

Porthmeor Beach – Helen Dunmore

A storm blows on Porthmeor Beach. Waves burst behind Man's Head, sending up shocks of spray. The black rock shows for an instant, ribbed white by backwash, and then the swash thuds in again and smothers it.

The north wind thumps. Pancakes of foam fly off the sea and skitter down the beach. Two children play daredevil on the white sand, high up, safe from the pouncing waves. The chopped, messy, lumpy water struggles to make sense of itself. Today, there's no-one in the sea. There's nearly always someone in the sea. On rainy November evenings, as the light fades, surfers paddle out one last time. A black figure shows like an insect, then another and another. November is a good month. The sea won't reach its coldest until February, and the summer crowds are gone.

Waves are territory. In winter you define what is your own. The rain drives harder. Lights come on across the crouching land, but rows of empty cottages stay dark. There are phone books in plastic wrappers stuffed in doorways and they'll stay there like that for months, until the summer people come. The town lives on tourism. Stories, paintings, photos and the seamed faces of the very old tell of times when things were different.

But things were always different. The past was always retreating from the touch of the present. That is where the Alba was wrecked: look, just there. At low tide the snout of its wreck appears, where the lifeboat went out and was taken by the same black, roiling sea that had driven the Alba aground. And then the next year the lifeboat went out again and capsized at Clodgy. All but one in the boat were drowned. Twelve men gone from the lifeboat crew within twelve months. Men who looked into that sea and knew what it was and what it could do. There were cars lined up on the road above Porthmeor, the night of the Alba wreck, shining their headlights out to sea to help the rescue. Beneath the shriek of the wind, the sound of engines revving in case the batteries ran down.

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Anchor chains coil around the gravestones in Barnoon Cemetery. Mariners, master mariners, men lost at sea. At night the sea pounds Hellesveor cliff, and the noise is animal, growling.

Flat calm. An August day dissolves into evening, and on Porthmeor the day-long camps are dissolving too. It's time to go home. Men were down here before breakfast to make their settlements, hammering windbreaks into virgin sand. Each day the beach city remakes itself, and by night every trace is washed clean away. A lifeguard picks up the bucket where children stung by weever fish soak their feet in water as hot as they can bear.

Beach buggies scud over the sand as the flags are moved for the last time. Down by the tideline a figure walks slowly, surely, the entire length of the beach, as if the whole day has been nothing but waiting for the leaping, paddling, swimming, bodyboarding figures to be cleared away. The sea barely breathes. A woman pauses before her ascent of the steps, and looks back. "At home the sky starts up there," she says, pointing at eye-level, and then she puts down her two striped beach-bags and crouches to measure the huge horizon. "But here, the sky begins down at your feet."

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