

Ebb and Flow

DEBORAH CUMMINS

Summer days begin early on this island in Maine. Even when fog blankets the coast and coves, obscures the spruce tops and thumping lobster boats putting out from the harbor, I rise at dawn. I make coffee, feed the dog, linger a bit in the garden to deadhead and prune or to water the planted pots on the deck. Before embarking on the rest of my morning, the best of which include a few hours of writing, I put away last night's dishes, make the bed. I straighten.

I descend from a long line of straighteners, women who daily aligned, put things right, performed what I presumed back in the '50s was a necessary housewifely art, like pressed handkerchiefs and Sunday pot roasts. Often, my mother's straightening took on a near Calvinistic zeal. It produced tangible results—a polished tabletop, a dusted *Encyclopedia Britannica* bookshelf, a counter cleared of all but the percolator, cookie jar, and rotary phone. But other days, dust rag in hand, she moved through our red brick ranch on Oakdale Avenue in an almost aimless wander, as though with her attempts to straighten, something inside her was expanding, allowing for an *un*-straightening.

By the time I took any notice of her ritual, I had begun to climb alone into my primitive backyard tree house and lose myself to daydreams and adolescent yearnings. I was still years away from understanding how in such housewifely gestures my mother found it possible to withdraw into herself, free there to contemplate whatever she wished, travel wherever consciousness might take her. To my mind, mothers and daydreamers were still worlds apart.

I wasn't taught to straighten. Unlike other tasks—ironing blouses, for example, with her directive to always start with the collars—the command

“Go straighten your room” came with only vague instruction. In it, however, dwelled specific expectation, and the understanding the unlikely had occurred—a tornado had dropped down on our house and blown with singular mayhem through my room. Unenthused, I picked up, stashed, stacked, and stowed. I took none of the pleasure I now do in laying my hands on favorite objects—polished rocks from Boom Beach, a local potter’s small vases glazed in that dusky sunset violet the sky takes on just before all light over the Camden Hills is extinguished. Now, in my own actions I recognize my mother’s ritual, how she lingered before the open shelves of the dining room hutch, arranging her flow blue transferware and Old Willow–patterned plates. Some mornings, a bit like her, I drift. In a doorway, I pause to admire how the light, fixed in a particular moment—Octavio Paz’s “time thinking about itself”—gilds the petals of a white rose in a glass on the sill.

Straightening has, of course, its practical sides. Behind a framed photograph I find the lost earring. I discover while restacking magazines the mark a wet vase has made on a table. I renew my love of a forgotten object. I honor the beauty of a made thing. Striving for effects, I clear a space around a blue bowl of oranges and make them, to my eye, more appealing. I suppose I could worry that I’m succumbing to the tyranny of inanimate objects, but I prefer to believe straightening helps make the spaces I inhabit more beautiful, a not-so-unworthy result from what is largely seen as a mostly gender-specific pursuit. Or, as colorfully observed by writer John Fowles—with men, it’s the “challenging of getting,” with women “the elaboration of the got.”

No apologies. I’m neat. I need straightened surroundings. I require a tranquil place from which to leave and return, launch and retreat. I’m certainly mindful of the writing that doesn’t get done when I spend time and energy attending to tasks lacking any real urgency. I don’t thumb my nose at such a concern. But as I clear and open physical spaces in a drawer or on a shelf or desktop, it’s as if physical and psychological spaces open up in me, places where lines or phrases begin to trickle in, like the ebb’s merest seepage when the tide first turns. And though it’s been said that only amidst disorder do muses stroll, might they not from time to time in a surprise visit appreciate a cleared path?

Most important, I straighten in an attempt to create order. My husband may stack his shirts on our closet shelf regardless of type, season, or color, but I encourage them into straight stacks. His desk is awash with files, envelopes,

clipped articles, and letters, but he commandeers them like regimented soldiers into tidy rows, all so perfectly aligned, the right angles could've been the work of a T-square. To my way of looking, that almost works.

In my straightened house, I may be tempted to think that I alone am the controlling principle. Perhaps over mere objects I am. But even that notion seems refuted by the evidence of our junk drawer, that burgeoning, almost life-of-its-own growth of receipts, ticket stubs, odd screws, hooks, coupons, rubber bands, and obsolete appliance manuals.

For all its often overwhelming beauty, the northeastern Atlantic can be wild, unpredictable, an alien and dangerous place. Wherever I am on this island where for 14 years I've spent most of my summers, some part of its waters is in walking distance. From almost every room in this house I see it, the reminder of a powerful and potentially disordering force.

Deep water has always scared me. Otherwise fairly athletic, I'm a poor and clumsy swimmer. I possess no skills at pool or beach as I do on diamond, court, or track. Since childhood, I watch with envy as family and friends dive and move through water with the confidence of a dolphin or seal. On the rare occasions I find myself in deep water, I feel just an arm stroke away from being sucked under. To reside in all my puniness at the edge of the sea's indifferent immensity and to know here joy and peace sometimes still comes as a surprise to me.

Clearly, I didn't anticipate the pull of the sea, its complexities and contradictions that attracted—attracts still—a flailing swimmer from the Midwest. Nor did I expect the northeast Atlantic's many gifts, chief among them its unrelenting tides.

With a reliability that puts to shame any clock in my house, tides, at specific times, heave and collapse. They empty then fill coves and harbors, reveal bars and small offshore islands accessible on foot but only for the narrow window of time a tidal cycle allows. They strand boats on their moorings, or maroon boaters who turn too late for passage out of a narrow tidal cove. Many times, I've watched amateur paddlers go ashore at nearby tiny Heart Island and fail to pull their kayaks above the high-tide line, so that later my neighbor or I often hear them halooing for help.

Day and night, in all seasons and weather, tides alter this coastline, expose tidal pools and vast mudflats depended upon by the creatures who

hunt there—gulls and wild mink and men who carry hods and rakes. The difference between a tidal cove and a lake, the old saying goes, is when you return, the lake is exactly where you left it.

Like a boater in foreign waters studying nautical charts, who must memorize the locations of channel markers and bell buoys, I had to acquire new language when learning about the island's tides. The outgoing ebb. The incoming flood. The sluggish neap. Slack tide—that brief period of in-between—the equivalent, in tide-parlance, of time standing still. Although, even then, movement, a drift and sway.

Behind all this orchestration of movement is, of course, the moon, which, simply put, pulls toward it the closest of earth's water and pushes away the water on the earth's far side. In what appears to us as shape-shifting phases more than 200,000 miles away, the moon adheres to a rigid schedule, and of the tides, demands a similar, to-the-minute, chartable precision.

Once, I thought spring tides with their greatest extremes of high and low levels referred to a season. But the causes behind them relate to astronomy, how and when and to what degree the moon either tugs or shoves. Occurring around a full or new moon phase, a spring tide's waters brim, as though with a newly acquired energy. They "spring" forward. Perhaps a more colorful if inaccurate measurement of a spring tide's swing is the promise a recent houseguest made when departing for a low-tide walk on the shore: "I'll be back when my butt gets wet."

Averaging 11 feet, our island tides are impressive. But consider those Down East. In some places there, tides rise and fall as much as 30 feet. The "main tide" running from the shore and islands can move at speeds up to eight or ten knots, making it all but impossible for lobstermen to haul traps in anything other than slack tide.

Unlike them, I don't live by the tides. I'm not a fisherman wrestling tidal currents, or a clammer working mudflats. Still, I rely on tides. They're often a gauge of my day. They help create its rhythms, determine when I'm likely to take a break and visit the shore or walk the narrow finger of an exposed bar. There, in the small pocket of time I've been given before the incoming tide returns and reclaims, they demand awareness, a concentrated attention. So, too, tidal constancy connects me to the world. Daily, I'm aware of ebb or flow, how each incrementally shifts our shorelines, alters my view. I look up from my desk, and the amount of change tells me the time. I awake and listen

on a windless summer night, know in slap or murmuring slide whether the tide is in advance or retreat. In each is the assurance the cosmos is still intact.

And such supreme straighteners the tides can be. Daily at work on the shore, a high tide sweeps in and routinely attempts to tidy up all the messy evidence of a seemingly endless banquet another retreating tide leaves behind. Each cycle arranges, rearranges. Presents something new. But it clears, takes away, too—like the treasure of a nearly complete heron skeleton I discovered one morning on our shoreline, gone the next. Tides straighten. They take and give. Leave and return. And in them, always, flux.

For all they might signify or deliver, there's no ceremony when a tide first turns. When the day is still and a cove is quiet, there's no big drama in the incoming tide, even with the push of the sea behind it, although potential tumult dwells there, ready to be assisted by the slightest shift in wind or weather. Nor might it seem like much drama resides within the little tidal pools revealed by the ebb. But it does.

A guide to tidal zones finer than the late Rachel Carson's has probably yet to be found. Her words still masterfully instruct us to consider even the smallest of tidal pools as miniature seas, the adjoining exposed flats and neighboring tidal shorelines little communities of activity. In them, small dramas, a part of the ancient continuum, are enacted daily. Mostly they're old stories—something being eaten by something in danger of being eaten. Whatever the narrative thread, it's the absence or presence of water that unravels it, not light or dark, dawn or dusk.

Not surprisingly, most intertidal creatures are of necessity linked. But the rules governing them are often neither kind nor just. A sea star gropes its slow way up to the high-tide line to feast, but only at its peril. A herring gull patiently pursues an ebbing tide to catch, then hoist above some shell-shattering rocks a hapless mollusk, only to have it snatched by a lazier but quicker gull. Or, even worse, by that king of shoreline opportunists, a crow.

To survive the alternate land and water worlds tides create twice daily, true tidal creatures have had to adapt. The green crab has learned to scuttle into the rockweed's messy closet and duck behind heavy, dripping folds to wait out the ebb. Perhaps at some point in its evolution, the pale sand shrimp shelved in a neat stack its more colorful shirt and now sports conservative garb in colors native to its habitat. The less particular hermit crab, on the other

hand, merely rummages in the shoreline's junk drawer of flotsam—amidst sea-glass bits, bitter ends of washed-ashore rope, a few iron-caked bolts, and the remnants of a shorebird's recent lunch for whatever empty armoring shell he can scramble into and claim as his own.

On the uppermost reaches of the high-tide zones, even in spots where only the surf's occasional spray is enough to keep them wet, barnacles offer few signs of active life. Once situated, they don't budge from the porch. Fixed there, they appear to all but the most discerning eye to snooze beneath their coolie-shaped sun hats until, like a pizza delivery guy, the sea hands over the next meal. Nearby, periwinkles in astonishing numbers thrive, claiming as home every imaginable rock, seam, and crevice. Few creatures are less dramatic than a grazing periwinkle, but a large population of them scraping about for food—albeit imperceptibly—can, over time, erode rocks, deepen tidal pools. Recently, I read about a 16-year study of a tidal pool in which periwinkles altered the rock bottom by three-eighths of an inch—the equivalent, more or less, of the earth's major erosive forces of rain, frost, and flood.

Further into the mid-tidal zone, the simple architectural lines of a limpet's cone-shaped shell belie the genius of its precise engineering. As the tides push and pull, a limpet only has to fasten itself to a rock face, shut tight its operculum, and hold on as water washes over its sloped roof. The more forceful the waves, the more firmly the limpet is pressed into place. Aristotle was among the first to point out that a limpet, even if looking every bit as much the lounge lizard as the barnacle, actually goes afield to feed. As the tide rises, it wanders nearby rocks. Prior to the ebb, however, the limpet returns, often by the same path, and always to the same precise place, its home made as recognizable by a particular depression or scar as does a welcome mat or the color of shutters to the owner of a clapboard Cape.

For every creature that survives the shoreline's daily drama, who can say how many don't? The number may be unknown, but not for lack of evidence. With each ebb tide, the shore is strewn with the debris of the once living—bleached shells of whelks and moon snails, split carapaces of green crabs, shattered purple and white remnants of sea urchins, the claws of rock crabs and an occasional lobster, the unhinged halves of surf clams and mussels, skeletal bits of seabirds and fish, the larger bones of, perhaps, a seal. Tangled in the heaps of black wrack are pulverized bits of whatever once swam, crawled,

crept, siphoned, and spit, and which in death has been shattered, pummeled, dragged. An “arena of mortality,” in the words of poet Mark Doty. A junk drawer’s jumble of chance and contingency. Of universality and certainty.

There are so many casualties in the tidal zones. So many deaths. The numbers, were they known, would be staggering. Sadly, with almost every walk I take on the tide-exposed shoreline below our house, I add to it. As though intended as a carpet, periwinkle-encrusted rocks stretch out in all directions. When the tide is out, it’s almost impossible for me to step anywhere and not hear a telltale crunch. Heavy-footed and too often clumsy, I scramble over rockweed beneath which crabs or sea stars might be waiting out the ebb, or where a large moon snail, en route to its lunch, has protracted its fleshy, plowing foot—none of which can compete against the press of a size-eight thick-soled Teva. Out on the flats, who can say how many unintended casualties clambers working a tide produce?

We go down to the shore or emptied tidal cove, and most times we’re indifferent to death’s untidy aftermath. We stumble and crunch, overcome instead with the larger picture of sculpted cumulus, like continents on a map, ballooning across the distant horizon, or the panoramic swaths of saturated color seeping into the sea at sunrise. Or perhaps we’re mesmerized by the masterful orchestration overhead of an osprey’s hover and dive. Even when we attentively rummage in what’s underfoot, we’re apt to forget these are the remains of so many small and unexceptional deaths. We strive instead to find in that breakage beauty, objects we slip into a pocket and carry home to arrange on table or shelf, make of them something different, as if it were in our power to transform.

For Cape Cod writer Robert Finch, so much tide-revealed wreckage enlivens. In emptied vessels and shattered remains delivered up for our inspection by the obliging tides is evidence of the richness of life. Neither sentimental nor neat, this strewn, disorderly spectacle is a testimony to existence’s harshness and the endurance of living in spite of it. And without such mangled and battered remains of extinguished life, wouldn’t the shore, Finch asks, be a “barren, morbid and ultimately terrifying place?” What if the comings and goings of the tides revealed to us none of the discarded signs of life’s continuity? We’d be left with trying to decipher the empty wrack line like mysterious hieroglyphics on a cave’s wall. Without crunch or squish, we’d

walk the shore in search of links broken, crucial cycles stopped. In death's messy evidence, the tides deliver to us certainty. Life, they tell us, persists.

“What are you looking for?” A human voice startles me. It's John, a neighbor who lives down the road.

I'm standing still and mute, head bent, ankle deep—my blue-heron imitation—in a small sandy-bottomed tidal pool. The tide has only just turned, begun to seep back toward shore. It's a glorious morning, without the merest hint of breeze. The intertidal water is flat, clear. Shortly after sunrise, I came down to the shore to take advantage of one of maybe only a dozen times this year a big spring tide will occur during daylight hours.

I can't say how long I've been standing in this same spot or position, but my sandaled feet are almost too numb from the cold water to feel what look to be sand shrimp skittering over them as if they were rocks. Just as John posed his question, one had come to rest on my big toe. Moments before that, a small flat fish—a juvenile flounder? a good sign for our local fish population as surely as the stands of swaying eel grass further out—shuddered itself out of the sand, then skimmed toward some draping rockweed and disappeared.

Undetected, John has paddled up in his kayak, making it easier to understand how a kayaker is able to steal up on a seal snoozing on a sun-warmed ledge.

“Oh, well,” I fumble in answer to his question. “I'm just . . .” I raise my hands to shade my eyes. The sun is higher, but it doesn't tell me how much time I've spent on the shore. Enough to have made it out to a cluster of boulders splotched with rose-colored coralline algae revealed only at the spring tides' extremes. Not far from where John floats, I earlier came upon a trove of sea stars in varying shades of purple, blue, and pink. One bigger than my hand was in the middle of breakfast. With strong arms and supple suction-cup feet, the sea star had pried open a mussel, and from its mouth emptied its stomach into the meaty bivalve. No doubt, digestive enzymes, with a blender's purée-cycle efficiency, were already turning it into slurpable slop.

I don't divulge to John the nearby cache of overharvested sand dollars or the spot where in a tide as big as this you can dig a mess of hen clams. Nor do I tell him that despite their decline in the years since divers descended on the island each November to satisfy appetites in far-off Japan, there are large colonies of sea urchins among the corraline-crusting rocks just off our shore.

I'm tempted to report that while wading out past the spring tide's low-water mark, I discovered a brittle star, a nocturnally active dweller typically found in deeper water. But I don't know John well. And I can't really fault him for what's feeling more and more to me like an intrusion. I comment instead on the beauty of the day, and comfortably we retreat into weather's neutral territory, the recent stretch of fine days, those still being promised in the forecast. As he paddles away, I turn for shore—still, I realize, mulling over his question.

I do not come down to the shore as a scientist or expert of any kind. I don't search for an epiphany, though it's possible in such a messy realm to sweep out a few cobwebs. Maybe not actively searching for one, I sometimes stumble on a phrase or line that, like a well-placed squirt of oil, helps ignite the sputtering engine of some stalled essay or poem. Or perhaps I see again how the shoreline routinely makes good on its promise to delight, even amaze.

But John didn't ask, "What do you see?" Not even, "What are you looking at?"

His question suggested I'd not come down to the shore for an aimless walk, but was driven here by purpose, by a need yet to be met. Or was the purpose his? His readiness to be helpful if needed—if, say, I was after something I'd lost, something I had to find.

What, he asked, are you looking *for*?

It's supposed to be a walk to observe birds. Several of us have joined two birders associated with an island conservation group. Our destination: the Mill Pond's tidal flats, a place I know well. One August years ago, my husband and I rented a house on this tidal cove, the terrain of numerous visiting shorebird species, and it's here the walk starts, just as the tide is approaching its lowest ebb and the last of the morning's fog is burning off.

It's often said that a developed eye is needed to appreciate the beauty of exposed mudflats. In what might appear as a barren stretch of pungent smell and muck over which the wind routinely sweeps but elicits no deep-water waves' shimmer and shine is a terrain of small holes and mounds, scrapes and troughs, the traces of what crawls or trails away, what, to survive, must burrow and hide. A place where grazing shorebirds probe and poke, etching the mud with calligraphic scribblings.

Once, in another house we rented, a houseguest waking his first morning

to a similarly emptied tidal cove proclaimed, “You’d better get your money back. Someone has stolen all the water.” Other guests, holding their noses, greeted the exposed flats with less humor. Even our dog Ben, always keen in his younger days for a walk at any time, hesitated when the afternoon’s adventure included a low-tide paw-sucking hike across muddy flats.

For the clammer who makes his living by digging a tide, the exposed flats is where he punches in, the equivalent elsewhere of office, assembly line, or construction site. It’s no place for a slouch. The work here demands physical effort and produces, by day’s end, oodles of discomfort. With upper body bent low over a short-handled rake, the clammer works the lengthening flats in a repetitive chop and scrape. Ankle deep in muck, each rubber-booted step requires a sucking pop of release. For the birds that inhabit them, the tide-exposed flats are essential, the equivalent of a well-stocked supermarket or brimming salad bar. They, too, go to work here. But hands down, and even though clammer and shorebird alike recognize the telltale signs in the flats, of where to bend and poke or rake, it’s the feathered forager that makes the enterprise look easy.

No sooner do we walkers park our cars than a “whew, whew, whew” prompts Mike to announce, “Greater yellow legs,” three syllables alone distinguishing it from a lesser yellow legs’s two. On the rocky shoreline, Chip sets up his spotting scope, and the smallest of the distant birds is noted first—least sandpipers, or peeps, each of which weighs no more than a few ounces, but in migration to and from the Hudson Bay fly thousands of miles. Atop a rocky outcropping perch several Bonaparte gulls. Farther out are a few stout-billed semipalmated plovers that with their quick steps and abrupt pause before each probe remind me of my childhood game of “Freeze.”

I love lists. Always have. Making them, keeping them. Using lists, I prioritize, create structure, invite and maintain order. A To Do list in itself displays industriousness, the promise of tangible accomplishment. Satisfaction resides in checking off each item and moving on to the next. A life list is a list of a different sort. As the tally of all bird species seen in a lifetime, its value resides in what is added, not taken away. There’s no burden in how such a list expands. Indeed each new entry is eagerly sought, none more so than a type of bird seen for the first time. What in bird-speak is known as a “lifer.”

Clearly my novice rank and infant life list assure me numerous lifers still await me. On walks such as this, with notebook and field guide in hand, I’ve yet

to confirm great numbers of the newly observed, or what with some practice I'll be able to identify with more than mere name. Like the stout, mottled bird Mike waves me over to sight in his scope. Sporting a tweed jacket over a rust-colored sweater, this bird with its straight, prominent bill twice the size of its head is one I'm certain I've seen, but until now I'd not, albeit with Mike's help, identified—a short-billed dowitcher. Actually, there are three of them on the far side of the cove, each intent and singularly focused, though their movements are the same, and now to my eye unmistakable. Methodically they step across a shallow pool, their heads in perpetual up-and-down motion, their long bills repeatedly probing. The “sewing machine bird” stitching patterns in the mud.

Itself like a small flock of birds, our gathered group has made its way out to a small point. With much less grace and lightness of foot, we step over the slick tide-exposed rocks near shore, trying to stay safely out of muck's reach. Soon the tide will turn, and this cove, I remember, quickly fills once the flood tide reaches the cove's narrowing neck, pressed by the deep waters of Sylvester Cove and Penobscot Bay beyond. Already seepage into the cove has begun. Soon, the shorebirds' salad bar will be shut down.

Time on the flats is measured in what the tides grant. And we've got enough of it, Mike assures, to make it around the point and to a small marshy area. I already know that near there, above a tide-exposed track leading to Sheephead Island, is an osprey nest with three as yet unfledged juveniles who, by their Baby Huey proportions alone, threaten to topple the nest, but with their big appetites and loud demands seem to be exhausting beyond reason their attentive, bedraggled parents. Often in this marsh are birds I'm less familiar with, including, as recently reported sightings suggest, some red knots and ruddy turnstones I'm eager now to confirm.

But this is before the whale.

“Oh look, there it is.” A woman late to our group points toward land, to the wrackline and a long, dark hump almost obscured by large boulders close to the wooded shore.

“Don't go near it. It stinks,” she warns, continuing on to the marsh as four of us peel off and approach the dead whale's body. Despite her warning, I've yet to be overpowered by any putrefying stench. Nor is the congress of flies as thick and riotous as I expect. Surprisingly, there's little significant evidence that the busiest and most opportunistic shoreline scavengers, the

gulls and crows, have been at work peppering the dead creature with open shotgun-like wounds. The eye sockets have yet to be fully emptied, ravaged clean. Clearly, though, the elements have had a hand in whatever natural process of disintegration began when the whale's dark skin and fatty layer, meant to retain heat in cold water, baked the whale once stranded on land. Up close, it's possible to see that the skin, once smooth and rubbery, has split, and, like fruit, is peeling away in thick, ragged sheets. The body is swollen, blown up, but with an odd density more than gaseous bloat. It looks sodden and lumpish, heavy, as though by sheer weight alone it's becoming part of the earth. Still, the animal it once was is distinguishable. Tall, curved dorsal fin, broad flukes, long and thin flippers, a slender tail that once could thrust. A conspicuous watery-world presence, even if what once gave this creature of the sea its speed and grace has vanished.

So this is it. What I was so sorry to miss. Just five days ago, in one of those startling juxtapositions offered up by this 12 by 7 mile island, when many of us were joining the New Orleans musicians invited here for the annual JazzFest in a Mardi-Gras-type line dance winding down Stonington's Main Street, other islanders were ringing Sylvester Cove to observe the rare occurrence of a whale who'd come close to shore and was by all accounts cavorting among moored boats and putting on its own show. News of the sighting soon percolated its way around the island, but few of us knew until the following morning that later the whale followed the tide into the Mill Pond, this cove that, as one worried resident declared, "empties right out." Whatever attempts were made to direct it back into the bay failed. The whale, stranded, died. And only later still did news circulate that the whale, thought first to be a minke and later a pilot, is in fact a Risso's dolphin.

As we circle, stoop, squat for a closer look, it's easy to see how the mistake was made. The dolphin's 11-foot length and the square, blunt shape of its head would telegraph "whale" to those on shore. But the perceived scratches and scars reported to marine biologists by the Mill Pond residents who first feared a stranding are actually the distinctive white markings of a Risso's dolphin. Even now, though much of the splitting skin has peeled and frayed, it's possible to see them—irregular lines and scratches, smudged splotches, some almost circular, like the remnants of chalk marks on a blackboard carelessly erased. Such dolphins, I've since read, travel in pods, typically offshore, and are known to prefer warmer temperatures and tropical waters. Some may,

though rarely, migrate north to cooler waters during summer calving season. Were this dolphin a bird, it might be tempting to identify it as an accidental, a species that has wandered far from normal range.

A stranded cetacean of any type is a rare occurrence and an even rarer sighting. Truly, for me, a lifer. But by way of unfortunate circumstance. What drove this creature to a quiet tidal cove that became treacherous, the outgoing tide less a merciful shot to the head than a slow, torturous suffocation? Had the dolphin's sonar misguided it in pursuit of prey? Was this, as some suggest, an intentional beaching because of illness or internal injury? Had parasites made of the brain a smushy mess, or did a twisting spaghetti-mass of nematode worms infect the inner ear, disrupt navigation? Only an autopsy will reveal answers to the marine researchers at nearby College of the Atlantic who most of us thought had already hauled the dolphin's body away. Instead, here it is.

All around us on the cove are the small deaths customary to our shorelines. The broken detritus, the extinguished remains, the crunch beneath our pitiless feet. But just as the images of oil-soaked birds and otters call to us from our television screens, big and visible deaths such as this, particularly of what is stranded, netted, assaulted by accident or environmental tragedy, capture our attention. Deaths more extraordinary, more exceptional. Deaths, perhaps, that bear more resemblance to our own.

Among us humans, the act of dying is often kept hidden, and more so certainly its aftermath: what happens to the body after life is extinguished. None in this small group here are medical people, homicide detectives, or soldiers who've been in battle. Most likely we've never witnessed beloved bodies transformed into mere containers or vessels—untidy, rotting husks. It's hard for me to imagine what any of us squatting here in our embodied selves would look like after several days cooked on a granite ledge.

With textbook knowledge, I know that the dolphin and I are linked by similar mammalian characteristics. Yet I bear no physical similarity to it. The underwater world can never be home to me. Even temporarily, I'm unable to swim with even a smidgen of the dolphin's liquid grace. Yet for a time, we breathed the same air.

"I had no idea skin could do this," Nancy, squatting beside me, says in not much more than a whisper. A textile artist I knew only by her work in local galleries until we met as fellow walkers this morning, she's obviously sensitive

to surface and texture. About this body before us, she is understandably, appropriately, amazed. And a bit horrified. As am I. Yet neither of us seems ready to resume the walk around the point.

Maybe behind her observation and our mutual unwillingness to move on or look away is the recognition: we, too, are this.

Finally I stand. The sea, unrelenting, is inching up. Eventually, after we're forced to leave, it will reach the dolphin's body, this creature now so very much of the earth. Even without being tethered as I would've thought the researchers would instruct while, as I now understand it, they await necessary marine-mammal removal permits, the dolphin's body shows no signs of being budged loose by the tides. While it's certain the tidal cycle played a key role in the dolphin's death and at some point nudged the body to the wrack line, the tide will, in this quiet cove, need some big assists to fully reclaim it, like wind whipping up waves, or the moon surging a spring tide to its highest water levels. Eventually, were the dolphin's body not destined for the COA labs, the sea, in cahoots with whatever scavengers find the carcass, with whatever mysterious internal process of decay the plethora of munching bacteria have long been hastening, the mush-and-muck, gas-and-rot evidence of which, were we able to flip the dolphin over, would on its underside display, will break the body down, scatter whatever bones and bits remain—flotsam helpless against a current, all reclaimed by an outgoing tide, and maybe, in fragments small enough to be pocketed, tossed ashore again.

This morning, I sat at my desk, attempted a new poem. I don't usually write in form, but I'd challenged myself to compose and strictly adhere to the identifying characteristics of a 14-line sonnet. What I wound up with wasn't a sonnet. Among other reasons, its apparent subject didn't trigger me to a *volta* at the end of the eighth line, nor, as it turns out, to anything else worth keeping. Instead, I shifted my attention to other drafts, to prose bearing no form similar to that which eluded me in the sonnet. And certainly not to any found in a sestina's regimented number of lines, its precise order of key end-line words repeated in as precise a sequence as the tide's charted rise and fall.

No stranger to form, Robert Frost famously likened free verse to playing tennis without a net. He also proclaimed that poetry is a "momentary stay against confusion." Of course the same can be said about other types of writing, not just poetry. How we order and lay out words on a page, attempt

to straighten the jumbled bits of our untidy minds. How we strive to make something out of, and thereby able to live with, disorder, all the world's chaos. Like an ebb tide against a stiff onshore breeze, words incrementally, stubbornly fill the page. And there, among truths waiting to be revealed, forms and patterns emerge.

As they do elsewhere. In symmetrical architectural designs. In the clipped geometrical hedges that in formal gardens and cultivated countrysides attempt to banish chance, declare victory over untamed wildness. Or in the ebb and flow of our daily lives when the fear of life's unpredictable hazards throws a long shadow. There, shaken, we turn our faces to regularity's bright light. Reliable patterns emerge, rituals and habits. Perhaps we routinely choose to set our dinner table with cloth mats and napkins and flowers from the garden rather than squeeze out a haphazard space between teetering piles of books, magazines, and unopened mail. With deep satisfaction, we stack clean, neatly folded towels on a shelf, or with an aesthetic that through practice and intention has become routine as much as it may be physically inherent, we pluck from a cabinet a cobalt plate because its color alone is perfect for the lemons.

"Fragments I have shored against my ruins," writer Joan Didion declared in her memoir recounting the time following her husband's death and her daughter's critical and eventually fatal illness. Didion was referring to the fragments of her domestic life's repeated rituals in which, as wife and mother, she once believed she could find meaning. In deep mourning, she believed in them still, even if, at a well-laid table in their routine dinner-at-home ritual, her husband had slumped, head to plate, in an almost immediately fatal cardiac arrest.

Order and disorder reside not parallel, but intertwined. They mingle, as do, briefly, currents at their tidal turn. We live with both. Sometimes, like a boat, even if carefully tethered, we're pulled by a flood tide from our mooring. Or, in spite of all our armoring against, we collapse at the loss of someone we love, and like an eroding chunk of coastline in a spring tide's surge backed by a strong northeasterly, a vital piece of ourselves is swept into a sea of grief. Daily we're open to revision, vulnerable to change.

And isn't that how it should be? Uncertainty helps make life possible, doesn't it? If my brother who couldn't survive without a liver transplant had been told it was certain he'd never get one, how could he have gone on the last year of his life?

Embedded in human experience are contradictions and polarities between which we must reside. What we attach ourselves to, what we're forced to relinquish. The tides' reliable reassurance, their reckless indifference. Our attempts to stay the current, our recognition that we're bits of flotsam powerless against it. The certainty of uncertainty.

Of course I know all this. I know the ritual of sipping tea from a favorite mug at the same hour each day offers little more than comfort. I know no amount of straightening or rearranging will prevent loss. No order I can impose arrests the inevitable. Relentlessly, in a world where so much of what comes next is unknown, tides predictably, in spite of us, rise and fall. Tides leave, always return. The blessing and the curse.

The tidal sculptures of Andy Goldsworthy remind me of this. Erected between tides at the sea's edge and constructed of sticks and stones, even bracken, leaves, and ice, they're beautiful, often intricate, but never bulwark-sturdy. Goldsworthy's intention isn't permanence. His sculptural constructions attract in part because they're ephemeral, temporary. Part of their making is the unmaking, what occurs when the rising tide slowly, incrementally, but inevitably and irretrievably undermines, claims. In a documentary of Goldsworthy's water's-edge sculptures, we watch as he constructs, in an estuary's upper tidal zone, a large dome of washed up, bleached-gray branches collected from a nearby embankment. Laboriously, as the tide advances, he stacks the sticks around him, the last of which he places around the dome's top hole at a height taller than he is, before scooting out of a small opening at its base. Soon, the rising water touches the branches, begins to lift the dome. As it slowly rises, a few bottom branches float off. And then a few more. An aerial view shows them radiating out and away. The water continues to rise, and the dome, as though untethered, begins to move, revolve in the current, until, with more branches floating off, what remains of the dome is carried upstream. Watching, Goldsworthy is visibly excited about his success. He's achieved his aim: "to make works that anticipate but do not attempt to predict or control the future." Change is integral to his work, to the dome that Goldsworthy observes is being taken into another plane, another world. The dome, he's convinced, "becomes stronger and more complete as it falls apart, and disappears."

Tides impose a kind of order on what, by its very nature, is water's formlessness. They mandate at what time, as directed by the moon, water

will measurably rise and fall. But the tides cannot direct or control a heap of other factors—wind and weather and season—the confluences of which, along with the assists of chance and contingency, can't be predicted. Tides impose an order, but do not alone control the sea. As with a Goldsworthy sculpture, the precise *when* of its impending destruction may be known, but not the *how* of a dome's or cairn's demise. The Mill Pond onlookers on a Sunday night knew the precise time a dolphin's final trouble would begin, but not the *if* of the other factors that might yet assist in steering it out to the bay. The uncertainty of certainty.

Yet the tides with their charted accuracy do provide a unifying principle amidst disorder, what we writers may be trying to achieve as we push words across a page, or, pushing away from our desks, go down to the shore to find. There, amidst evidence of deaths large and small, we discover again the reminder that permanence, like the order in my junk drawer that will probably forever elude me, can't be ours. Nothing is permanent in spite of our efforts to endure, no matter the predictable regularity sustained with ritual and routine. If, with a sonnet-making intention, I make surprising turns, none can reroute me from where, inevitably, I'll wind up.

This morning, before I sat down to write, I returned from the unmade, rumpled bed, structured order out of last night's kitchen clutter. I straightened. I put my hands into the current that carries me back to my knowable past, my hands linked to my mother's as they still are each time I iron, her hands guiding mine across first-primer handkerchiefs, lessons my young granddaughters in their hyperscheduled worlds of fleece, denim, and spandex may never know to miss. Through ritual and routine, I gathered to me pieces scattered by time and distance, and in spaces newly cleared, infused them with possible new meaning.

Soon I'll go down to the shore. Out in the bay, the distant eelgrass streaming with the current will tell me if the tide is in advance or retreat. Either way, I'm in it, too, heading in the same direction as every living thing. I'll wade out into the sloshing, formless sea, among the remains of what's already extinguished. Again, in the tides' certainty, I'll find life persists. Again, I'll plunge my hands in.

