

Impressions: A Journey to the Sea

story & photos by John D'Onofrio

*"The sea heaves up, hangs loaded o'er the land,
breaks there,
and buries its tumultuous strength."*

- Robert Browning Hamilton

We reach the edge of the sea in the late afternoon.

The Olympic coast—Rialto Beach: both Jesse and I have been here many times before. The sky is tempestuous and grey and it blows hard from the north. We hike up the beach, into the teeth of the devouring wind.

After an hour or so the sun breaks through the roiling clouds and the wind-borne sea foam gleams white and ethereal in the rich afternoon light, dancing across the crests of the leaping waves. Off shore, the surf pounds the rocks—dark bulks protruding from the ocean like prehistoric shipwrecks.

We shrug off our packs and sit on the smooth stones, leaning against a massive beach log to watch the clouds do their elegant dance. A pair of eagles work the north wind high overhead, rising straight up from the gnarled trees at the forest's edge and hovering, shopping for dinner.

At the end of the day we're back at camp, leaning into the campfire against the evening's chill before rolling out our sleeping bags and listening to the restless wind sing in the ancient trees.

It's still dark when I rise from my sleeping bag. The first light turns the Quillayute River pink and purple. Mist rolls up the river, coming off the ocean like an invited guest.

We eat breakfast and head up the coast. The tide is up and there's not much beach to walk on so we work our way north, picking our route through convoluted jumbles of driftwood. A gargantuan log bobs ominously in the surf but the sun is shining and everything glitters—the stones, the sea foam, the breaking waves. We cross Ellen Creek on a slippery log and continue north on the waning tide.

At the Hole in the Wall we ascend the steep trail over the sharply serrated headland and inch our way cautiously back down onto the cobblestone beach.

Harlequin ducks splash around in tide-stranded pools. Soaring gulls circle overhead. We trace a cove and climb over emerald green boulders to round a point. The tide has retreated and we choose a route further down on the rocks, threading our way between tide pools sparkling with starfish and anemones.

The clouds move in and a light rain begins to fall. We ignore it and continue up the coast on beaches of tiny marble-like pebbles and over seaweed encrusted boulders, stopping to eat our lunch on a protruding rock, enjoying the roar of the ocean.

Coming back, we steal through the slippery passage of the Hole in the Wall against the on-coming tide. Again, a fine rain drifts down and we take shelter in the lee of a benevolent rock outcropping and wait it out. The tide is rising fast as we ford Ellen Creek and head south beside the creamy surf in the fading light.

Darkness falls and the jagged islands fade softly into the impenetrable ambiguity of night.

Back at camp we sit beside the fire and listen to the muted patter of soft rain on the tarp. A foghorn wails in the indistinct distance, lonely as a Dylan Thomas poem. A squall blows in, driving us into our sleeping bags and the dark world of dreams.

The morning delivers blue skies and morning sunshine. We drink strong coffee beneath dripping trees and then return to the beach to sit beside the boisterous sea and listen to the muffled kettledrum sounds of the winter ocean.

Sea lions, gathered out beyond the breakers, float lazily on the surface discussing whatever it is that sea lions talk about and then all at once, as if choreographed, vanish beneath the surface.

The beach is covered with debris left by the receding of the morning tide; twisted tubes of bull kelp entangled with smoothly sculpted pieces of driftwood, lengths of rope the thickness of a weightlifter's wrist, obscure pieces of brightly colored plastic so tumbled and

disguised by the sea that no guess can be made as to their original form or purpose.

In the distance, a gargantuan square rock rises against the blue horizon, its perpendicular walls sharply divided by purple shadow.

We sit silently for an hour in the sweet winter sunshine, not exchanging a word. The gulls do all the talking.

The waves roll in and the sea lions reappear, popping above the surface one at a time. We gather our gear, turn our backs to the sea and begin the journey home.

