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ROCK POOL

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INTRODUCTION

Glimpsing the Underwater World



Une fois qu'elle vous a ensorcelé, la mer vous tient pour toujours dans son filet à merveilles.

**The sea, once it casts its spell,
holds you in its net of wonder for ever.**

Jaques-Yves Cousteau

Borders are places of contrasting extremes, places where the rules suddenly change and the unfamiliar beckons. Beaches mark one of the most extreme frontiers on our planet, the line between land and sea, where our everyday experience gives way to an alien world in which we are not equipped to survive. On the other side of the tideline, life is tough. There are extreme temperatures, salinity, pressure and currents to contend with: challenges that are exacerbated by fierce competition for survival among the inhabitants of the shore.

The marine world is largely an unexplored one. It is easier to trek to the Poles or to scale the highest peaks than it is to wander the deepest seabeds. Even our shallowest waters are mostly known only to divers. Yet twice each day, for a few short hours, the sea's protective cover slips away. The border moves back and allows us to walk into this curious realm, where every creature has a remarkable story to tell, from the common limpet to the curled octopus. What we know is astounding, and there is much still to be discovered.

With every step I take down the beach, I am heading further into the seabed. I am trespassing in the marine world. More than once I have forgotten my place, becoming entranced by my exploration of distant rocks and kelp beds, finally looking up to realise that the water level has changed, that a current is flowing through gaps in the rock and that my way back to shore will soon be flooded. Heart pounding, feet flailing on seaweeds and slipping on rocks, I scramble to beat the flooding tide, hurrying to reach dry land before the sea cuts me off.

Afterwards, I tell myself that my panic was irrational, that there was no need to rush, but it is a fear I cannot overcome. Even on the calmest day the sea's power is immense, and I cannot shake the knowledge that this world is not mine. Neither can I shake the fascination it holds.

There is a beach that never fails to make me happy. It isn't in the Cornwall tourist brochures and you can't book in to a hotel there. There are no cafés, not even a road, but that is its charm. To visit Porth Mear, on the wild north coast near the stone stacks of Bedruthan Steps, is to take a flight from the highest, springy-turfed cliff tops to the hidden depths of the ocean.

I first knew it was a special beach when I was at primary school and a friend told me that his uncle had caught a giant

goby there. Or he might have said guppy; we didn't know much about fish then. Either way, it was a magical creature, with Mick Jagger lips and piggy eyes, and his uncle had scooped it from a pool so deep you could swim there if you dared.

Porth Mear was walkable from my home in Mawgan Porth with a bit of determination and a *Star Wars* flask of pink milkshake to keep me going, but it was easier if I could persuade my parents to take the car to the valley head and park alongside the Cornish hedge next to the wheat field. Every gap in the stacked and herring-boned slates sprouted with soft greenery, festooned with alexanders, cornflowers or valerian, depending on the season.

Beside the lonely whitewashed farmhouse that seemed to belong in a *Famous Five* mystery, a slate stile built into the wall crossed to the fields. The gate beside the stile was always unlocked, but I never went through it. Every time, I climbed that stile to secure the first unbroken view of the sea through the plunging sides of the valley, my lungs expanding to take in the Atlantic air. A splash of deep blue framed by towering cliffs rose to meet me as I descended, past the herd of warm-breathed brown cows to the tall marsh reeds below, then across the footbridge to the open beach.

Between me and the sea lay rocks, and between the rocks lay pools of clear water lined with seaweeds of every shape and colour: greens, pinks, browns and even blues. Within these pools anything was possible. During my first childhood visits, most of the wildlife was glimpsed for an instant and lost to view just as quickly. Fish zipped away and crabs tucked themselves under stones, fleeing my eager footsteps and splashing boots, but those moments, so brief they seemed imagined, never failed to thrill. As I grew, I learned to move more slowly and watch more closely, but the flash of a fish's flank reflecting the sun as it swims away still quickens my heart.

In an ever-changing world, the beach is a constant. It is a paradox, changing with every tide, every season, every storm, yet

always the same. It is like an old friend, every part of it reassuring and familiar, but still able to surprise me. Over the years and decades I have often returned to this beach, and every time I uncover something new.

The ocean does not give up its secrets easily. This is part of its charm. The best pools are those most rarely uncovered by the tide, those that appear only when the moon is new or full and aligned with the sun to exert maximum gravitational pull on the seas.

I have never found a giant goby (or indeed a guppy) at Porth Mear. You rarely find what you set out to look for in the rock pools, but I have caught my breath as the shells around me come alive, with strange hermit crabs poking out their black and white chequered eyes on stalks; I have crawled under dark rocks to see scarlet and gold cup corals glowing like fires; and I have wavered many times at the edge of a pool so deep it draws me in, wondering what might lurk hidden there.

There are pools that you can only reach when the seas are calm and sleeping. It can take many visits to obtain the right conditions. The sea rarely falls quiet. The waves that pound this shore build up as they travel vast distances and hurl themselves against the rocks. If you set a course west from this bay, you would find nothing but open ocean until you hit Newfoundland.

Porth Mear is lovely on any day, holding you between its rocky ledges and playing out its ever-changing concert of sounds, from the roars and hollow explosions of waves against its caverns and gullies in winter to the gurgling of the stream over rocks and the trill of skylarks in summer. Even on the feeblest neap tide, the shore buzzes and clicks with life. Limpets scour the rocks clean of algae, crabs froth in every dark recess of the rocks, keeping their gills moist, and sea spiders paddle through the seaweed on their delicate limbs.

Nothing, however, is more incredible than when the conditions unite to roll back the edge of the sea and reveal the bed of encrusted rocks and swaying kelp forests beneath. At these times, and for a short while only, you can walk on the seabed as though you are diving without air tanks.

When you enter this world of lobsters lurking in their caves, of bright anemones spreading their tentacles and of a thousand alien creatures living their alien lives right in front of you, it truly feels like you are breathing underwater.

Wherever I go, I seek out beaches. They are woven through my life; the fabric that holds me together, inseparable and steadying. Beaches are a changing constant in a constantly changing world, lingering in my thoughts even when I find myself far from the sea. Every walk through the rock pools, from the tideline to the low water mark, takes me on a journey into the marine world and challenges my understanding of my own world and of myself.

At the inhospitable upper edges of the shore, I witness the extraordinary tenacity of animals struggling to survive; struggles that dwarf whatever petty annoyances I may face in my everyday world. Here, all that counts is the present moment. The change of perspective can be dizzying, as though my reflection has changed into something I recognise better: the curious child I have never quite left behind. When I look closer, everything about seemingly unmoving animals like limpets, barnacles and anemones is mind-bendingly strange. The sole focus of the creatures that live in this extreme habitat is survival: not to be battered by waves, desiccated by the sun or to have their legs bitten off by a fish. Life, in the end, is all that matters.

As I move out to the midshore, I feel increasingly aware that every creature here is perfectly adapted and I am the alien. Even the tiniest blob of jelly is able to cope with being endlessly

submerged and exposed, fending off attacks with weapons and bioengineering that make human inventions seem feeble by comparison. Camouflage, armoury, chemistry and cunning abound in every pool.

By the time I reach the lower tidemark, the astounding diversity becomes overwhelming. Nothing here resembles my terrestrial world and I move with cautious fascination among the thick turfs of colourful unmoving sponges, sea mats and sea squirts. It is a place of boundless discovery that calls me back time and again. This is the gateway between the shore and the deep, a place that fills me with a mixture of curiosity and fear. Anything is possible.