

The Draw of the Sea by Wyl Menmuir

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First published in 2022 by Aurum,
An imprint of The Quarto Group
The Old Brewery, 6 Blundell Street,
London, N7 9BH, United Kingdom
www.Quarto.com/Aurum
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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-0-7112-7396-2

Ebook ISBN: 978-0-7112-7398-6

Audiobook ISBN: 978-0-7112-8090-8

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Cover illustration and design by Holly Ovenden

Typeset in Adobe Caslon Pro by Tetragon, London

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CRO 4YY

The travels and conversations portrayed in *The Draw of the Sea* took place over three years between 2019 and 2021. Some events have been compressed and some names, locations, and identifying characteristics have been changed to protect the privacy of those depicted. The author would like to express his gratitude to all the people who have generously shared their stories with him for this book.

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Strandline Gleaner

Beachcombing & wrecking around Cornwall's coast

There was a storm coming . Or, more accurately,

there was another storm coming. It was the end of October and we were sitting in a lull between two areas of low pressure, a lighter patch between two bright purple bruises on the weather charts. Over the previous 48 hours, the west coasts of the UK and Ireland had been battered by the tail end of hurricane Epsilon. I'd spent the last few nights listening to the wind attempting to rip the tiles off the roof of my family's home, close to Cornwall's exposed north coast, and thinking about what I might find washed up on the shore in the morning. I had been tracking the dark blots on the weather charts for several days, watching as they raced eastward across the North Atlantic. Just a day before, the M6 buoy, 210 nautical miles off the Atlantic coast of Ireland, registered a wave 30 metres high, just shy of 100 feet, one of the tallest waves ever recorded. I'd been keeping an eye on chatter on the socials, too: the storm chasers were out in force, and big wave surfers; and though they were quieter about it, Cornwall's wreckers would be on the case too.

It was a year of broken records. There had been more storms of a strength that meant they required names than at any point
Goose barnacles on cork.

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on record. We were only a few weeks into the new storm season and the storm namers had already turned to the Greek alphabet after exhausting the Roman one. The winds had been high and the seas too.

I had not been surfing (which I do badly), sailing (at which I am a little more competent), canoeing or sea swimming for weeks. Instead, I'd been haunting the coastline close to home, picking up bits and pieces I had found and bringing them back in my coat pockets. It was during these long walks and following the conversations I had with the people I met by the shore, that I began to conceive of a series of essays about the ways in which we are drawn to the sea, though really it was an idea that was returning to me.

In 2016, I published a novel, *The Many*, which was set in a small fishing village on a coast very much like you might

find in Cornwall. My research involved walking around the fringe of the county, spending time in small coastal communities, listening to the stories of people who make their living from, or who find inspiration or solace, in and around the sea. Following *The Many's* publication, wherever I went to publicize the book, at festivals and bookshops, above everything else, I found that readers wanted to talk about the sea: the ways in which they responded to it, the way it held them, the ways in which they felt drawn to it. It makes sense: we're an island nation; we're shaped by the sea. It's natural, surely, that we'd want to dissect the ways in which we gravitate to the element that surrounds us, that comforts and threatens us, that gives joy and takes lives.

I live a mile from the Atlantic and there are few days when I don't go down to the sea for one reason or another. It's ritual and routine. I swim, surf, bodysurf, sail, paddle and splash. If I want to solve a thorny problem in the novel I'm writing – which is regularly – I head to the coast path and stand at the very edge of the land, looking out across the water. I cast my characters onto *Strandline Gleaner 17*

Bawden Rocks, the two tiny islands just off St Agnes Head and leave them there a while to see what they are made of. Much of life where I live revolves around the sea. On my desk I have a tide clock and a storm glass and, bookmarked on my computer, the Magic Seaweed website, which gives a surf forecast for local beaches. I could do without all of these, as there's a far more accurate way of finding out what's going on around the coast. When I collect my children from the local school, I can tell how good the surf is by the number of parents who turn up with salt-streaked hair. One of the other dads squeezes as much out of his surf as possible and sometimes turns up in the playground in his towel-coat. Like in playgrounds across the country, the parents split into their various tribes. Here, the surfing parents gravitate towards each other. They exchange notes about which break they've been surfing in between jobs, the early start they made to squeeze a surf in at the end of the day, or the dawn patrol. They talk in terms of sea state and board type, how crowded the line-up was, the beaches to which they'll be heading come the weekend.

In this surf-heavy community, life is ruled, to an extent, by the tides and the surf forecast. For many of the kids here, the first stop after the school bell rings, is not home, but the beach, the car already loaded with wetsuits and boards. On Saturdays, though there is football, cricket and rugby on offer, the surf lifesaving club heaves with the 120 or so children who pile down the beach to throw themselves into the waves each weekend, with or without boards. They can all identify a rip tide, know how to duck dive an incoming wave and, at ten, many of them already surf far better than I ever will. They, like my children, Alana and Tom, see the waves as their birthright.

I grew up in Stockport which, as the crow flies, is almost 40 miles to the nearest coastline, not far at all from the most landlocked point in England, just around the corner in Derbyshire.

Stockport is a town so ill at ease with water that in the 1970s,
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the council concreted over the River Mersey to make way for the brutalist Merseyway shopping centre. The glimpses of the river I remember, as we crossed the bridge into town to do the weekly shop, were of stacks of jettisoned shopping trolleys sticking out of the brown water, taxed and dumped bikes and a gaping mawlike hole beneath Asda where the river disappeared, a churning, frothing torrent. I remember clearly the sense of expansion I had on days out to the coast and the corresponding sense of being hemmed in when I was not by the sea. I have Stockport to thank for my own obsession, at least in part. We always want what we don't have but it's more complex than that. When I celebrate, I turn to the sea, when I need inspiration too. And when I have needed to grieve, when my life felt upended, the sea's presence comforted me and gave me solace in ways I still find difficult to explain.

My earliest memories of the sea are of family holidays in France, of playing games in which I waded into the surf and tried to remain standing stock still as a big set came in, being delighted when I failed, being washed around in the breakers. It was after one of these long games of playing chicken with the waves on a beach in Normandy with my family at the beginning of a glorious summer, after being called out of the water for sandwiches, sifting through the sand, I found a brass shell casing. Later the same day, I found a stone buried in the sand which came apart in my hand to reveal a perfectly preserved fossilized limpet. I lost the shell casing almost immediately. At that age, I couldn't connect that object with the D-Day landings. I wasn't capable of seeing beyond the parasols and windbreaks to war. I'm still not capable of connecting with the fossil, with life turned to rock, with something that lived hundreds of thousands of years ago. I forgot about the bullet casing for years but kept the fossil,
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and for me it was the beginning of a long-held interest in the things that wash up on the shore, or which are uncovered from the sand by wind and wave.

Last year, I found another rifle shell casing, similar to the one I had found in Normandy, only this one I found 3,600 kilometres further north, on a beach in Svalbard, Norway. My hands saw it before my eyes and, as I picked it up instinctively, the memory of finding that first rifle shell came back to me with all the force that only a childhood memory can hold. Moments after, recalling the lecture I'd been given about the law that prohibits visitors to Svalbard from picking up anything manmade that might predate 1946, I returned the shell to the beach. My Arctic guide, Emil, nodded his approval, though he said the next person to find it

would probably pocket it. He explained that during the Second World War, two SS officers were stationed on Svalbard, just a stone's throw from where we were and – bored, and with little but a huge store of ammunition to keep them company – they shot anything that came into view: birds, bears, seals, walruses. They set up a rudimentary and brutal polar bear trap, a rectangular box on stilts, with an opening at one end into which they placed food. The bear, on putting its head into the box, tripped a mechanism that triggered the rifle at the opposite end. The casing I had picked up was almost certainly one of theirs and was possibly from the trap, the remains of which were still standing just a few metres from us. From this one small object I tried to build out the picture of the lives of these two men there, their small hut, the isolation, boredom and the cold.

When I returned home from Svalbard, I found myself looking down at my feet more when I was on the beach, more interested than I had been in thirty years or so in the things I might find there. And the more people I met, the more diversity I saw in the reasons people are drawn to the sea, not just in the summer season but later in the year when the waves are coloured lead and seem laced with ice.

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Ask ten different people what they see when they look at the coastline and you will get eleven different answers. Wreckers watch for the approach of storms, for weather that will wash in or wash away and uncover what may have been buried there for decades. They scan the online forums for news of container spills, hurricanes and recent finds.

Through the salt-rimmed windows of pick-ups and panel vans, surfers watch for the emergence of clean lines heading shoreward, for the tell-tale signs of the rip that will carry them out back, for an empty, peeling wave. Or they watch from low in the water, semi-submerged on their boards, the longed-for offshore breeze on their necks, and scan for lumps on the horizon, for the arrival of a promised swell. Gig rowers and sea swimmers seek out flat, sheltered waters across which to pull or swim, over which to glide or into which to immerse themselves. Sailors judge wind strength in white horses and windsocks, pick out tidal races,

Storm worn dragon's wing.

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judge fickle breezes, gusts and lulls. Like fishermen, they overlay that which can be seen with knowledge of the shallows and the deeps, of reefs and submerged rocks, with knowledge of what lies beneath the surface, the ways in which the water moves in this particular place.

This assessment of the sea, part scientific, part mystical – the poring over of charts and apps, of long-range weather forecasts, watching the approach of weather fronts, building clouds, the sense of a stiffening of the breeze, signs that something is building –

is a form of scrying. There's only so much you can tell for sure and it's always a punt. When you're out on the water, however well prepared you are, there's always an element of luck. Wreckers are no different in this respect. Many of the wreckers I've met engage in an activity I might call *flotsamancy*, a prediction of where the most interesting wreck will wash in, based on a combination of hunch, experience, tip-offs and weather tracking.

The question for me, staring at the charts, was which beach to choose. Cornwall's most celebrated wrecker of modern times, the playwright Nick Darke, described wrecking as a secretive business. The locations of beaches on which the best wreck lands are closely guarded secrets and it's a general principle that you find your own beach, make your own predictions, cast your own dice. My flotsamancy generally produces mixed results, but I chose my beach, ten miles or so from home, and arrived just after dawn, as the tide began to fall, at a stretch of sand where, if I had timed it right, I knew I could walk for several miles along the strandline before having to turn back. From the carpark, I could see the Atlantic was unaware of the supposed lull between bouts of weather; it was still boiling white, the waves huge and messy. There was no one else around when I arrived, though after fifteen minutes or so a couple of kite surfers appeared, to take advantage of the storm winds. I found a spot out of the wind with a flask of coffee and waited for it to get a little lighter. The

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kite surfers looked tiny against the incoming rollers and even they were playing it safe, emerging from the water every few minutes and struggling their way back up the beach to re-enter where the water was flatter.

Later, the lifeguards arrived and set about red-flagging the beach – no swimming, no surfing – along with four men and women in their seventies or eighties who unfolded chairs and sat below the dunes and valiantly ignored the sandblasting to which they were being subjected by the relentless crosswind making a sandstorm of the dunes.

In the rapidly ebbing tide, the beach became huge and I felt the usual draw to the waves and walked right down to where they were breaking. The outgoing tide had revealed a lobster pot, which was still half-submerged in the sand and proved impossible to shift. There was still a sheen of water over the sand which, in the onshore wind, looked as though it was mounting a campaign back up the beach, serried ranks of wavelets fighting the ebb tide as the autumn sun crested the dunes behind.

Cornwall has the longest shoreline of any county in the British Isles; 326 or so miles of it. Richard Carew, in his 1603 *Survey of Cornwall*, described it as being 'so besieged . . . with the ocean that it forms a demi-island in an island'. Demi-island or not, because of the way it juts out into the Atlantic, Cornwall acts like an outstretched arm, its north coast open to the wild weather

and putting it in the path of the Atlantic gyres, perfect for the gathering of flotsam and jetsam. The set of the tides and the wind, and the type and structure of beach and the seabed offshore, all contribute to determining what washes up where. Ghost nets, lobster pots, Coke bottles, buoys, fisherman's kisses and yellow fishermen's wellingtons, Nike trainers and nappies from cargo spills and wrecks, sea beans carried on currents from the United

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States, Canada, the Caribbean, fragments of lives being led in other places.

In Cornwall, beachcombers are known as wreckers; in Shetland, they are scranners. There's something wonderfully disreputable about both terms and the activity itself, picking through the strandline seaweed for valueless scraps and fragments, is somewhat outre. And while the term wreckers brings to mind false lights and ships lured onto the rocks, there is little evidence for this ever having happened, though the myth lives on in family stories, in fiction and film. The first recorded beachcombers – castaways, runaways and those living on the margins in poor coastal communities – relied on selling, trading or using their finds. In Cornwall and on the Isles of Scilly, and in Shetland too, where life was hard for those living on the fringes, wrecking (or scranning) would have supplemented incomes at best, the finds making life slightly more bearable, and every scrap of wood or metal being put to use.

Most of the wreckers I met on my travels were in it for the fun rather than relying on what they found for income. The closest I've come so far to finding someone who makes their living from what washes in from the sea, aside from a few artists who use driftwood to make mirror frames they sell on Etsy, was an elderly man on a beach near Lyme Bay, who I found dismembering a driftwood tree with a small axe, which he uses to carve walking sticks to sell. The Cornish, like the Scillonians, are inveterate wreckers. One of my favourite characters from Cornish history, the Reverend Robert Steven Hawker – most famous, perhaps, for writing the words of Cornwall's national anthem, 'Trelawney' – was said to have smoked opium with Samuel Taylor Coleridge in the tiny hut Hawker made for himself on the cliffs at Morwenstow, in the north, from a combination of timbers of the wrecked brig

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Caledonia, in 1842, and those of two ships that wrecked there over the next year. Morwenstow was, by all accounts, a poor parish and wrecking was a common way of supplementing meagre incomes. When Hawker arrived there, the residents of Morwenstow had a reputation for cruelty towards shipwrecked sailors, prioritizing salvage over life. The hut aside, evidence of a more benign sort of wrecking, Hawker became known for his efforts to ensure the crews of wrecked ships were rescued, and that those who died at sea off the coast of Morwenstow were given proper burials. The desire to wreck still runs strong down here. Though, technically,

everything that washes up on the shores of most parts of Cornwall and Scilly belongs to the Duchy, a high proportion of the homes along the stretch of coast where we live have a wreck, in some form or other, either in the house or in the garden. Part of my house, which was built just twelve years ago, is constructed with wreck timber, Nigerian iroko that fell off a ship off Penzance and which was used for some of the structural beams.

The more people I talked to locally about wrecking, the more I found it was still ingrained. The name of the house of one of our neighbours came from that of a boat on a crate they found washed up. Several years later, another neighbour found a crate from the same boat in almost exactly the same place, washed across the Atlantic to the same beach. Another yet has the ribs of an enormous drift whale, lying around in his garden, which he carried off a beach and buried in a field for several months until the stench had died down, then unearthed again. The most common signs of modern wrecking are the strings of colourful buoys found on fences or on walls, as seen in gardens all along the coast.

I was almost two centuries too late to talk with Hawker and fifteen years too late to talk with playwright, fisherman and wrecker Nick Darke. Although Nick died in 2005, shortly after he and his wife, Jane, finished the documentary *The Wrecking Season*, Jane invited me to the family home to look at her collection.

When I arrived, she showed me in through the porch, where *Strandline Gleaner 25*

various desiccated fish hung, into a lean-to on the side of the house made almost entirely of driftwood the couple collected. There she talked to me about their life together and the time they spent on the tideline.

In the study, more like a chaotic museum than a workplace, there was a lampshade made, appropriately, of a dried pufferfish and, piled on shelves, stuck to walls, filling windowsills was the evidence of the couple's obsession with wreck. Jane opened drawers filled with hockey pucks, dart-like gannet skulls, dried sea beans – the seeds of tropical plants, some of which she grows against sunny walls, each one a surprise and a thrill – and rolls of silver-grey birch bark that have floated across the Atlantic. One of the drawers contained a dish-shaped bone and it took me a moment to realize I was looking at part of a human skull they had found washed up. There were drawers full of more prosaic items, too – crisp packets dating back decades, plastic ducks, lighters, small parts of a violin, tiles from a backgammon set, lead weights, a Scooby Doo doll encrusted with barnacles, glass ampules, their medication still sloshing around inside them – Jane has no idea what is in them as they are untraceable – the product of decades of wrecking. Jane has been wrecking here for thirty years, and Nick, until weeks before he died, wrecked here since he was a boy. 'All this could so easily not have been found,' Jane told me, holding out a block of lignum vitae, the material once used to make the wheels for blocks on sailing ships. 'Somebody made

that and it ended up here. It could be from the Caribbean; it could be from anywhere. These things make the whole world seem a whole lot smaller, a lot more connected.'

Nick delighted in tracking down the original owners of items he could identify, conducting transatlantic conversations with fishermen in Newfoundland whose tags had made land on the beach by the couple's house. Jane recorded their finds, creating an archive of wreckage that now spans decades, though the story started much earlier when Nick's grandfather moved to the cove

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from Padstow. He was a sea captain who sailed the world and had been wrecked twice himself. When he was at home, he would scan the beach for wreck and carry his finds back to the house. In a notebook Nick kept towards the end of his life, he documents a story about his father, who had been stationed on the beach as lookout for the custom's officers, as various valuable items were carried off. It was, for him, in the blood.

Later, we walked down through the garden, past a driftwood table on which sat a horde of more recent colourful plastic finds, from golf balls to the arms of Barbie dolls and pieces of pottery, past a huge red buoy and the driftwood fences Nick had built from wood that washed into the cove.

'The beach is different every time you come down,' Jane said as we made our way between the wreckage and out of the gate that led straight onto the beach. 'The stream carves different routes down to the sea, storms shape and reshape the face of the dunes, pools come and go, seaweed washes in and rots down. You never know what you're going to find either. The beach is wiped clean twice a day. That's part of the appeal: what was there yesterday is not there today.'

Picking our way through the seaweed, I could see nothing promising though. Just as we were about to give up, Jane laughed loudly, bent down and lifted a small, brightly coloured object which she held out to me. At first glance, it looked like an orange ball of fishing line, though on closer inspection I could see it was woven into a very definite pattern, like a tiny rope ladder, or a nylon corn dolly.

'I've got seven of these now,' she said. 'The last one I found was two years' ago. Somebody's making them and letting them go. They're a message from the sea. On my thirtieth anniversary of getting together with Nick, a string of green buoys washed up here and I thought, this is amazing – a huge necklace for our anniversary – though it wasn't until about a month later that I realized there were thirty buoys in that string, one for each year we'd been together.'

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Wreckers, like Nick and Jane, are in conversation with the past and the present, with the vast, unseen networks that link a hockey puck from Canada to a small beach in Cornwall. And now, for Jane, it seems to me that wrecking is still part of her conversation with Nick.

'I still find Nick in out of the way places on the shore . . . that's where he is,' she told me. 'Nick was sea-made. Close to here, there was a shack his grandfather built in 1910. It was just two sheds and a 1940s stove, mildewy and damp. When Nick first took me there, it was because there was an exceptionally low tide. I remember going down some steps from the shack and I was on the sand. It was my idea of heaven.

'Nick grew up in this place, he knew the name of everything, every rock. This bit of coast was just another part of him.'

After visiting Jane, I started to make inventories of the things I found. Plastic bottles, nylon rope, cotton buds, shoes, the shells of violet sea snails which eat the by-the-wind sailors, the almost

Woven dollies in Jane Darke's collection.

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alien hydrozoa that float on the open ocean and wash up on Cornish shores in the autumn and winter, net hooks, flags, floats, lighters and plastic pipe stems (lots of these, still washing up after a container spill in the late nineties), plastic plants, golf tees, rolls of caps, combs, toothbrushes, decorating spacers, fisherman's kisses, knotted and discarded fishing net. As I did, I began to covet certain things – wrecking taps into the obsessive – and at times, I began to feel like an intertidal Womble, picking up the everyday objects that other folk had cast off.

Of all the activities you can do, by or on the sea, wrecking seems to me the most democratic. There's no industry around it, no merchandise. Unlike surfing, there's no associated fashion clothing, branded boards and wetsuits, leashes and fins, and unlike sailing costs don't spiral. There are no maintenance or mooring fees. Even sea-swimming, which is undergoing a real resurgence now, has its own 'merch'. Wrecking is a decidedly anti-commercial activity. The only requirement is access to the beach, a bit of time and a little understanding of the winds and tides – a pair of wellies comes in handy, a bag perhaps for finds and one for rubbish. Really, the only real cost with wrecking is time.

However, there's a subtle hierarchy among the wreckers I met, from those who have been at it for decades to the newcomers. There are, though, a few things they all seem to agree on. First, that wrecking beaches are kept secret – few people will discuss their favourite spots. And there's a loose code. What you touch, you take home – if it is manmade that is.

As I made my way west along the beach from the lobster pot, I set about making my usual internal bargain. The deal I offer is that if I pick up enough pieces of plastic rope and bottles, the world will karmically deliver me something really interesting like a lobster tag or a sea bean. I'm aware that life doesn't work

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this way, but it doesn't stop me thinking it. It's gambling thinking – if this, then that, when the system doesn't work like that.

If I shake the dice so many times, they will come up sixes. And aside from the outside chance of stumbling across ambergris, the

paradoxically valuable faeces of a sperm whale, sought after for its use in the perfume industry, there is little of monetary value to be found on the shoreline, which seems to have an effect on wreckers themselves.

In the wreckers I have met, I've seen none of the treasureseeker's thrill or avarice. This is a meditative practice, in a way that fossil hunting and metal detecting just aren't. On a recent trip to Charmouth in Dorset, I watched people with picks and shovels, digging away at the cliffs in the hope of unearthing plesiosaur bones. Theirs was a kind of desperate, rough excavation, often taking place right next to signs warning about the erosion of the cliffs and the dangers of rock falls, pleas not to do the sea's work for it.

After half an hour, I got my eye in. Several dogfish cases, their tendrils still clinging on to wisps of seaweed. An orange lobster tag from Canada. A few rolls of birch bark, probably from the States. The child in me always desperately wants to find a message in a bottle, a note from another time and place, and every time I find a bottle with the cap still on, my heart leaps, even though I have yet to find one with a letter in it. The chances are that if I did so now, it would be part of an oceanographic study exploring the distribution of oceanic plastics, but I would most like to find something along the lines of the note the eighteenth-century treasure hunter Chunosuke Matsuyama wrote when he was shipwrecked on an island in the South Pacific. Matsuyama carved his note onto coconut wood before casting it off in a bottle. The story goes it washed up in his native Japan, at the village where he was born.

With many of the things I find, like Jane's mystery woven dolls, the meaning of the messages has been slightly obscured, 30 *The Draw of the Sea*

a radio dial a few notches off from a clear signal. The sense of interconnectedness, though, is entrancing, a reminder that in times of separation, the sea connects us to one another.

Most of what I find, in terms of monetary value in any case, is worthless to anyone other than me. It's the connections that draw me to them: a mangled dragon's wing to the child who played with that dragon twenty years earlier; a roll of birch bark to a tree that fell some 4,000 miles away. Narrative drawn from rubbish. In many ways, it's like the writing process itself, a wandering, sifting, picking up and looking with new eyes approach that asks questions of the things that wash up on the mind's shore. Oh, that's interesting. I wonder if . . .

It feels strange to be excited to find shaped plastic that has been thrown up or uncovered by the waves. In his 1972 *Shell Book of Beachcombing*, Tony Soper insists that beachcombers must 'adapt to the change and learn to enjoy the plastic artefacts which decorate the tideline'. Perhaps this is an unsurprising sentiment in a book sponsored by the oil industry. This is the plastic that is breaking down into ever smaller particles in our seas, being eaten

by the fish we eat, making its ways into the stomachs of birds and whales, all the way up the food chain, leaching into our bodies, our organs and which will almost certainly outlast all of us. But there is undeniably a thrill to finding something that connects us to our past, or to another part of the world.

I throw away most of what I find. The fisherman's kisses – knots cut away while fishermen mend the nets and jettisoned in their thousands – balloons, bottles and shards of unidentifiable plastic. The rest, the interesting, join my other finds in bags in the van, in bowls on the kitchen table, in smaller bowls on the French dresser.

Sorting through them later, I would see that my myopic wanderings were anything but. In the microcosm of the things we find on the shore, I experience the occasional vertiginous journey upward to bird's eye level, at which I can see the curve
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of the horizon in a lobster tag, the downfall of a civilization in a popped balloon, a nurdle or a Coke bottle. Or I am hurled back to a childhood – mine or someone else's – soaked in nostalgia at finding spokey dokeys, rolls of caps, and limbless action figures. Emma, my wife, asks how long the finds are going to stay on the kitchen table. Some of them are beginning to smell. I hide them in a box marked 'items with narrative potential' in a desk drawer. Emma tells me they still smell terrible; they can they live outside, preferably in the bin.

Among the stones beneath a steep, eroding cliff I found the legs of an entirely bleached white plastic cowboy figure (talk about undergoing a sea change). I'm drawn to the uncanniness of sea-worn plastic soldiers with lost arms and legs, twisted and frayed, doll's heads in which the eyes are long gone or replaced with small stones that have lodged themselves in the eye sockets. They are traces and echoes, suggestions of other lives lived. These items, washed clean by the sea, rolled around on the seabed and returned to us, slightly strange, appeal to our sense of pareidolia.

Half a wrecked cowboy.

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'That's Action Man's arse.' Photographer and beachcomber Lisa Woollett handed me the bum-shaped piece of pink plastic. 'I know it's from a 1966–78 Action Man because in 1978 he became blue pants Action Man. I found that out from an Action Man expert. It's thrilling when you find out something like that. The experts call him "blue pants, tanned Action Man". Officially this is called his hip section. This is the sorts of nerdy information you pick up when you go spinning off on a little trail of research into something.'

We were standing in Lisa's office, sifting through a collection of beach finds that entirely covered her desk.

'I like finding plastic dinosaurs and small figures, things that are quite poignant. I really like plastic plants, too. In fact, I've

been really disappointed when I've discovered that the thing I've picked up is a real plant rather than a plastic one, which is a bit perverse, I suppose. I'm disappointed at my own disappointment. That's when you realize your balance between being thrilled by finding something and being appalled by the state of the beach has shifted. You realize you shouldn't be so thrilled about finding a plastic Kellogg's toy that came out of a cereal box fifteen years ago.'

Lisa started beachcombing as a child on the Isle of Sheppey, off the north-east coast of Kent, and then later mud-larking on the Thames, before arriving in Cornwall, when she rediscovered the beach, as a means of escape, at first from the intensity of having children, and later when her partner became ill.

'I'd been used to being out working and suddenly I was spending what seemed like years at a time with the kids,' she explained. 'Being by the beach was totally opposite to that. That solitude was an escape. The whole thing has been an escape. It was elemental, so different to everything else that was going on in my life.'

'It started when the kids went to pre-school, when you get that government two-and-a-half hours a day, so I was going to *Strandline Gleaner* 33

beaches I could get to in that two-and-a-half hours. There's a liberation in that. When they went to primary school, I began to go further and further away. It started out as an antidote to the kids but then when they got a bit older, they loved it too.'

As she was saying this, she lifted out of her office collection prosthetic fingertips, ceramic fingernails, the arms and legs of dolls, mangled spoons, tea pods (each used to make a single cup and then discarded), toy soldiers in varying states of decay, bone toothbrushes and combs, the plastic soy sauce fish you get from take-outs, sea combs, a type of seaweed which gathers fishing line, rope, fabric.

Lisa Woollett's collection.

As with Lisa, each trip to the sea that I take by myself is a kind of escape, the interesting items I find there evidence of those moments of freedom from all my other responsibilities. I thought of Lisa's collections as I sifted through the flotsam, jetsam and the items that had been pulled out of the eroding sand dunes at high tide. Further down the beach, I found two dead seal pups being fought over by a crow and a seagull – it

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was pupping season – and further on still, a porpoise with marks of a propellor strike on its torso. I called them into the Cornish Wildlife Trust strandings hotline, which organizes the collection and autopsy of such birds and mammals, in order to build a picture of the causes of death of coastal wildlife. At first, I wasn't sure what they were: neither had a head.

'[They] are the first things to go,' said the cheerful volunteer on the other end of the line. 'The seal's neck goes limp and, being

soft, it doesn't survive the beaching.'

Looking at the seals, it was impossible not to think of other bodies washing up on other beaches. Only that morning, after I had scanned the weather forecast, I had flicked to the news pages and read an article about a family of four who drowned in rough seas trying to cross the English Channel in a small, overcrowded fishing boat. Two of Rasul Iran Nezhad and Shiva Mohammad Panahi's children were aged just a year younger than my children and I got that telescopic sense again. There but for the grace of God.

Sobering, too, was the thought that less than a mile from the beach I was walking along is a site known more for the number of suicides than anything else, the sign of which is the number of stickers for The Samaritans along the low fence by the clifftop. A beachcomber friend had told me only the week before that she has a constant low-level dread of discovering a body washed up on the beach.

What washes up on the shore has made other headlines recently, too. Eleven containers lost overboard in the Bristol Channel and their plastic-heavy contents – nappies, incontinence pads, sanitary towels – heading towards the beaches of South Gower: Rotherslade, Langland, Three Cliffs Bay.

According to campaigning charity, Surfers Against Sewage, the plastic that washes in is not the biggest problem; it's the plastic that swills around the seas that poses the greatest threat. What we see on the strandline is just a message, an indication
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of the estimated eight million pieces of plastic that enter the sea every day, amounting to almost 270,000 tons.

The things we find on the shore are memory. They delight and connect. They throw us into fits of nostalgia. They are horror and shame. Our detritus returns to us, bit by bit, pushed up the beach on the tide, changed by the sea. On my strandline walk, I started to think about what it would be like to carry everything we ever bought or were given around behind us, to feel the sheer weight of it, to be hampered by it. It sometimes feels as though this is what the sea is reminding us by coughing up these plastic gobbets. You're connected to this whether you like it or not, it's saying, just like we are connected to the families who drown in the sea, heading to a better life. All this stuff we thought we were ridding ourselves of, it all comes back to us.

The tide had turned by the time I turned back towards the lighthouse and carpark. On the way back, I saw several walkers almost swept out in the tidal surges that come out of the blue, or rather out of the foaming white. A couple in jeans, T-shirts and trainers gave up on trying to stay dry and waded through the tidal pools, having misjudged the speed of the incoming tide. A father was ushering his two small children in wetsuits down towards the boiling pit of sea, struggling against the wind with two neon yellow bodyboards. He seemed determined they

should get in the water despite the lifeguards' red flags. One of the kite surfers was losing his battle with his kite, which seemed determined to drag him out to sea. The storm was approaching.

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