

## On Beaches

By Sean Seu

What more can we say about beaches? There is nothing left to be said. You can stand on a beach and look out at the ocean, a seemingly endless expanse. It makes you feel so small, you'll think. And the universe so big. These thoughts aren't wrong, necessarily. They just aren't very original.

You can turn away from the water and look to the sand. Stick your toes under, burrow with the mites. There are more stars in the universe than all the grains of sand on earth, you might recite. Or, quicksand doesn't really exist, you might think. Or, let's build a castle. You wouldn't be the first.

What's under the surface? Monster whales, creatures with soul-sucking tentacles— a lobster playing the bongos. The forests of kelp, the fish flying among the trees. Everything flies underwater. We all float down here. Everything's better down where it's wetter! Land ho! Call me Ishmael.

We can talk about the salty air.

Or the constant breeze.

Or the umbrellas, both the big ones and the tiny paper ones.

Sunscreen (in the pink bottle.)

And beach towels.

Flip flops.

There just isn't that much to say about beaches anymore.  
And yet here we are, always coming back.

Coming and going, like the tide. Cliché to cliché to  
cliché. What are we hoping to capture? Moonlight glittering? A grave  
of sea froth? The siren's sound?

Humans are not beach dwellers. Our feet are built for the  
plains, for hunting among tall grass, spear in hand. Blood trickles  
down our arms and our legs, it does not bleed into air like it does into  
water. We are not built to swim. Our toes get caught in the sand. We  
cannot drink the water. We have lost our gills. We cling to the  
rockface.

And yet we build our homes along the shore, and we fill  
them with seashells. Maybe we're drawn back to the ocean, where we  
began, our bodies aching to return to the octopus's garden, the water  
muffling the sound of our language. Dunk your head under and even  
your hair floats away. The anchor: your scalp.

Do you remember your second grade class and the trip to  
the beach, the kites flying, let's learn about Estuaries! Once upon a  
time (in 1992) a shipping barge unleashed twenty-eight thousand  
rubber ducks into the middle of the Pacific en route from Hong Kong  
to Tacoma. Imagine floating safely aboard a boat, packed tightly with  
thousands of your comrades, when splash! You're overboard, the crate  
breaking, and you're out, out at sea, the horizon five miles away in  
every direction.

Rubber ducks, an entire army, dispersing into the endless expanse, floating somewhere between water and air.

And thus began the Odyssey. “Tell me, O Muse, of that ingenious hero—” And they’re off! Off to the races. Let’s split up, gang!

The first washes up on the shores of the Island of Oahu, yellow rubber clashing with the black sands. *Aloha Oe*. The song of a long-dead Queen can still be heard on these shores. *I laila hia ‘ia nā manu*. They still dance on the mountainside. Love birds live there.

And even farther, carried along by waves, to the beaches of Australia, past the box jellies, unscathed by their venom. Past the surfers and the reef, to see an illustrious performance at the opera house. Quack. G’day Mate.

Past enormous spider crabs, legs long as the necks of guitars, to small islands off the coast of Japan, where Christians to this day hide among the caves. Here they step on the Holy Book. Here, hidden behind this panel of the Buddha, is a painting of the Virgin. Sitting at the altar, among the candles and inkwells, a new rubber duck, dusted delicately with bits of sand.

Some, to the states! To the states! Sea to shining sea. Beaches in Northern California, ducks bound for nests among the Redwoods. Navigating around the half-sunken boulders. A child of eight, barefoot in the cold waters, finds a rubber duck and takes it home for his bath that evening.

Some float north, into the endless night, under the green ribbons of the Arctic skies. They freeze in ice, stopped in their tracks. A polar bear paws at the little flash of yellow, hoping for a snack. He dislodges the little toy from the ice floe and sends it Eastward, around Greenland and, eventually, to the shores of Ireland. A group of banshees stand cliffside—they wail into the night, as the little duck makes landfall. He waits for daybreak.

Onward! Onward! To Calais, Calais. *Comment ça va?*  
An Afghan girl practices her French on a rare trip to the beach, as her family waits to make safe passage across the English Channel.

And some travel farther, still. Above the Titanic they float, around the iceberg. And then to the beaches of Rhode Island, of Long Island, Plymouth Rock. What do they think of Boston? Can they taste black tea?

To a rubber duck, a floater, the Ocean is merely a surface. The ducks walk on water as we walk on land. Perhaps, given a few million years, we would find floating duck cities. Duck societies with glittering banks. Duck bucks. Duck kings and duck peasants, an entire social contract floating upon the ocean's plains. Duck democracies, duck extended families, the First Church of Quack. Until then, though, the ducks are much like we were when we first crawled onto dry land. Nomads.

I have an inkling that we and the ducks are drawn to the shores for the same reason. There's something indescribable about the beach, something so balanced, so middled, something that withstands

the division of water and earth. Try to name it with a word, and it falls apart, either falling into the waves or blowing onto the boardwalk. Say it again, and it becomes a cliché. Old hat. Worn. Nothing can stay on the beach. Everything is either coming or going.

Here's one attempt at permanence:

If I stay standing on the beach long enough, at the edge of the tide, right where the water laps on and off the dunes, I can sink into the sand one swell at a time. I cannot stay here forever. I will sink, inch by inch, until—

But then a rubber duck washes onto the shore. And with it, a new thought. I do not stay planted in the sand forever. I cannot. I pick up the rubber duck and dry it with my t-shirt. And I give it to you. Wait. Look closely. There's a moment, infinitely brief, arguably nonexistent, when the duck is in both my hand and yours. That's the beach. Constantly eroding. That's the beach. The beach. Beach.