

The narrator's summer job is collecting marine specimens in Puget Sound, Washington. In this excerpt, he is looking for specimens in the mudflats before daybreak. Mudflats, or flats, are coastal landforms created when sediment and silt from tides are deposited as the tides recede.

Excerpt from *The Highest Tide*

by Jim Lynch

- 1 I rounded the oyster beds, to the far side. . . . It was low tide by then, and I saw the water hesitating at its apex, neither leaving nor returning, patiently waiting for the gravitational gears to shift. Dozens of anxious clams started squirting in unison like they did whenever vibrating grains of sand warned them predators were approaching. I stopped and waited with them, to actually see the moment when the tide started returning with its invisible buffet of plankton for the clams, oysters, mussels and other filter feeders. It was right then, ankle deep in the Sound, feet numbing, eyes relaxed, that I saw the nudibranch.¹
- 2 In all my time on the flats I'd never seen one before. I'd read about them, sure. I'd handled them at aquariums but never in the wild, and I'd never even seen a photo of one this stunning. It was just three inches long but with dozens of fluorescent, orange-tipped hornlike plumes jutting from the back of its see-through body that appeared to be lit from within.
- 3 Nudibranchs are often called the butterflies of the sea, but even that understates their dazzle. Almost everything else in the northern Pacific is dressed to blend with pale surroundings. Nudibranchs don't bother, in part because they taste so lousy they don't need camouflage to survive. But also, I decided right then, because their beauty is so startling it earns them a free pass, the same way everyday life brakes for peacocks, parade floats. . . .
- 4 The dark mudflats loomed like wet, flattened dunes stretching deep into Skookumchuck Bay in front of our house. From a distance, they looked too barren to support sea life. Up close, they still did, unless you knew where to find the hearty clams, worms and tiny creatures that flourish in mud. . . . I'm not sure why I decided to take a look. It was still an hour before sunrise, and I knew exactly what the bars² looked like in the moonlight, but for some reason, I couldn't resist.
- 5 I heard it long before I saw it. It was an exhale, a release of sorts, and I instantly wondered if a whale was stranded again. We had a young minke³ stuck out there two summers prior, and it made similar noises until the tide rose high enough for rescuers to help free it. . . . I looked for a hulking silhouette but couldn't find one. I waited, but there were no more sounds. Still, I went toward what I thought I'd heard, avoiding stepping into the mud until I had to. I knew the flats well enough to know I could get stuck just about anywhere. The general rule was you didn't venture out past the shells and gravel with an incoming tide. I sank up to my knees twice, and numbing water filled my boots.

¹**nudibranch:** type of sea slug

²**bars:** sandbars

³**minke:** species of small whale

- 6 . . . I kept stepping toward the one sound I'd heard, a growing part of me hoping I'd find nothing at all. When I stopped to rest and yank up my socks, my headlamp crossed it. My first thought? A giant octopus.
- 7 Puget Sound has some of the biggest octopi in the world. They often balloon to a hundred pounds. Even the great Jacques Cousteau⁴ himself came to study them. But when I saw the long tubular shape of its upper body and the tangle of tentacles below it, I knew it was more than an octopus. I came closer, within fifty feet, close enough to see its large cylindrical siphon⁵ quiver. I couldn't tell if it was making any sounds at that point, because it was impossible to hear anything over the blood in my ears. . . .
- 8 The creature's body came to a triangular point above narrow fins that lay flat on the mud like wings, but it was hard to be sure exactly where it all began or ended, or how long its tentacles truly were, because I was afraid to pry my eyes off its jumble of arms for more than half a second. I didn't know whether I was within reach, and its arms were as big around as my ankle and lined with suckers the size of half-dollars. If they even twitched I would have run. So, I was looking at it and not looking at it while my heart spangled my vision. I saw fragments, pieces, and tried to fuse them in my mind but couldn't be certain of the whole. I knew what it had to be, but I wouldn't allow myself to even think the two words. Then I gradually realized the dark shiny disc in the middle of the rubbery mass was too perfectly round to be mud or a reflection.
- 9 It was too late to smother my scream. Its eye was the size of a hubcap.⁶

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⁴**Jacques Cousteau:** renowned French oceanographer

⁵**siphon:** tube-like organ that is used for drawing in or removing fluids

⁶**hubcap:** removable cap over the end of a wheel axle