

exactly where it started. For Taylor, feeling the weight of a living bird, this experience is a boost: "Keep moving toward life, not away from it."

With its elements of autobiography, Taylor's book is a model for a richer life. Bird books are typically organized by category: shorebirds, wading birds, raptors, songbirds, ducks. These categories are essential to understanding how birds inhabit the natural world. The world of birds is stitched into the fabric of ecosystems. Taylor's essays tell us something more personal and unique. We are each an ecosystem of perception. Noticing a bird and its behavior can open up a way of thinking.

Nature is here to make us more alive. The patterns of human life have paralleled nature's seasons for millennia. Taylor asks us to reconnect.

She claims the status of a novice, approaching each bird experience in a manner that reminds me of the "beginner's mind" of John Cage's *Zen*. The pursuit draws the birder away from the comfort of the familiar. Doubt may creep in, but the payoff is to see a hundred thousand cranes take flight or count birds as gray specks migrating in the night sky. The result finds us firmly centered, feet on the ground under a sky of awe. ■

MARK ADAMS is a cartographer and geologist for the National Park Service and exhibits at the Schoolhouse Gallery in Provincetown.

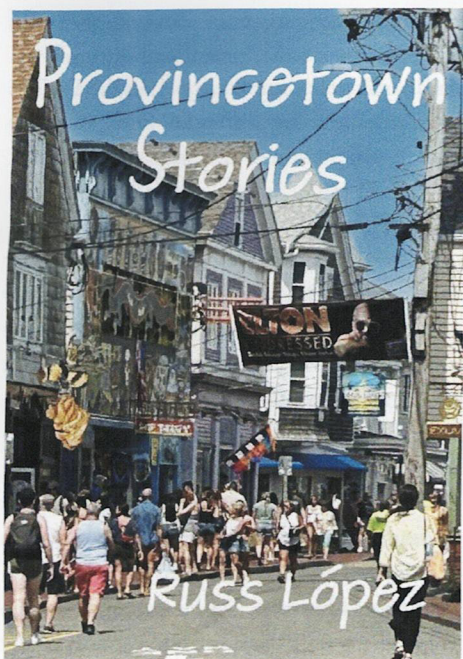
Provincetown Stories

By Russ López

Shamut Peninsula Press, 2026

A book review by Art Cohen

★ In this collection of short stories, the place is not made up, but the characters and most of the events are fictitious, and for anyone who has spent any time in Provincetown, all will feel real. Russ López's *Provincetown Stories* is ostensibly a collection of short stories, but in reality the book is one long love letter to the town. The characters are always beautiful, handsome, sexy, and incredibly promiscuous because they are irresistible. They are also gay, lesbian, straight, bisexual, bears, twinks, trans, and prostitutes. Sometimes, they are disappointments to their families or themselves. Many are obsessed with one



strange or self-defeating thing or another. All are seeking love and connection. They come to Provincetown because it encourages, loves, and celebrates their obsessions, the more challenging to convention, the better. They come to Provincetown to live their lives because they couldn't do that anywhere else.

A few characters appear in multiple stories like "Luna, the Queen of Land's End," whose feet hurt because "more than a century of bunions and blisters conspire to make every step a pain." Luna collects newcomers and guides them through the customs of Provincetown, offering a perfect description and a warning:

This town is full of misfits, nonconformists, and people who just never quite felt comfortable in old-fashioned society. If your quirks are making you itch, someone or something in P'town will scratch them for you. If you want attention, they will show-er you with looks and listens, and if you need to be left alone, they will respect your solitude. But this is not heaven, there are still mean people here; some like to say cruel things, and too many go out of their way to hurt others. There is no magic protective cover here." Luna smiled. "That said, this may be one of the few places in the world where people like us can exist without being constantly scrutinized. You can live here comfortably forever, if you like. And if eternity is like P'town, I am looking forward to it.

López's characters are living their own fantasies. They are in some ways delusional, but they also embody the way Provincetown thinks of itself. Some of the stories are built around characters with connections to the town, like the guy who imagines a deep

friendship with Tennessee Williams as if it were real. (The playwright spent several summers there in the 1940s.)

A handful of stories kept me reading, excited to find out if the characters would end up with each other. And there is Leeza, who sets newcomer Trish up with one hundred and one dates in search of true love with a nice twist ending. But most of them are not stories in the usual sense. They are portraits of the many and varied characters who collectively represent the town. Many of the stories are not built around plots, but just moments in people's lives. They are brief life-histories, summaries really, the kind of thing a writer might prepare as backstories for characters they plan on writing about in a novel or movie script. The characters are often obsessed, delusional, and stuck. Some end with a whimper.

Several of the stories emphasize Provincetown's delusions, like the effort to commemorate gay icon Judy Garland's "legendary" performance in Provincetown, or the war that leads to bitter feuds over the use of adverbs. (In fact, I question if Judy Garland ever performed in Provincetown, and although I've spent a lot of time there, no one has called me out for my grammar.)

The fictional characters live in a real place, and people who know Provincetown will recognize many of the places López mentions. He does change the names of some well-known businesses, I assume for legal reasons, which may seem a little weird for people familiar with Provincetown. But readers who know their way around will recognize the A House, the Gifford House, the Crown and Anchor, and many other locations because he provides enough detail to figure it out. And if you don't know Provincetown well, it doesn't matter, really. You get the point.

The writing is often funny and clever. Some of the stories describe the town, its history, and its features. It's full of fun trivia about the place and offbeat references to other writers, movies, and events. It uses stereotypes and tropes to describe the many characters and people, and the stories are uneven. I really enjoyed some and endured others. Anyone who knows Provincetown will find a lot of fun and many delights in this collection, and those who don't will want to visit after meeting its collective citizens, its collective image of itself, and its collective self-delusions. ■

ART COHEN is board chair of the Gay and Lesbian Review.