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Writing about the Environment

High Tide

I'd been in the water for an hour, pushing through the water steadily, when I saw a disruption in the Sun's glare against the water. A dark spot. I paddled towards it, curious. I saw a creature poking out of the brackish, dark water. It looked gray-haired. I stilled my kayak six feet away.

His chin pointed skyward, soaking in January sunlight. A high sun's light glimmered on his forehead. He resembled a retired old man, out for a long, slow swim on a lagoon, taking a brief break to enjoy California's warm winter.

I was kayaking in Bolinas lagoon just north of San Francisco in January. The Pacific Ocean is connected to the lagoon by a narrow channel on the West side, and to the East the water flows into various small freshwater streams.

Turning his face earthward, he looked at me. His wide black eyes were too big to be human, the mouth too small, the eyebrows too bushy. Glistening like an oil slick, his wet fur covered him everywhere but his shiny nose. Long whiskers trembled in the air. The face I'd mistaken for skin was fur, the color a lighter gray than his spotted back. A harbor seal gazed at me, through me.

That day, the lagoon was less windy than usual and the water had no waves between me and the seal. An orange mirror of the kayak rippled below me. Although I'd mistaken him at first, he was close enough that if he'd barked I would have heard him perfectly.

I didn't approach, afraid to spook him.

A human swimmer is unlikely in Bolinas lagoon. Oozing ankle deep mud rings the lagoon and it's full of swampy seaweed. The lagoon is a maze of shallow patches that have grounded even the most careful kayaker. The human swimmers do not venture there. But the seal knew those depths. He could have been my age, and if he were, he'd be old for a seal. A swimming old man.

The seal looked a yard long; small, for a seal. Despite his size, he must have weighed more than me as harbor seals are mostly blubber. Despite the fat, his round face looked sturdy. His facial features looked different from a human's, but in the way a stranger is unfamiliar. It made sense that I had thought he was an old man.

The seal had traveled into the lagoon via the channel for protection from the Pacific. Out there, sharks, orcas, fishermen, and other dangers roam free. When the tide changes, the narrow inlet has a strong rip current. In the ocean, human swimmers have been overpowered by the outflow from that channel. At high tide, seals float into the shallow lagoon with that current. At least forty seals come in with the tide, heads appearing and disappearing underwater. The seals stay in the deeper sections and avoid the white sharks in the ocean. Instead, they eat a different animal, the long and skinny leopard shark. They also eat bat eagle rays and striped bass.

The seals are safe in the lagoon for a few hours before the tide carries them back to sea. At low tide, the lagoon becomes a marsh — too shallow even for seals. The seals of Bolinas lagoon might return with the tide in some hours, or swim towards other protected coves. This place is one of many homes.

At low tide, after the seals drift out, lagoon life changes. Long beaked shore birds sit on the new muddy flats and peck at crustaceans crawling right below the mud's surface. Seagrass hidden at high tide now ripples with the shifting winds.

In the lagoon and at sea, harbor seals live alone. They form groups only when they go on land to give birth. Seals don't have puppies in Bolinas lagoon. They must travel to a more secluded spot off the California coast.

People near the water are why seals don't feel safe there. On the East side of the lagoon, a highway traces the curving path of the lagoon right below a pine covered mountain. The engineers who cut the highway destabilized the mountain, increasing rockfall into the lagoon. Car exhaust kills plants and highway noise frightens birds. On the West side, one story homes look over the estuary. Peak summer vacation season has disrupted the rhythms of animals and plants previously attuned to the days and the tide.

In my kayak, I held the seal's gaze. Then he broke the silence with a slosh of water and disappeared below. The water tangled with kelp hid him.