

PEBBLE BEACHES

Beth Powning

Pebble beach. The words evoke the special kind of tranquillity and solitude common to Canada's coasts. A secluded, cliff-rung cove in B.C.'s Gulf Islands, where orcas rub up against the steep shore; or a strand littered with driftwood, viewed from the cedar-scented waters of a Tofino hot tub. Forillon National Park, on the Gaspé; or Grand Manan Island, where your sneakers crunching the slippery pebbles are the only human sound, a metronome timeless as the long-drawn boom of foghorn.

Pebble beaches, steeper and narrower than sand beaches, are often remote, tucked into wild coves. Formed by a higher energy wave environment, or by the erosion of ancient cliffs, they don't invite jogging, can't be used for sand-castle building, aren't usually good places to swim. Instead, they are the haunts of moose, ravens, gulls. On their high-tide lines, driftwood marks the transition from rock to wildflower. Tide pools gleam, a secret world of anemones, starfish, and whelks. And from the beach's smooth, slippery pebbles, peace rises, shimmering as heat.

You're seduced into a peaceful pursuit; pebble-gathering. It's a slow, contemplative, stoop and search.

Pebbles are different from one another as snowflakes. They fit in the cup of a hand, nestle in pockets. When wet, they gleam like jewels. They're red-streaked, green-flecked, obsidian, or ivory. You might collect only white pebbles, symbol of hope, new starts. Or perhaps green ones, to celebrate a new love. Or certain shapes: heart, round, oblong. You rub them on your cheek, wet them in your mouth. When pockets or backpack are full, you sit on a log, smelling both wet, rock-clung spruce trees, and the fresh sea-air. You listen to the searing, wild cries of gannets. You watch the small burst of water as, wing-tucked, they dive. The rhythmic boom of surf both fills and empties your mind.

You rummage, once home. Old Mason jars. Or that beautiful, round glass bowl. You fill them with your pebbles, and set them in a window, where they will gleam in sunshine. Or on the hearth, where they'll be ruddied in firelight. Every so often, you pour water on them. And once again, their colours bloom, strong and vibrant as memory.