclist) in *The Wedding Breakfast on the Eiffel Tower* by Jean Cocteau, April 1925.

Back in the States, I found Catharine jubilant because Whitfield Cook had written a play about those star-crossed lovers, whose passion was ahead of its time. There was a tryout in Philadelphia that went no further. Some years later, Linda Hunt, as diminutive as the Little Locksmith, became interested in the role. She met with Catharine and the playwright, but the project did not materialize.

Yet, even now, the web is stronger than ever. Catharine's grand-niece, Katie (as if in reparation for the sorrows of the Little Locksmith), married a young Japanese banker, and started her family in Tokyo. Catharine sent me the haiku she wrote on receiving a snapshot of them on an outing:

> "Children at a shrine.
> Fallen leaves tell of Autumn,
> But now Spring is here."

In the summer of 1964, Catharine rented a simple cottage, or as she put it, "a small shed" on Standish Street, not too far from the Playhouse. She chose it for the "Portuguese garden" where Phoneix (Moonlight's more congenial predecessor), could stroll outside on a long leash. We often sat in the garden, eating cucumber sandwiches (which mirculously tasted just like those on Pinckney Street), absorbed in talk of the plays they were doing that season.

Catharine was preparing for her part in the one-act play I had written for her—"A Web, A Thread, a String of a Teabag." It was scheduled for the middle of August on a bill with George Bernard Shaw's one-acter, "Village Wooing." I had, over many years of sitting on the Playhouse's hard benches, watched Catharine play serious roles in O'Neill, Ibsen, Tennessee Williams, and T.S. Eliot (among others), but I didn't realize that she was a natural comic actress until I saw her in Edward Albee's "The Sandbox." She had a fey quality, not unlike that of Billy Burke. I wanted to capture that.

Ionesco was all the rage at the time. In my absurdist play Catharine plays Wife, a proud Gold Star mother: "I hung that solid gold star/ On top of my family tree/ And mothers whose sons came back/ How they did envy me." Wife and Husband have the illusion that it is not too late to start life over. To celebrate their second honeymoon, they have invited everyone they've ever known to a tea party; the butcher, the baker, the undertaker; the woman who stepped on Wife's feet in the bus; the man who tried to sell Husband the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Wife explains: "We cannot afford to lose contact, no matter how brief. We're all in this thing together, connected somehow by a web . . . by a thread . . . by a string of a teabag. We must not cut the string . . ."

By midnight, the only one who shows up for tea is the mysterious Caller (Virginia Thoms), dressed in black. The play ends with her Moving Men removing everything from the house, in preparation for the next tenant. They also carry out Wife and Husband, who think it is a lark being laid out on the dining room table.

The *Cape Codder* review said Catharine Huntington "radiates charm under a large felt hat and reveals her great talent as a commediene." Of the playwright: "Like Ionesco, she regales you with the ridiculous, like Beckett, perplexes you with possible symbolisms." Our theater-going Wellfleet trash collecter put it this way: "I prefer your Ionesco to your Beckett."

Off stage, Catharine could not be removed from this world so easily. She came from a long-lived family. I remember telling her about the American spaceship that had just been launched with a message for any extraterrestrials it encountered. "It frightens me, all that space out there," she said. And then she spoke of her deceased Uncle James, who had founded the Order of the Holy Cross: "He promised he would intervene for me. I hope he doesn't forget."

When my book, *Twice Born, Memoirs of an Adopted Daughter,* came out in 1975, Catharine remarked "They say blood tells."

"What does it tell?" I asked. The book was about how hard it is to grow up not knowing your origins.

"I think it tells something," she replied. "It would have been hard for me not to know. In times of stress, I knew what kind of people I came from. Even though some live far away, I think I instinctively relate to them. Yes, blood tells something."

In early April, 1975, my uncle phoned me from Cincinnati, Ohio. "Come immediately. This time is surely the end." My adoptive mother, at eighty six, had been failing for the past year. With each summons I had dropped everything and taken the next plane out. I called Catharine, whom I was supposed to see that weekend,

I to break our date. She was disappointed. Without the Playhouse, she was restless. Her sturdy body was riddled with arthritis; everything had suddenly become "dim." She'd been looking forward to getting out to some plays. If there is a mother of the spirit, then, surely, Catharine was my mother. But she would have been insulted to have anyone cast her in such a role. She saw herself as a supporting player: suporting not only her ingenious director, Ed Thomen, and her versatile co-star in many productions, Virginia Thoms, but the young actors and actresses, the set designers, writers, directors and musicians, who stayed in touch, even after they had made names for themselves on a larger stage than hers.

"Oh dear," Catharine said when she heard I wasn't coming. "One should go on with one's plans. The living should continue with their lives." She paused. "Anyway, I don't think it's time yet."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, there is a saying in my family—I think my great aunt told me: 'March will search, April try, May will tell if we live or die'."

She pronounced search like "sarch"—the old English—so that it rhymed with March. Catharine's extensive family had left a legacy of such wisdom culled from generations of living and dying. Still, I couldn't take a chance. May was three weeks away. I had to go then.

Catharine's great aunt proved to be right. It was May that told.

In the late 1970s, when I was in Germany and Israel doing research for what would become my biography of Janusz Korczak, *The King of Children,* Catharine and I corresponded regularly. She was having trouble living alone. In one letter, she wrote: "I wish I could use this isolation for something creative." And in another: "Please picture if you could not hear well or see clearly or move with any real equilibrium. I can scarcely see to write this to you." But, as always, she could "treasure" news about the world outside—and especially the avant-garde theater world. I sent her details of George Tabori's daring adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice* in Munich. She savored the idea of thirteen Shylocks—all of them German actors—rushing about the stage.

When Catharine was in her nineties, she could no longer live alone. Her relatives arranged for her to enter the Sherrill House nursing home, where so many Beacon Hill women had gone before her. I hated taking the cab from the airport to that unfamiliar area of Boston, so far from the tranquil little garden on Pinckney Street that was her natural turf.

Her bed, in a room for four, was by the window in the rear. I found her sitting in a chair next to it. A curtain drawn along the other side of the bed gave us the illusion that we were alone. Catharine presided, as if over tea, at a small table with a telephone: it was her lifeline, the umbilical cord that connected her to her many friends out there.

The Sherill House had a well trained staff that seemed to appreciate Catharine. But time, which she had defeated until now, was now defeating her. Phone calls became more difficult. "I'm all shot to pieces . . . broken now," she said in one of them. "Everything's going. I can't hear you. My ears are ringing. The connection is no good."

I didn't have the heart to tell her when I heard that the Provincetown Playhouse burned to the ground in 1977. Torched by some delinquent teenagers in the dead of winter when the tourists are gone, and the town closes into itself. All of the wonderful old costumes, photographs and programs, and most of the collection of O'Neill memorabilia that Catharine had gathered with such care—destroyed. Tennessee Williams said of the fire: "Hundreds of theater people have lost their roots."

I don't know who broke the news, but she never revealed to me the pain it must have caused her. Much later, in a line appended to the end of a letter, she wrote that I.M. Pei had consented to judge the design contest for a proposed theater. It was never built for lack of funds.

For years I could not bring myself to walk down the narrow alleyway off Commercial Street, to where the Playhouse, much like a fisherman's hut or a sorcerer's palace, had sat perched on the wharf, communing with the sea. When I finally did, I saw that it took only the few cars parked there to fill up the hallowed space that had once contained all the moon-lit, dream-riven energy with which artists convey their eternal message: I am! You can be!

Toward the end, I would find Catharine's room empty and be directed to the solarium. There she was, lined up with all the other women in wheelchairs taking their afternoon tea or chocolate milk. I would greet her, and wheel her off to a private room.

She no longer asked: "How is Arturo?" Her lovely voice that could recite Shakespearean sonnets by the hour, was gone. It had been replaced by one that seemed to have no relation to her—a high piping

squeal. I sat on a couch opposite the chair. Shrill sounds came from her, as from a strangled bird. I got up and leaned over her.

"I want to die," I heard. "Help me, I want to die."

I realized that she was imprisoned in her body. Entombed. She was calling to me from deep inside to release her. I felt powerless. A traitor. I couldn't do anything. Where was Uncle James? He had promised to intervene for her. It was his job, not mine.

The last time I visited Catharine I had trouble finding her. I searched through the solarium, but didn't see her in the familiar row of wheelchairs. I went out to the nurse's station to inquire, and was assured that she was there. Returning, I scanned the identical chalk-white faces munching away on this and that, until I saw one more familiar than the rest sipping chocolate milk through a straw. As I stared, the features reassembled themselves into my lovely Catharine. Her wonderful blue eyes peered into mine. I wasn't sure she recognized me. I wheeled her to the other room where a volunteer joined us. She had been helping Catharine to communicate through writing.

"I am Betty," I wrote on a small piece of paper. Catharine studied it carefully. She smiled. I thought for a moment she might clap her hands. Then she took a pencil and wrote: "Betty. I remember."

Uncle James intervened in late February; she did not have to wait for May. "Thank you, Uncle James," I thought. "Thank you, for pulling the curtain down, at last."

I recalled one of those afternoons on Pinckney Street when Catharine told me her mother had asked her not to mourn for her when she died. "Think of it this way," she had said: "That I've just put aside a dress, something I've worn."

In her will, Catharine put aside something else; $500 for the Massachusetts Association Against the Death Penalty, in memory of Sacco and Vanzetti. ■

Betty Jean Lifton's latest book is *The King of Children* (Schocken), a biography of Janusz Korczak, the legendary Polish-Jewish doctor, writer, and educator, who gave his life to accompany the orphans of the Warsaw Ghetto to Treblinka. She is also the author of *Lost and Found, the Adoption Experience* (Harper & Row) and *A Place Called Hiroshima*, which comes out in paper this summer (Kodansha International).