

# An Artistic Encounter with Nature



Stories, Poetry & Photographs  
From Chesterman Beach

by Patrick Jennings





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From Chesterman Beach

Words & Images by  
Patrick Jennings

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Pix to Words Press  
Vancouver, BC, Canada

[PixToWords@GreyMatterMedia.com](mailto:PixToWords@GreyMatterMedia.com)

[www.PixToWords.com](http://www.PixToWords.com)

First Edition



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This book completes the array of photographs entitled *An Artistic Encounter with Nature* as displayed in my first solo gallery exhibit, *Harmony in Word and Form*. I took the photographs on a single glorious afternoon on Chesterman Beach in Tofino, BC, Canada. The titular short story was forming in my mind even then, and I completed it that night. Read here many of the stories and poems these photographs have inspired since then. Find more at [PixToWords.com](http://PixToWords.com)

# *An Artistic Encounter With Nature*

“Let me paint for you,” she said.

“Ummm, yeah. Yeah!” I stammered as what she was suggesting sank in with increasing gravity.

“Yeah! That would be awesome!”

She nodded, “Good.” Then rose from the wicker chair, grabbing her mug of rich, dark aromatic tea from the small table between us.

She’d seen me photographing the waves and rocks, and her home perched high up on the rocks. I was quite thirsty and graciously accepted the offer of tea she called down to me from above.

We’d talked for hours, as morning turned to lunch, (which she made for me with ingredients fresh from her garden) and then, hours later, to another round of tea. We’d talked about photography, about art, about beauty. She was remarkably well versed in art

history, in aesthetics, in how to set a frame so the elements within it worked in harmony, to create beauty and meaning.

After lunch, she’d let it slip that she was a painter, herself. And of some renown, though I’d never heard of her before. “I’m very popular within the Folk Art movement,” she demurred. I had just asked if she would show me some of her work. Instead, I was going to have the treat of watching as she created it. Wonderful!

Now she rose with a regal grace, an effortless gravity, the mug wrapped snugly between the palms and fingers of both hands. She drew it close to her breast, as if she were lovingly cradling an infant. In retrospect, I really can’t be sure if it was so she could feel its warmth, or whether the force of her presence was keeping the tea warm.

She was five stately strides away by the time I snapped out of my reverie, hastily pushed my chair

back and reached for the mug I’d been sipping from for the past half hour. Strangely, it was still full, and vapour curls caught the sunlight.

“You won’t need that.”

What? She hadn’t looked back...

“Just bring your camera,” she finished, then began lightly and confidently stepping down the rough rocky descent to the beach below.

I grabbed my camera from its bag and hurried to catch up. She was halfway to the sand by the time I reached the edge, where I shouted down over the sound of the crashing waves, “I thought we’d be going into the house!?”

“Why would we do that?” She replied, in the same soft husky whisper she’d used moments ago while sitting across from me at the table. It reached my ears easily, a sonorous song which touched me as though the song had been written





*Red Carapace and Sand*

and sung only for me.

In just a few more steps, she reached the beach and stopped. A dozen or so heartbeats later, I realized I'd stopped as well, and she was probably waiting for me. I started the awkward and somewhat risky downclimb, clutching the camera close to my chest while

using the other hand to assist myself down the unruly rock.

Then I realized I hadn't answered her question yet. "Isn't your studio in your house?"

I nearly tumbled from the rocks to the sand, managing only just to get my feet under me, juggling the camera between both

hands while staggering to stay upright. I came to a full stop about ten feet away from her, gathered myself up and faced her.

She shook a little with the tremors of soft, gentle laughter, the sweetest laugh I'd ever heard, bemused yet somehow loving, like when you see someone do

something so damn kind you just want to smile and laugh at the perfection of the world. She was laughing not because I'd just reprised the full catalogue of physical comedy in my descent down the rock face, but because I'd done it with complete humanity, and stood before her with a sincere dignity.

And so I laughed with her. The little laugh that's mostly in your eyes, and the way your mouth curves up on one side. The knowing laugh you share with someone known to you intimately for years, and years.

She looked at me. Looked *into* me. And winked. I wished right then in my heart that I had more than the one afternoon to spend with her.

God, she was a magnificent human being. Long grey hair cascading over one shoulder in a braid. Browned skin, taut yet wrinkled, drawn smoothly along the contours of finely chiseled features. But it wasn't the features

that made her magnificent.

"Silly man," she said, then, throwing her arms out and up, "This is my studio!"

A lot of men might have been intimidated by her. I was. More than a little. And maybe some men would have been insulted, being called silly by a woman who intimidated them.

I wasn't.

What made her magnificent was her presence, her bearing. Some people just seem to belong in whatever place they are. She had all that, and more. It seemed like, well, she *was* the place. Not that she owned it or anything. Or that it existed for her. But... it was there because of her.

That's powerful. That's presence. That's gravitas.

I wasn't insulted, because she wasn't belittling me. What she was saying was, "I'm going to show you something extraordinary, something exquisite, something you really,

really do want to know." Don't ask me how I knew that. It was... apparent. There for anyone to see. There was no meanness in her. There was nothing so petty as a put-down in her, no desire to demean anyone.

"Come over here," she said, practically skipping to a section of the small, sandy beach below the high tide line, but above the point the waves were then reaching with the advancing tide. By the time I caught up with her, she was crouched down, on the balls of her feet, one hand on a knee, the other delicately tracing lines across the sand.

So I crouched beside her, watching. "Do you see the patterns?" she asked, still looking down at the sand. I looked down, where she was tracing figures, and for the first time noticed the sheen of lightly coloured sand resting on top of the denser slate grey sand. I'd thought the whole beach to be this deep, rich grey, but there was a light, glimmery sheen on top. More



than that, there were indeed delicate patterns formed by the lighter sand on its dark grey background.

And the darker sand, I noticed, it wasn't really grey at all. I mean, it was grey, but there was a deep green cast to it, like a twilight sage.

How did I not see all that? A trick of the light? A trick of my eye?

"Oh, come on," she prompted me again, "you *have* to see them."

"Oh! Yes! Yes, of course I see them."

"Aren't they beautiful? Aren't they just perfect?"

I looked for a moment. Saw sweeping lines formed by the lighter sand. Some dead straight. Some

organic curves. And between the lines, light sand or dark sand filled in, creating patterns of darkness and light. Much of it was, indeed, beautiful in that way that nature is beautiful. But, some of the lines and shapes in the area she was gesturing toward seemed more chaotic to me. Discordant with the long sweeping arcs. There seemed to be no... harmony to it.

"Yes," I responded, "this over here would make a beautiful photograph."

"Oh yes!" She actually beamed at me. "You *do* have an eye! Why don't you take that photo?" So I lined up the frame, checked my meter settings and clicked the shutter. We both looked at the display screen. It really did look great.

She pointed to the discordant area. "Why don't you take that shot too?"

I looked at it again. Tilted my head sideways, looking for an angle I could frame something interesting.



*Nature's Beach 8*

“I don’t know. There doesn’t seem to be anything there.”

She smiled. The smile my favourite teacher used to give me whenever I had asked the right question in class, but didn't really understand what I'd just asked.

“Why not? Aren’t there some shapes, and lines? Is there nothing at all beautiful in there?”

I thought about my answer. “I don’t see any order there. It’s a jumble. I like clean, precise lines. Complex is OK. But there’s almost always something that seems mathematically perfect about a good line. Those lines are all chaotic.”

She looked at me, thoughtfully. “I see what you mean by 'chaos'. That nobody has come up with a mathematical formula to describe what’s going on when nature is at work. But do you really think that means it’s not beautiful?”

“Yeah,” I shrugged. “Isn’t it the math that makes a line perfect, defines a shape that is beautiful?” I

started into an explanation about the Fibonacci sequence, and bifurcation, and how these mathematical formulas could be used to describe the utter beauty and perfection of nature, but she interrupted me before I got very far.

“No. No no. It’s the patterns that make the math perfect! It’s nature that makes math beautiful!”

I gave another shrug. “But if there’s no math, then there’s no order. No order, no art.”

That teacher smile again. “There is order in everything. If mathematicians can’t find that order, that just means they have something to learn. Just like you mister.” And on that note, she practically beamed. “No matter. If you can’t see it yet, there are other things I can paint for you.”

And with that a wave came through with a thin film of water, just enough to wipe away the patterns and rearrange the light sand into new patterns. The red carapace of a dead crab floated into the

frame, adding a new colour and texture to the frame. As the water washed up by the wave drained away, I shot a couple new images while she watched, intent.

She actually “Oooh’ed, then smiled at me. “Nice shot!”

While another wave rolled through, changing the patterns again.

We kept this pattern up as wave after wave kept creating patterns for me to photograph. I couldn’t find beauty in all of them, but she would always assure me there was.

“The dark sand is the canvas, and the organics are the paint. The waves are the paint brush. So, every time a wave comes through that’s just me — I mean, nature — that’s just nature painting a new picture. And nature never paints an ugly picture. It’s always beautiful.”

When a new wave would “paint” a beauty I couldn’t see, she’d try to give me a perspective or an insight that would help me see it. And sometimes I would. So I was



learning, a lot. Learning new ways of seeing.

My time for departure drew near, so we clambered up the rocks back to the house. Rather, I clambered while she seemed to glide through the sharp angularities with feline grace. By the time I'd breathlessly crested the top, she was waiting with a large glass of water. Then just smiled as I drank it down

between breaths.

Our conversation had grown increasingly casual, and we'd mixed in some topics that weren't wholly about art. I was still curious about the white sand. Where did it come from? So, handing back the glass, I asked her.

"Oh, that's not sand," she said, holding up the crab carapace she must have picked up from the

beach. "It's shell. From crabs, and mussels, oysters and clams. Barnacles."

"I had no idea!" I said, while packing my camera into its bag. Just about ready to leave.

But she wasn't finished.

"Yes, it's not sand but the ground up shells of thousands of animals. I guess, in a sense, thousands of animals had to die so I could paint for you today, so you could learn about what's perfect, what's beautiful."

I stopped, and looked at her. "I'd never thought of it that way before."

That smile again. It warmed me. I wondered what was coming.

"So what do you think that means for you? Does it make you want to do anything differently when you photograph?"

"Hmmm," I thought. "I suppose I could express gratitude to those creatures. Thank them for offering me such beauty."



*Nature's Beach 7*

The gentle laugh, again. “Well, yes. That too.”

Then she fixed me with a look deep into my eyes, deep into *me*. “What it really means is, ‘*Don’t fuck it up!*’”

She held that look, held me to the depth of my core, for a number of uncomfortable seconds.

Then leaned back and laughed in a hearty guffaw. Even slapped me on the back.

We said our goodbyes. She gave me the most wondrous of hugs, a kiss on the cheek and sent me on my way with a wave and a blown kiss.

I never did see her again. I went back to the area on another trip a few years later, and went to look her up. But she wasn’t there anymore. There wasn’t a house there. As far as I could tell, it didn’t look like there ever had been.

But I still carry her with me.

Or rather, she is in everything I see, everything I photograph. And I’ll never forget that last bit about not fucking it up.

I’ve tried to be authentic and sincere in my photography ever since. In my photography. In my art. In my life. And I’ll never stop looking for beauty, the beauty in everything.

I must be doing OK. Something makes me think I’d be getting a visit if I wasn’t.

This story continues with  
*The Seashell Nebula*  
on page 22



# *Patterns in the Chaos*

I love finding  
Patterns in chaos  
When order emerges  
From disorder

I try not to mind  
Immersion into chaos  
When the irregular  
Overcomes the regular

These are all  
Fundamental states of being  
And who am I  
To argue with reality

Rather, embrace them all  
Find beauty in disorder  
Perfection in the irregular  
Peace in chaos



*Patterns in the Chaos*

# *She Danced*

She danced  
As if everyone was watching  
And all they wanted  
Was to see her dance

She danced  
As if every word she'd ever spoken  
Could be translated  
To a gesture, a swirl, or a twirl

She danced  
And all I knew was  
I wanted to be there  
On the dance floor

With her  
Now  
Forever





*She Danced*

# *Maelstrom*

Caught in the maelstrom of thoughts  
I am lost in a chaos of possibilities

So I breathe  
Let go the thoughts  
Dispelling  
The chaos

Until I am conscious  
Only of being

From there a single possibility arises  
So I open myself  
To the peace  
Of non-being

Until the “I”  
Drifts away, like my thoughts





Maelstrom

# *She Saw Them Dancing*

In the moving sand  
She saw them dancing  
The elves and sprites  
No one else saw  
She found that sad

The world was a more beautiful place  
When magical creatures danced  
A shame no one else knew the magic  
They didn't dance in this world

Of course, she knew that  
She only saw their shadows  
Energetic reflections  
Crossing the boundary between worlds

"Whatcha doin' lady?"  
The young boy's voice startled her  
Not sure what to say  
She felt the loose change in her pocket

Without looking up, she replied  
"I think I dropped a quarter here"  
Then instantly regretted it  
Now the boy would help her find it

The boy peered down at the sand  
"Oh, look! Elves!"  
The boy's finger pointed  
At the dancing figures

She followed the finger  
Back up the arm  
To the tousled head of hair  
Framed in the afternoon sun

"Yes, Elves. And sprites too"  
Then, after a pause  
"You see them?"  
"Oh yeah! All the time!"

The boy crouched down beside her  
"What are they doing? Dancing?"  
She smiled  
From the center of her being  
She smiled

"I think it is the solstice dance"  
She whispered, in confidence  
"Kewl!"  
Said the boy





Nature's Beach 15

They watched together, for a bit  
The gentle wavelets  
Moving the sand  
Revealing the movements  
Of magical creatures in another world

Her faith grew with every wave  
In herself  
In humanity  
The world was, indeed  
A magical place

The boy broke the peaceful silence  
“Over there, the Kobolds and Dwarves  
Are having an epic battle  
Wanna come watch?”

If it was possible  
Her smile deepened  
Deepened until she glowed  
“No thanks,” she said

“I’ve had rather enough of Kobolds  
And Dwarves and their wars  
I’m happy here  
With the Elves and Sprites”

“Sprites?! What are Sprites?”  
She pointed to the sand  
Where the Sprites pirouetted  
“They’re quite a bit smaller  
Than the Elves”, she said

“Oh, wow! And they have wings!”  
“Yes”, she agreed, “they do  
They hover  
Like hummingbirds”

“I’ve never seen a Sprite before”  
She nodded her head  
“They are pretty shy  
But they always come out  
For the Solstice Dance”

The boy watched the Sprites  
As they flit about  
Like squadrons of hummingbirds  
Flying in formation  
She watched the boy’s wonder

It had been a long time  
Since she had known such wonder  
The wonder of a child  
The wonder no one wanted to take away  
But the boy soon grew tired  
Of Sprites and Elves  
He shifted on his haunches  
“I’m going to go watch the battle  
Sure you don’t wanna come?”

“No thanks,” she said amiably  
“I’m good here with the Solstice”  
Then, in a beguiling tone  
“The fireworks are about to begin!”

The boy considered that  
“The Kobolds were bringing a trebuchet...”  
She nodded  
“Yes, a trebuchet trumps fireworks  
Maybe I will catch up to you later”

With that, the boy popped up  
Stepped gingerly around  
The dancing Elves and Sprites  
Before running and skipping  
Off to the battle



# *Flood of Truth*

She watched the boy for a while  
Reminded of her young self  
In the boy's animated gestures  
Mimicking the arcs of arrows  
The swinging of hammers and swords

She shouted out to the lad  
“Do let me know if any dragons appear!”  
The boy gave her a thumbs up  
Over his shoulder  
Attention on the battle unwavering

Then, she surmised  
The Kobolds unleashed the trebuchet  
For the boy spread his arms wide  
The gesture of a mighty explosion

*Abhh, how boys love a good battle*  
*Especially when young, she sighed*  
Then returned her attention to the dance  
Unfolding in the sand

*I do wish I could hear them singing*  
She thought, not for the first time  
*Oh well, I can't live forever*  
*So, soon enough*



*Flood of Truth*

It was an open secret  
Yearning for its time  
To become an open truth

When time came  
Truth was a flood  
Which swept the world clean

And like the river Nile  
After the waters recede  
Fertile ground remained

A gift  
Of the tide  
Of reckoning

# *Harmony*

I wonder at the patterns in the sand  
How they got there  
The intricate harmonies of line and shape  
What could create such beauty?

Then the wave comes  
I wonder anew  
At the interplay of moving water and sand  
The rivulets and eddies and smaller waves

Then I wonder  
Does the wave cause the beauty in the sand  
Does the sand cause the beauty in the wave  
Which creates which?

Then I understand  
The harmony of sand and sea  
I realize the beauty of each  
Is created by the harmony of all





*Wondering*

# *The Eye of the World Upon Me*

I sat  
Relaxed  
Settled myself  
Turned my consciousness inward  
And breathed

Breathing in  
Breathing out

In the quiet  
I observed  
The peace  
Of my mind  
Of my body

I observed  
The clothes  
Settling against my skin

I sensed the sand  
And the ocean  
Lapping at the beach  
Salt in the air  
The sun  
And its warmth  
On my brow  
Where the wind tousled my bangs

So I quieted my senses  
Reached deeper inside  
With my breath

Breathing in  
Breathing out

Until my breath became the wind  
My body became the sand  
My being became the ocean

Vast  
Fathomless  
The source  
Of all things  
And the reservoir  
To which all things return

Connecting to all things

And there I sat  
Settled  
Present

Breathing in  
Breathing out

Until I felt a gaze  
Not upon the sitting me  
A gaze upon my being  
The eye of the world upon me

Mind, awakened, quietly suggested

“If you are connected to all things  
All things are connected to you  
All things must also observe”

So there I sat  
A being  
Connecting to all things  
All things connecting  
To my being  
Until my being  
And all things  
Become one

Breathing in  
Breathing out

Mind returned to its quiet





*Nature's Beach 14*

I sat  
The eye of the world upon me  
Gazing back  
Into the infinite eye  
Connecting

Mind whispered one last thought

“Achieving oneness  
That eye  
Becomes  
Your Eye”

“Except...  
There is no you”

*And no mind*  
I reminded Mind  
*Now, quiet you*

Breathing in  
Breathing out

# *The Seashell Nebula*

*Continued from "An Artistic Encounter with Nature", page 2)*

I return to Chesterman Beach every year now. It always surprises me that the house still isn't there, that she is nowhere to be seen. I look up from the beach, expecting to see her, there at the top of the rocks, cradling a steaming mug of tea in her hands.

Every now and again, I Google the name she offered that day. No search has ever returned a mention of a folk artist from British Columbia's Vancouver Island. Nor do any of the many gallery curators I've met these past few years recognize her name.

No surprise there. And I've grown surprisingly nonchalant about it. I learned everything I needed from her that day, enough to send me on the path meant for me.

I come back here because... well, because this is the place I first began to really see the world, the world in its full breadth and width. It's where I began to find beauty everywhere, and where I began to discover ways

to tease that beauty out in photographs.

There is no place else quite like this little cove at the South end of Chesterman Beach. I've never found anywhere with this delightful sprinkle of pulverized seashell, nor the gentle brush of waves which paints so many patterns of exquisitely simple complexity on the canvas of sand. I can stand in one place and the waves treat me to an endless array of beautiful arrangements. In just an hour, I fill up memory card after memory card.

As the years have gone by, my Seashell Series of photographs gained critical and public notice, so the trips here have enriched my finances nearly as much as they have enriched my vision, my spirit. Every time I come, I see deeper and deeper into the beauty.

A lot of years have passed. I'm old now. If I want to stay on the beach for hours, I bring a chair, and a tripod, no longer quite so nimble

and tireless in my pursuit of beauty. But where I once needed to shoot hundreds of frames to find ten, I came to need just ten to find ten.

This time... this time, I haven't shot a single image. It's my last afternoon here. The tide's coming in. The sun getting low, and weak. I don't have much time left.

And yet, I'm unperturbed.

It's not for lack of seeing. The waves brought me more beauty than ever before. But, this time... beauty is not what I'm here for. Not that I have any clue just what that is. I'm not sure what I'm here to shoot. A voice, deep inside, says "not this one, Patrick." I guess I know what I don't want. And so, I stay my finger on the shutter release. Waiting.

The waves come in, and wash away. They come in, and wash away. Always bringing change to the sand, to the grains of shell. I can see them, the bits of shell,

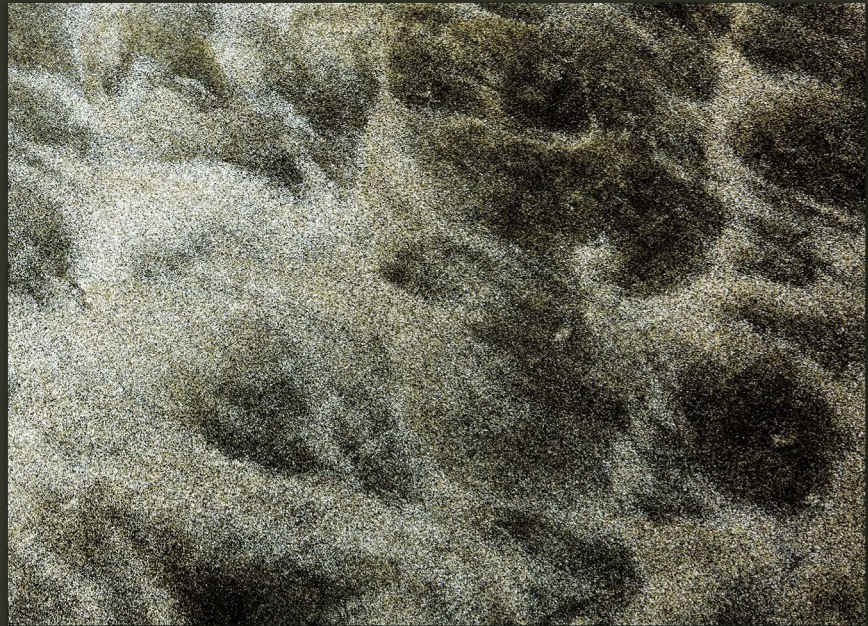


individually, rolling with the gentle flow of water, or tumbling with a stronger wave. I see time in them, I see the crab carapace and mussel shells they once were, see the crab prying open the mussel, and eating it. See the seagull, capturing the young crab in its beak, flying it dozens of feet aloft to drop onto the rocks, cracking its shell, exposing its flesh.

Cycles of life in a grain of shell I once thought was nothing but sand.

So I look closer at the sand, and see a beach before life, the look further back, to see a land before water, and further to see a sky before land. Further back, there is only dust, circling in a vast disk, circling the gassy mass, slowly heating up at its center. And when I look back into the beginning of it all, there is an implosion, into which all matter gathers, shrinking, shrinking, shrinking in volume, until it becomes nothingness, and everything blinks out of existence, even time.

I take a breath, then, and find



*Sea Shell Nebula*

that same grain of shell, watch it begin tumbling with an incoming wave. Thousands of them are tumbling, and rolling, like a dance, guided by forces greater than they, and yet always creating patterns, intricate and delicate, strong and brutish, whole swaths of grains swept up in a tide, moving as one, inexorable, unified, single-minded — each grain, its own path — yet in unison with all the other grains.

In all this motion, I see the great sweeping gestures of human history, see the totality of human existence, and how each individual being plays their part, has a role, makes their own choices, yet is confined in those choices by the forces of consciousness and unconsciousness which guide us — and drive us — on paths we believe to be of our own choosing. Sometimes, they are, but never so much as we believe,

never so much as we rationalize.

The wave recedes, and all the grains come to rest. No longer beings, they become stars, celestial things. Gases. Dust, in deep interstellar space. I see into them, see past them. See into the deepest reaches of the universe, beyond the point to which the light of the Big Bang has been able to reach. Far enough that it seems like touching infinity.

From there I look back, all the way back, and find the one star beyond a nebula of stars, and gas, and dust. The one star which is the sun, my sun, casting light upon a small cove, on an Island, in an Ocean on a very small blue planet. And I am back on that beach, looking through the viewfinder at the grains of sand and shell that are that nebula. Infinite depth in a layer of shell restlessly shifting across the sands of endless time.

CLICK!

I release my breath, along with the shutter.

Another wave comes in, and the Seashell Nebula is gone.

A tear traces down my cheek, catches the sun, twinkles like a star that no one can see, not even I. I begin to think the thought that comes to me as a whisper in my ear, “Yes, that’s the one, Patrick.”

I feel the hand on my shoulder, feel the brush of a braid against my cheek. Her scent is on the breeze.

“Print that one,” the voice continues. The voice I remember as if it were only yesterday I last heard it. “Many will see its beauty, but a few will see its true gift: that beauty — all beauty — has meaning. Some will know the meaning. In time, others will come to know. And they will all touch infinity, just as you have.”

The whisper trailed off, and then the hand was gone, the braid drawn away. Her scent faded on the breeze. When I turned to find her, to thank her, there was no one there.

I am done here. I have followed to a natural end the path I set out on decades ago. So I begin to pack up the camera equipment, prepare to make my way back to the rental car and drive away. I think, for the last time.

Packed, I look up the rock face to where I know a house once stood. Where an enigma invited me: come, understand the universe. There’s a sign there, one I hadn’t noticed before. The land is for sale.

Of course it is.







Wavelets drift paper-thin up a shallow beach of dark green sand, their gentle comings and goings working like an artist's brush on a creamy sheen of crushed seashell. Lighter than the dense sand, the pointillistic particles of crustacean and mollusk drift with the flow, settling into delightful patterns.

A man picks his way between the waves, framing the beauty in the patterns with his camera, while stories and stanzas begin forming in his mind.

You'll find Chesterman Beach on Vancouver Island's rugged west coast, in Tofino, British Columbia, Canada.

Patrick Jennings is a photographer, poet, author, and filmmaker who finds himself in Vancouver, a bit too far from Chesterman Beach.

Images and stories selected from his blog,

[PixToWords.com](http://PixToWords.com)