

# BETWEEN THE SPECIES

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## **At the Seashore** Josephine Donovan

It was a cool fall day. The sea chopped against the rocks in crisp rhythmic strokes, each time erupting in rolls of foam that furled down the shoreline like cascading dominoes. It was October 1, the first day dogs were allowed on the beach after the summer season. All the vacationers had gone back to their lives in cities to the south. We had the beach once more to ourselves—me and Daisy, my dog, who trotted on ahead.

It was low tide. Tangles of seaweed—rippled rubbery gold kelp, knobby bladderwrack, fringed Irish moss, black skate egg cases, fancied by some as mermaid purses—were heaped on the shore like mounds of dark hair. I inspected the jetsam carefully as I walked along, looking for the odd treasure—a scoured lavender-green sea urchin shell with its perfectly symmetrical alignment of spine holes, a peach lobster claw with white teeth shaped like mine, a unique piece of driftwood. All stripped by the sea of pretense, worn down to their bare essence. One couldn't edit out, however, the contaminating presence of human pollution—the odd bleached coke can caught in the tangle, a plastic spoon, a finished board with rusty nails, flaunting themselves like unwanted ads.

I passed two seagulls sitting near the edge of the beach, as always facing the wind, near where the tall willowy marsh grass begins. They eyed me warily. One was a striking black and white; the other with mottled brown streaks. I was the intruder.

The sky was bleached a pale blue. Occasional wispy clouds drifted overhead. The sand stretched before me a smooth gellid sheen, unmarked by human footprints, except my own, which trail like shadows behind me. A shore breeze prevailed but the tide would soon turn.

Daisy was playing a game of tag with the incoming waves. She would prance in close and then dance back as the wave lap up toward her. If it touched her she would jump back and bark. I picked up a piece of driftwood and tossed it for her to chase but she was too involved in her game to respond, other than to look up at me and hesitate momentarily before resuming her play.

I sat down on the beach content to absorb myself in the rhythmic rumble of the tide, the salty scents of the sea, and the brilliant light sparkling off the surface in erratic blinding glints. You could see the islands in the distance, and the lighthouse guarding the harbor to my left stood silently, its services unnecessary for the while.

After Daisy tired of her game she raced up beside me and shook her entire body from head to toe, as was her wont, showering me with spray. She stood in front of me panting and smiling with enthusiasm for the day and in appreciation for my having had the sense to bring us here again, her favorite place. She then settled down beside me.

After we sat quietly for a while, the seagulls waddled closer, observing us curiously. They knew humans often had food or left it behind them. Perhaps here was an opportunity. Daisy, who had seen many a gull in her time, merely looked back with mild interest as they circled us at a distance.

“Let’s go,” I said to Daisy, stretching my legs. I wanted to walk. At its far end the beach transformed into a rocky shoreline I wanted to explore. As few people ventured there, you could sometimes find unusual items thrown up by the sea, and I needed the exercise. The ebbing tide exposed sandy flats around the slippery rocks where one could keep one’s footing. You could see the tide line by the fringe of dense brown moss that began there and by the barnacles that clustered below it.

One time—last spring—while sitting very still, I was startled to see a rock in front of me move. I watched it closely for a while and decided, yes, there were barely perceptible movements, vibrations even, coming from the barnacles. I got up and moved closer so that my eyes weren’t but inches from a patch of encrusted barnacles clinging to the rock just below the surface of the water, determined to catch the slightest motion. I refrained from blinking for fear of missing it.

Why, they’re alive, I thought in amazement after minutes of intent scrutiny. I could make out tiny openings like mouths in the barnacles’ surface. And, sure enough, they were expanding and contracting in rhythmic strokes. Why, they’re breathing, I realized in astonishment. What I’d thought to be dead matter was in fact a living organism, something like myself. I was in the presence of another

consciousness. They were perhaps looking back at me this very moment. Could they know that I was there? I left the beach that day with a sense of respectful awe, feeling a special kinship with these mutely pulsating creatures.

This day I wanted to recheck my discovery. I approached the rocks with a new awareness, walking gingerly among them, sensing an aura of aliveness I hadn't felt before, as if a thousand eyes were peering at me from the rocks. A sudden excitement rose in me as I bent over to inspect the first barnacles I encountered. Sure enough I could see once again the patient bellows pumping pumping pumping.

I wanted to say something to them, like "hang in there, friend." I want to tell Daisy, "look, they're like us." But, of course, such thoughts were silly. "Friend" was not the right word. There wasn't a right word. Comrade? Ally? No. What we shared was living being and a desire to go on pumping.

I wandered further among the rocks, rounding a bend finally which cut us off from the beach proper. We were entering a rugged zone where few humans strayed. There was another stretch of sandy beach further on, I knew, which we would reach after we passed through this strip of rough terrain. Daisy looked at me questioningly. She preferred the smooth sand to clambering around and over the rocks. "Just a bit longer," I said. We circled around a small pocket cove, on the other side of which the terrain leveled off into the sandy stretch I was headed for.

Just as we reached the tip of the cove, however, I saw a strange dark object lying along the water's edge. Daisy ran toward it. From afar it looked like

a long fat log or planking of the kind that still occasionally drift ashore from shipwrecks far away. Or perhaps an immense black boulder toppled on its side. Closer, it seemed more like an inflated dinghy or some balloon or blimp material made of black synthetic threads. Then I noticed Daisy backing off, her tail down. She scrambled up a rocky incline and stood watching it, keeping her distance. White foam was oozing from one end; flies were buzzing around, and a small bird flew off as I approached. Gradually the black shape began to register in my mind. It was the shape of a whale: the head swollen, the body narrowing to a flattened fluke. It was dead. It was a small dead whale lying on its side, the water washing gently over it.

I caught my breath and stepped back. *Something has happened.* Sadness swept through me. Something has killed this baby whale. I looked about but there was no one. We were alone. I was uncertain what to do. What was it doing here? Why had no one reported it? Why hadn't officials tagged it and carted it off? Shouldn't someone have notified the police or the Boston Aquarium?

I finally realized I must be the first to discover it. Only I was aware of its presence. Only I in the whole world. I and Daisy. I had a strange feeling that in that moment that only we three were alive in the world—for the whale radiated a kind of being. I suddenly felt the vastness of the sea and sky. No one else existed. Only we shared the secret of existence—only we, the sea, the clouds, the barnacles; only we were being allowed to share in this numinous knowledge. It seemed unusually still, as if we were in some vast open-air cathedral at the

holiest of moments, as if I were in the presence of a sacred object that was imparting its blessing upon me, with the sky, the sea nodding in approval. I stood quietly for some time, feeling humbled, my head bowed as if in prayer, receiving a special wordless grace.

Suddenly I heard a clucking sound behind me. I whirled around.

An old woman was standing on the rocky crest next to Daisy, silhouetted by the sun. Her head and shoulders were bent over, her face in shadow.

“Must have been a baby,” she said, gesturing at the whale.

I looked back at the whale.

“Poor thing,” she added, making her way painstakingly down the rocky incline. One hand clutched a gnarled cane and in the other was a plastic K-Mart shopping bag half full.

She had short white hair and was wearing heavy boots, a long skirt and a heavy surplus army jacket much the color of the bladderwrack seaweed. As she approached I could make out her wrinkled weathered face and when she turned into the light, her eyes were the same color as the sea and sky—or was it their reflection?.

Her movements seemed labored and she was out of breath. I wanted to offer her a hand but she seemed able to manage on her own and I didn’t want to offend by showing I’d noticed her frailty.

“Been there for some time,” she said, turning toward the whale and setting her bag down.

“Yes,” I said. “It must have washed in with the tide.”

“Let her go out with it,” the old woman declared emphatically. She pointed out with her cane toward the sea’s horizon and her gaze settled there intently for some time.

“Don’t turn her in, whatever you do,” she continued, turning back urgently to me, as if I’m were an untrustworthy turncoat about to reveal the whale to hostile authorities who would intrude and destroy.

“They’ll just chop her up,” she said, “tear her apart.”

I reflected momentarily on her injunction. It’s true, I thought, they’d dissect her, try to find out what killed her. I imagined how it will be. The police would arrive. They’d ribbon off the area. Cranes would be brought in. Television stations would get wind of it, staking out cameras up and down the coast. They’d yank the body up in the air unceremoniously and dump it in the back of a truck. A Channel 4 helicopter would hover over for a close-up. They’d drive it on the interstate to Boston. CNN would follow behind with a trailing camera. Everyone would stare. Her dignity would be destroyed. And when they were through, being economical, they’d feed the pieces to the sharks who swim in the Aquarium pool.

No, the woman was right. Let her be.

“She belongs here,” the woman repeated urgently, looking at me intently, uncertain what I had decided. “Let her return to the sea and sky. That’s where we all go sooner or later.”

“It’s all right with me,” I said

“So, you won’t call them in?” she asked to make sure I understood I’d made a promise. She had an insistent croaking voice that reminded me of a scolding crow. “You won’t call the cops?”

“No,” I said “Let her be.”

The woman relaxed visibly and turned away from me, as if a crucial mission had been accomplished.

The tide continued to rise. It might soon envelope the whale, I reflected, perhaps lifting her up and buoying her out to sea, to a proper burial.

I wanted to resume my walk on the sandy stretch that lay on the other side of the crest. As the woman appeared to be heading in the same direction, we walked side by side. When we reached the sand, I asked her if she came here often. She said she did. She was a self-appointed one-person clean-up team, she said, picking up trash left behind by thoughtless humans.

“What a violation,” she exclaimed. “Every coke can, every bottle, every scrap of paper--a sacrilege. I clean it up. That’s the least I can do. It’s my mission. I liberate the beach from all this—coins, cans, bottles, plastic—all the detritus of so-called civilization. It shouldn’t be like this.” She shook her head.

I wanted to ask her how old she was and where she lived, but I thought that might seem a violation. Was she homeless? Where did she live? Her outfit looked thrown together and it was clear she rarely bathed or changed it. Yet she was well-educated, it appeared, and spoke in an articulate manner.

I resolved, however, as we walked along, that like the other mysteries of the day, I would leave this woman alone, in her place, unexplained, undissected,



another enigmatic presence like the barnacles and the whale before whom I'd felt such awe.

After we walked in silence a while--one or the other of us occasionally bending to pick up for her trash bag (for I volunteered to help)--she paused and turned back toward the ocean, then suddenly sat down on the sand, just beyond the tide line, gazing out to sea. She seemed to slip into a trance. I hesitated whether to leave her there and continue on. But after several moments she pulled out of her meditation and turned toward me with a hesitant smile, waving me closer, as if she'd decided she trusted me and was about to impart an important secret.

"I was a whale once myself, you know," she said matter-of-factly.

"Oh yeah?" I said.

"On my mother's side. Maternal descent. Mitochondrial DNA."

"Your mother was a whale?"

"Yes," the woman nodded, rearranging her bag next to her, smoothing her skirt, and repositioning her stick, all the while staring out to sea, her face concentrated as if intent on telling her story as accurately as possible.

"She deposited me along shore years ago not far from here." The woman gestured in a northerly direction. "She was afraid I wouldn't be accepted by her kin."

"The other whales?"

She nodded.

"And your father? Was he a whale too?"

“No,” she said, “my father was of Irish descent. Oh, he could tell a whale of a story, though,” she said, chuckling at her pun. “He could spin a tale with the best of them.”

“Was he the one who told you about your mother?” I asked, inadvertently revealing my skepticism.

“No,” the woman continued, ignoring my cynical innuendo, “no, that I remember myself. I remember crawling up on the beach and looking around. Just a little tyke, you know. It was a whole new world for me. To feel the solidity of land, you see, was a new experience, after the insubstantiality of the sea. Quite a change.”

“I imagine,” I said.

“No, I don’t think you can imagine what it’s like to live in the fathomless deeps, nothing solid to lean upon, unless it were your mother’s back, always in suspension, sometimes arching up toward the bright green surface, sometimes diving deep into the black night, sometimes just floating along by your mother’s side. Sea-shouldering whales we were.”

I stared out at the waves.

“Such a peaceful life,” she sighed. “Oh, occasionally a motor would churn overhead disrupting our chatter, spewing noxious gas fumes the way they do, but not often. And the harpoonist demons are gone now, at least in these waters. No more Moby-Dick. It was a good life.”

A couple of gulls settled down near the woman eyeing her curiously, as if they wanted to hear her tale too. Daisy also seemed unusually quiet; perhaps

tired out by our stroll, she lay beside me in the sand but with her eyes alert, paying close attention.

“I’ve never felt at home here,” the woman continued. “You see,” she said, plucking up an arm of her jacket. “I’ve never fit in here. They never accepted me. I wish I could go back, but it’s too late for that now.”

“My mother may still be out there,” she went on. “Sometimes when the tide is in I think I hear her cry for me, you know, in the cooing tones whales make to one another. I hear it in the wind. She’s calling me back. She thought it was for my own good—to leave me here. Like all parents she wanted the best for me. She wanted to give me the chance for a better life. That’s why she did it. But she soon realized what a mistake she’d made, and you can hear her cries of lament, if the wind is right and the tide high.”

As always when I hear a friend tell a sad tale, I tried to think of a bright side, something to cheer her up. Think of the richness of human civilization, I wanted to say. Think what you would have missed. Think of language, the arts. But I sensed that these had passed her by.

“No,” she said, interrupting my thoughts, “that’s where I belong. We took care of one another out there.”

The tide was reaching its high water mark, just inches from the woman’s shabby boots.

“Perhaps you better move,” I said. “You might get wet.”

At that the woman let out a strange, short laugh, as if to suggest I hadn’t gotten the point of her story, that no human could.

I glanced at my watch. The woman was compelling. I wanted to stay, yet I had a dinner appointment inland. I would soon have to leave. Daisy caught my shift in attitude and jumped to her feet. I stood up, brushing the sand from my pants. The woman seemed lost in thought.

I wanted to say good-bye and to thank her but words seemed frivolous. But she didn't look up or acknowledge my leave-taking, so I said nothing.

As I turned away, however, she said loudly and angrily, her words almost lost in the wind: "Humans have forgotten the earth's great truth: a living spring pulsates in us all. That's all you need to know."

After I retrieved my car from the parking lot about a mile away, I drove back to where I'd left the woman, regretting how in so doing I was committing a violation myself, contaminating the clean beach air with the noxious fumes she'd so decried. But I wanted to make sure she was still there and OK. I parked by the side of the road and ran back to the water's edge. She was nowhere in sight, but footprints heading in a northerly direction, disappearing in the dark seaweed hair thrown up by the tide, were still evident in the damp sand, not yet obliterated by the surf.