

A scenic view of a rocky coastline. In the foreground and middle ground, numerous seals are resting on the light-colored, layered rocks. Some are lying flat, while others are propped up. A group of people, including men, women, and children, are standing on the rocks and the sandy beach, observing the seals. The ocean is visible in the background, with gentle waves lapping at the shore. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and natural.

Signs

A Great Plastic Monster Consumes the Hero

Do you think it is a sad sight to see
The way things disappear and are replaced
Without any notice or without care
For the vast blue space these things leave behind?
When it is morning with a fresh sea breeze
Calling for salt and sand to stir tranquil
Strokes in clouds above even the bright birds,
I think it is sad their calls are quiet.
About the birds, I can't stop my aching
Weary heart noticing lack of shadows
Cast on white benches or across great waves
A greater shadow consumes, replaces
 Where once were wings new human ruin brings
 Consuming the chain, plastic ring by ring.



No Signs. 8" x 12". Watercolor and Ink (study).



Falling Under. 18" x 24". Resin, ink, oil on canvas.

LA JOLLA COVE— PROTECTED MARINE CONSERVATION SITE

The idea of climate change sparks controversy. There's no getting around it. Whether you believe in the science, believe that science *disproves* global warming, or don't believe in anthropogenic harm to the environment altogether, odds are whatever you believe is a strong feeling. And it is most definitely not something that you would mention at Thanksgiving dinner among your varied family members and zany friends.

I've been thinking a lot about climate change lately. I have an uncle who doesn't believe in it on religious grounds (really, I have a few uncles that match this description). Or, I made an acquaintance recently who mentioned to me that she believes, in light of her pursuit of a degree in astronomy, that science tells us that climate change is a completely natural phenomenon that the earth endures every few million years. In contrast, I should mention that I'm one of the family members to whom you would avoid— at all costs— talking about impending environmental disaster. When I hear claims like this, it's hard for me to keep myself from crying or screaming or expelling steam from my ears like an overexaggerated Looney Tunes character. Needless to say, I've been working on this, and it would be a huge accomplishment for me to be able to say something along the lines of *I respect your opinion* or *interesting, tell me more* or something at least civil instead of breaking into a tomato-faced disbelief.

As I've said, though, I've *really* been working on this. And thinking *a lot* about climate change lately. And trying my best not to fall apart from worry as I do all this.

Something I've noticed upon further introspection, though, is that I'm not sure whether or not I *actually* care about climate change. I also, radically, am not entirely convinced it's something that average citizens need to concern themselves with. This isn't because I've had a massive change

of heart or simply have decided to stop caring about things, but because global warming and axial rotation and carbon-driven ocean acidification seem like concepts that are overly complex for people to digest and then turn into caring. Instead, I've realized I should start focusing on what I can do, what I can see, and what I (and we) can change.

So this is what I've started to tell my uncle(s), my acquaintances, everyone who could be labeled as a "climate-denier": *it shouldn't matter whether or not climate change is real when we can see human caused destruction right in front of us.* That is to say, we don't need scientific proof to see what we're doing, and we don't need anything but compassion to change the way that we live accordingly.

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La Jolla Cove is one of the most popular protected marine areas in California, and I'm standing on the rugged rocks feeling like some sort of heroine in a period drama for the way my hair is blowing in the sea air without any sense of direction. The salty breeze seems to carry a puzzle that I cannot even have a hope of solving, so instead I sink into the ignorant bliss it incites. Everyone knows that the ocean takes up the most room on this planet, and yet the human race has not even begun to break below the surface of sea exploration. It's a hidden world, maybe it's meant to be hidden from the prying eyes of humanity. Here at the cove, though, the water crashes enthusiastically and cataclysmically onto the jagged rocks where I stand breathing it in. It's like it's own heartbeat, the way that it ebbs and flows and speeds up and slows down with a sense of life that I can't even begin to imagine or capture. At La Jolla Cove, it seems surreal, ethereal, personal. Until you move your head from the hypnotic waves to the side and realize you're surrounded.

What's interesting, though, is *who* exactly encircles rocky shores in hordes as far as the eye can see. First, of course, tourists. These days, it feels like it's impossible to go anywhere without at least a few dozen people tagging along to see the same thing. With the sound of sea waves, it's

almost easy to forget the nightmare it was to find parking, but the tourists are a good reminder. After all, I'm one of them.

Beyond the flashing cameras and selfie sticks and forced smiles, though, are endless blobs of shiny brown *things*. From far away, they look more like lumpy stones littering the linear cut of the rocks overlooking the ocean. Up close— and *really* up close— the seals scattered along the cove, pouring onto the sand, seem as human as any of the rest of us. Across from a new family, a baby in a Scripps bucket hat and his sun-scorched parents, a little seal plays around its rock-steady family. Motion in the midst of stagnancy. They're only feet apart.

On this same rock, while I'm making observations and retching from the smell and making overall critical judgments about the running of this "protected land," a group of three girls approaches me with a camera at the ready.

"Will you take a picture of us?" they ask with feigned embarrassment written all over their faces. Of course, I have to say yes because, usually, I *am* these girls, all embarrassed smiles and endless pictures in front of fun destinations. Usually, it takes me at least ten minutes to stand in front of something cool and pose in minutely different stances in the effort to just get one good photo.

"Yes, of course!"

"Could you make sure to take a few portraits and a few landscapes?"

"Of course, I'll take a ton!"

"And make sure to get some of the seals!"

Duh, but, "Oh for sure, maybe they'll even pose for you!"

It is important that this dialogue is imagined in a helium-high voice with a plastic smile. Today, though, I'm already feeling a little judgmental while I line up iPhone after iPhone for picture after picture with varying settings, angles, and verified portrait worthy poses. Sure, I'm planning on

having them reciprocate the photography to get a photo of me and my mom together after this, but that doesn't make this experience any less annoying. To me, it feels like I'm invading someone's home. Like the seals were just sitting on their couch watching Monday night football and this crew just comes in, stands in front of the TV, and demands to be photographed. I suck it up, try to remember that these girls are really just looking to document a fun trip and not ruin a seal family reunion or anything malicious like that, but none of this is aided by the proximity to the animals at La Jolla Cove.

When I say that the seals are close, I don't mean you can see them. I mean you could *touch* them. Not that people really do, at least not regularly, but the idea is the same. There are no rails, no rules, no signage to indicate what's okay or not, and certainly there is no warning that it is *not* okay to invade a seal's privacy.

And it all happens in slow motion as I line up to snap the photo(s). They smile their broad smiles, the seals in the back play buoyantly in the water, and I step just a step too far back.

A deafening bark.

I leap forward, everyone's laughing, my face is as pale as the fog floating just beyond the shore.

Behind me, blending into the pale face of the rock, a seal was relaxing in the sun, baking happily in the light until I came along with clumsy feet and invaded its space.

It's a funny story, really. I was scared, everyone laughed, we all moved on.

But almost stepping on a seal in its own home is an excusable representation of the way humans seem to tread over everything. The whole earth has a massive footprint from our careless feet.

It's like a humongous foot coming over the water, preparing for a grand trampling, as images of polluted plastic and discarded bottles on the beach surface in the collective idea of absolute anthropogenic apathy.

At Scripps, one of the most popular aquariums in the United States, among the plush sea creatures and happy displays of facts about ocean life are equally abundant facts about how human beings are causing the destruction of these habitats that are so revered by us. Essentially, through our love for wonderful things, we are the ones ruining them. Everyone seems to ignore these areas, too, that discuss climate change and ocean acidification and collapsed coral reefs. Among the jellyfish exhibit, a display of plastic floating in an identical habitat illustrates the danger that sea turtles face in doing something as simple as choosing their food. And in the turtle exhibit, everyone is all shining teeth and flashing lenses as they beam at the turtles floating at the top of the tank because they had been hit by boats in the wild.

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So I'm not sure that people need to believe in climate change when there are so many tangible things they could care about. And sometimes change starts small like this. Maybe sometimes it takes just caring about straws, just caring about litter, just caring about what we see harming our world. Because it's not just our world, it's *their* world.

We share this earth, and that's something we don't need proof of.