

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO ARP – A CHILDREN’S BOOK

Introduction;

Arp was a harbor seal. Her name was Arp, as is the vocal name of every seal. She could say her name to you, and you would hear it, but you would not be able to tell it apart from the vocal name of her mother, who was Arp, you see. And it would be wasted on you if she named all her friends for you, because though she pronounces the name Arp in 100,000 different ways, you are so tone deaf as to not be able to tell any of them apart.

In this story we will use the thought-names, by which seals tell each other apart, especially under water. It is easier than Arp#232,673, for instance, which a scientist might have named any one particular harbor seal in California. We will speak of communication between seals where there could be none as we know it.

Barks, yelps, growls, can express a lot, but nothing like body language – that is, posturing to convey an idea. A lot of what a pup must learn then is how to know what other seals are thinking by what they do. If mama looks up and starts heading for the water like mad, a pup must remember just what the circumstances were, so he will do the same in similar circumstances. So we say the pup was “taught”. Even when a seal gets out of another’s way, or doesn’t, that says a lot, and because we rely on words, we miss these hints if nobody explains with words. Not so with seals. Every movement has meaning.

Chapter 1. The childhood of SillySeal.

The thought-name for SillySeal came from her laid back attitude. All pups have that, but outgrow it unless interrupted in development, as was she. She was born in 1990 or so, in a typical harbor seal enclave; a 15’ wide beach formed in a fold of a cliff in northern San Diego County. She was swimming 45 minutes after her birth, avidly exploring the new world under the watchful eye of her mother, known as Bigger-than-most-and-alooof. Her mother showed her how to ride the power of the ocean to advantage by proper timing. She showed SillySeal where to find crabs and goodies, and how to know when a fish was being pulled by a fisherman’s hook and could be snatched while the fish was being reeled in.

One day Bigger-than-most-and-alooof indicated SillySeal had graduated from school, and disappeared. SillySeal didn’t know why her mother left, as she had never heard of mating season. She went off on her own, as do all Arps over 2 months of age.



Chapter 2. Lost and found

Big seals had group places they used, and sometimes she was allowed to haul out (get up out of the water) when there was room, sometimes not. When you are little, you never know if the older kids will be mean. While exploring the world, she found herself swimming against a hard storm, and thrown up on rocks over and over, until she was completely exhausted and maybe injured. She stayed there 2 days, waiting to feel better.



And then it happened. A net came down and she was swept into the air and carried to a truck. Laid back she was, but this was absurd. She was held and bottle fed some until she felt better. A human took her back flipper and held it for a moment and it sort of hurt, but then she got some extra food. Back in the pen, she noticed other seals had orange tags on their rear flippers now and supposed she had one too.

The humans put her in a large swimming pool with some other harbor seals and threw fish to all of them. “Not so bad” she thought. It was the rehabilitation center at Sea World, where humans gave her fish every day. Sea Lions were kept separate, as they can be rowdy and rude to harbor seals, but they got fed too.



This was contrary to the folklore she had been taught as a pup. “Never get near an animal bigger than you”, her mother had taught her, but could not explain why. It was just part of their culture. She decided Mom had given incomplete information on this one.

One old Arp, whose thought-name was Geezer, had had extensive injuries and had been there for a long time. He once indicated. “It’s good now, but I have seen many taken away from here, never to return. I suppose I am flawed and so can stay.” SillySeal didn’t understand the implications of Geezer’s suspicions, as seal pups have to be shown something by a mentor or be discomfited by something to be afraid of it.

Chapter 3. Abandoned Again.

One day the net fell again. A truck ride again, but now she could smell the ocean. It was a different truck that wobbled like the ocean used to. When the door was opened, she saw this truck was in the middle of the ocean, and all the harbor seals were let to fall into the water. She thought “So long, and thanks for all the fish”. She didn’t know she was right off La Jolla, far from her birthplace. She followed the other seals as they navigated up the slope of the bottom toward the shore. The waters between Seal Rock and Children’s Pool were full of harbor seals. She could hear them, though could only see the ones close by, but land animals had no clue at all they were there. Not so bad. She found a protected area with a fine rock she could get up on for some sunshine. Humans were close by, but none of them offered any fish. She didn’t need any anyway.



Chapter 4 Love at first sight

SillySeal wandered about the area as seals do. Usually within 15 miles or so just to explore and hunt, but came back to Children’s Pool or Seal Rock more often than not, where she had fond memories and there was always a crowd of seals that acted safe, so she could too. By 1997, she was full grown and doing fine.

One day she heard an awful racket. If she had known what a locomotive was, she might have thought one had come this way. A lot of bubbles and huffing sounds and something was bumping into rocks and swimming erratically. She saw what seemed like, but unlike a human, as she didn't know they could change into divers. She stayed well back, but a burly boy seal was watching too. He looked at her for a moment, then in the direction she had been looking. That means "Whatcha lookin' at?" She kept looking at the diver to show him. He shot forward a flip, then looked back at her. That means "Watch this". Then he came behind the diver and grabbed its fin in his mouth, then spun around behind the diver when it turned to see what had grabbed him. Before it was over, the diver had spun completely around and the Burly Boy had stayed out of sight the whole time.

SillySeal had never seen anything so funny. "So seals are superior to this animal, large as it is". Her own thought name for the burly boy was "WildThing", as he behaved so rashly, seemed to her. She wondered why he had no orange tag.

WildThing paid a lot of attention to SillySeal after that and one day indicated something was brewing, called mating season. He chased SillySeal around a lot, but hesitated to follow her onto the Children's Pool beach, even though the humans didn't want to use it any more for some reason. He indicated it was against the legends of long ago to be on a beach without a cliff wall to cover your back. She indicated "Poo, that's what the old ones said".

Chapter 5. A mixture of feelings about humans.

Eventually WildThing followed her up on the sand and did find it ok. Still, if a human came close did anything suspicious, he and others might dash into the water just for a moment until the fright passed. Even he was not sure why he did it. It just felt right. He was not a coward; he had seen San Francisco Bay and San Miguel Island and been in a couple good fights. "I just wanted to check the water, he would say", and come back out after a while. Or decide he had meant to go start hunting food just then. The more nothing bad happened, the more likely he would stay on the sand. There were lots of other beaches. They were cozy small ones in secluded spots where only seals could even reach them.

Silly Seal thought it odd they bolted at the approach of a human that one could play with in the water, still she herself would get a panicky feeling if one suddenly moved. If a tiny child smaller than she was moved suddenly and giggled and shrieked would make fear feelings come from nowhere, and if other seals around her suddenly moved, she could not stop herself. Then after a dip, they would go back if the mood struck. If a human got in the water, that was ok, because they are so pathetic when they try to swim.

Chapter 6 Hard times 1998

Life was good socially, but the ocean became stingy. The water was too warm, and the kelp was falling apart. It made the water cloudy and somehow there were fewer fish and things to eat. An El Niño had arrived, and the whole food chain suffered as the kelp fell down and small fish had no place to hide. Mussels and scallops filtered things out of the water that were bitter and poisonous. Red Tide made the water dark below the surface. Silly Seal was always hungry. She hunted further, but it was the same in every direction, and it only wasted energy. Some seals stopped moving and drifted away with the tide. She didn't spend much time on the beach anymore. Seals are made for cold water, not hot sand.

WildThing and others who knew the way had made a journey to the Channel Islands, where seals in Southern California were more prosperous, and deep cold water was readily available.

SillySeal was not quite a wild seal and had not ventured with others that far, so she didn't know the way.

Chapter 7 A visitor that didn't stay.

The ocean cooled as winter approached and life recovered some. She had stopped growing, with so little food available, and didn't feel well. She hauled out one day and felt something slipping away. She looked and she had given birth, but it was too soon. It was December, and she was young still, and her low body weight and weakened condition caused a stillbirth. This is a common occurrence with seals on the underweight side especially when their bodies are weakened in hard times.



She stared at the undersized lump. She had seen pups, but this one was wrong. Typical of the unfinished ones. It didn't move. It didn't want to swim. She felt bad, like something had failed but had no reason to believe it was real terrible. She had not known she lost anything, just something peculiar happened.

Sea gulls came to clean up the afterbirth as they do, and the tide came in and the stillbirth washed away. Some of her old friends were never seen again that year, but she survived, as did most.

WildThing reappeared. She still preferred her old friend and indicated to him once "WildThing, I think I love you". One day mating season began, and seals chased each other around under water and barked and yelped and carried on, though not even scuba divers can hear their vocalizations underwater. The sea became cooler and more plentiful and life was easier. The next year, the pup SillyThing arrived in 1999 resembling both SillySeal and WildThing.

Chapter 8 The next generation

The life of SillyThing had no El Niño. Those seem to come 7 years apart, but that is only a rough estimate. Life was good. There were no seals old enough to remember what a predator was. The divisions between the Wilds and the Acclimated were fading. By 2005, SillyThing had had her first mating and like her mother, had not seen the father since. Seals don't need to. In 2006 she pupped on the sand at Children's Pool and after a couple months, had watched that pup go off to seek his fortune. She never saw him again, or never recognized him again. A second mating season then passed without anything special as far as she was concerned. Now she knew what pups were, and SillyThing felt on top of the world.

Came winter 2007, she brought forth a second pup whose thought-name was FutureLeader. It reflected her confident and assertive nature. Children's Pool was getting crowded and stinky, and as part of the education of FutureLeader, she brought him upon the sand of a new beach to show him some humans. Humans were there, but kept their distance instinctively, as they had always done. FutureLeader understood the message which his grandmother had learned and passed down.

"Yes, seals are superior to humans. This beach is ours for the taking. Humans always retreat."



