

“Ocean” “Shore” “Abyss”

Excerpts adapted from *The Watery Realm*
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From Chapter I: “Ocean”

An ocean is where you find it. As a child I was puzzled by the term “Seven Seas”; anyone looking at a map can see that there are many more than that. Furthermore, my National Geographic globe, with its plastic skullcap, indicated that seas were part of oceans, but that oceans met oceans in some way that seemed to lack the clear demarcations that separated nations.

The child whose attention is drawn to maps and globes and who can be inveigled into making a study of their content—in the best of all worlds not by the demands of a school curriculum but by a household or a friendship that places value on building an awareness of these things—has a great gift. The child susceptible to cartographic temptation learns not only about scale, about the smallness of one’s own existence on the vastness of the earth, but also about possibility: of a whole world to see, of places, defined by nature and developed and named by our own species, to dream of, to visit, and to protect. The child cradling a globe holds, in a figurative sense, the world, a sacred trust that can be dimly understood by any child old enough to understand the concept of representation.

The globe is covered with oceans, or rather with ocean—a single, connected expanse comprising a vast blue field onto which landmasses are set, like floating islands; ocean is the default, land is the exception.

The child fascinated by the compact, highly decorated orb of a good globe or whose eye naturally focuses toward the finest level of detail on a global or continental map is introduced to a world of infinite seas. Subdividing the greatness of “ocean” and covering landmasses with cheerful blue dots of many kinds, the seemingly infinite seas—including lakes of all sizes down to ponds and “land” in its soggy forms—swamps and bogs, for example—add to the notion of a world indeed defined by water.

The child looking at the broad bands of blue on a globe knows that something more important than the convention of names is going on. The surface of the globe, the child knows, is a model of something more wild, more unbounded, more fundamental; for something so huge, the little black letters account for little, at least much beyond the three labels placed on the “true” oceans in their encirclement of the earth—Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian. Maybe rest is just detail.

The relationship of seas and lakes with moving water also invites speculation. A dam compresses a river into the blue splotch of a lake, which suddenly narrows again into a thin blue line. Rivers broaden without manmade obstruction into their own thin stripes. The energetic flow of virtually all rivers

dissipates into the calm breadth of an ocean, sea, or lake, sometimes with the added drama of a delta and sometimes just of a sudden. Sometimes the river seems to become something else before rediscovering its riverine purpose and pushing on, at last debouching into still water.

Time takes on a different meaning when we look at maps of water. Jet travel has, in the cliché, shrunk the globe, but the distance to a destination away from the main air routes can still be sometimes be measured in days, not hours. The world may shrink, but the fundamental unit of measure for humans is time—a finite personal resource in an infinite universe. In a world where few bother to travel great distances *on* water, preferring to be *over* it, the great gaps between land must still be noted, accommodated for. The world is large, and the sea, reminding us by its vastness of the premium we must place on time, defines its largeness in four dimensions.

When we look at a map we see the ocean in our mind's eye, fluid, heaving, teeming with life. But we are touched even more deeply when we have occasion to fly over water, living out what for many is a recurring dream. High over the middle of the ocean on a clear day, we can even see the curvature of the earth, personal affirmation that Columbus was right, and we delight in the infinite sparkle of moving waves or—better still—the path of light that moves along the water to connect our vantage point with the sun or moon when they are low in the sky. In places fractalized coastlines mark the land's margins—the

bays, islands, and coves of northern New England and the Northwest—and in others there are vast expanses of yellow beach with parallel chalklines of surf. We ache to reach down and trail our fingers along where the surfaces meet, the cool water and the rough, plastic ground. Over rivers and lakes sudden quicksilver squiggles or coin-bright ovoids change to brown, green, or—most rarely and most wonderfully—blue as we pass over; occasionally the waters are so clear or so filled with vegetation that we cannot tell where the water ends and the land begins. All this is beauty, confirming what the map has told. With our foreheads pressed against the scratched Perspex of an airplane window, we see the representation become the reality.

In the imagination of the child whose attention has been brought to the world of maps, and then to the world itself, the idea takes form that the earth is indeed a place of infinite variety and infinite interest.

From Chapter V: "Shore"

Those interested in the purity and authenticity of children's exposure to the natural world might scoff at the typical experience of the American beachgoing child, where the destination is a crowded shore with a "safe" area marked by floats and guarded by red-bathing suit-clad avatars on raised thrones. Perhaps littered with bottle tops and cigarette butts—occasionally even medical waste cast up by the waves—this bit of nature might have little to recommend it other than the presence of water.

But children can find, even in the most aesthetically challenged setting, things to amuse and enlighten. With feeble plastic shovels and tiny buckets, they indulge the human instinct for digging and building, discovering the water table as well as differences in the types of sand, stones, and shells that make up the beach. The most jaded of children will still have a small collection of interesting or pretty shells and stones to remove from bathing suit pockets at bedtime, proof of the human proclivity to touch, to feel what is strange and to somehow make it a part of ourselves; I had almost written "possess," but that is too conscious and too crude. The child who picks up a scallop shell does not want so much to possess it as to incorporate its strange, symmetrical beauty into his or her own being.

At the very point where water meets land, the child finds much to see. Small fish dart with electronic speed through the shallows. Perhaps frogs conceal themselves in the grasses of a still corner of a cove, or turtles take the sun on a rock – all creatures to be observed, carefully held by the quick and the brave, and returned to their habitat. Even the plants have things to teach: poison ivy’s hard lesson is one, but so is the surprising sharpness of many kinds of beach grass and the briny succulence of saltwater pickle. There is a rich harvest for the mind, at least.

The shore offers a feast for all the senses. The smell of fish, of vegetation moldering in a marsh, of salt in the air, even of the exhaust fumes of passing vessels – these are rich scents to be sorted and savored in present experience and in memory, ready in the future to trigger pleasant associations. The natural hygroscopy of skin measures for us the ambient humidity: dry days by the waterside are a sun-dried gift, while hazy, hot, and humid periods pass with miasmatic slowness. The sounds of wave, wind, boat, and bird give fullness to our time, completing our envelopment.

We may be hard-wired to spot water, but as a species we seem equally determined to make our mark along each and every watercourse. Wherever man has stopped to eat, drink, or procreate, there the careful – and open-minded – observer can find various illustrative remnants of man’s relationship with this environment, from Indian shell mounds and arrowheads to the contemporary

effluvia of illicit beer-drinking or lovemaking. Other, perhaps more significant artifacts appear in the most surprising places—here the wreckage of a dam, its concrete bound with old automobile frames; there a fence running into a stream and indicating a change in course, perhaps within living memory.

The work of animals is another thing: beaver dams and lodges, the footprints of wading birds in shallow reaches, the shining vee of the wake of a mink or weasel swimming in haste away from the human intruder, nests and burrows along the banks from which birds, or snakes, or small rodents may (or may not) appear.

The littered shoreline offers great opportunities for stewardship. The child given a bag and a stretch of beach to clear of human-created waste will begin to understand some of the darker lessons of human behavior as well as being able to see immediately the positive results of even a little action; perhaps that child will develop an aversion to plastic packaging that will one day grow into a commitment to change the world. Being in the sea is yet another matter. The swimmer sees the land and sea together, whether in the swirling chaos of surf or the placidity of flatwater. Even those who only wade in the shallows, like great pink and brown shorebirds, experience the sea in a way fundamentally distinct from their own experience standing on the shore a few yards off. When one is wet, the circuit between body and environment is made more efficient, sensation conducted more directly. Afloat, gravity is for once held in abeyance, the body

governed by new laws whose study becomes natural only when one can relax and feel their subtle power.

We envy the sponge and pearl divers of Greece and Japan who, without equipment, effortlessly inhabit the medium of the creatures they hunt, and it is almost impossible not to watch the natural swimming of children at home in the water, whose grace we would want to capture—perhaps just once more—in our own movements. At the same time we are told that fishermen and mariners the world over choose not to learn the art of swimming so as to abbreviate futile struggles in the aftermath of misadventure far from shore; one admires the sentiment, perhaps, but at the same time, one ponders how they can so preemptively abandon hope.

From Chapter X: "Abyss"

Standing on a bridge on a fine summer day in one of Dickens's earlier *Pickwick Papers*, Mr. Pickwick is approached by a man. "Did it ever strike you, on such a morning as this, that drowning would be happiness and peace?" he asks. "The calm, cool water seems to me to murmur an invitation to repose and rest. A bound, a splash, a brief struggle; there is an eddy for an instant, it gradually subsides into a gentle ripple; the waters have closed above your head, and the world has closed upon your miseries and misfortunes forever," the man continues, and shortly walks away. The genial Pickwick, the placid realist, is left gaping.

The contemplation of death by water has at once terrified and enticed humans for ages. Like the eyes of a weaving snake, unfathomable depths hold for humans a timeless, often morbid, fascination. As a literary trope, suicide by drowning is the chosen mode of some of fiction's most self-reflective characters, from Faulkner's Quentin Compson in *Absalom, Absalom!* to Kate Chopin's Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*—not to mention of course Narcissus himself, the archetype of destructive self-reflection. The power of the deep is its very capacity for resisting penetration, for throwing back at us the very image we project; that the reflected image is often distorted only adds to the fatal mystery.

The child gazing hard at the water as it slides by the hull of a vessel or passes under a bridge will be drawn into the mystery. He or she may invent games and fantasies – Pooh-sticks and little mermaids – to project meaning into the depths, and when on occasion what is below reveals itself in the shiny swirl of a fish or the sudden glimpse of a rock projecting upward from the bottom, the mind and heart quicken with interest. Will there be more, will these things manifest themselves again? Is there danger? Is there treasure?

What does Jim Hawkins think about as he watches the sea roll by and listens to the sly prattle of Long John Silver? What pulls Conrad’s Marlowe, a companionable, sophisticated man, ever to the water, from the sea of his youth to the Congo River, even as his fellows “swallow the anchor” to become men of affairs?

The sea giveth, and the sea taketh away. The power of the waters of the earth both to provide and to destroy is a continuum; like all things on earth, there is a season, a cycle, to every aspect of the sea’s behavior. As a species *homo sapiens* has been remarkably adept at harnessing the potential of the sea – by traveling upon it, by reaping its bounties, by finding spiritual strength in its generative potency and its sheer magnitude. We have also been remarkably maladroit in how we treat it, polluting and wasting resources even as we continue to develop new ways to harm and kill ourselves on it, by accident or by

acts of war. We act as if we own the sea, and in return the sea, like a dog shaking off an ill-fitting collar, reminds us that we do not, we cannot.

Our artists and poets, and our children, have found and will continue to find in the sea the inspiration to explore our relationship to nature, to one another, to our gods, and to our innermost selves. The creative spirit contemplates the abyss, unlike Pickwick's companion, not as a way out of the human condition but rather as the setting for an exploration of the most profound depths of what it means to be human.