



By Anne Atwell-McLeod

She looks out at the water that goes on forever and admires the way the morning sunlight reflects upon its surface. She feels herself grow lighter with each lap at the shore. She knows that water takes up most of her body weight, and she can feel it now, beneath her skin. She finds herself echoing the ocean.

She has come here this morning as she has on countless days. With a word of farewell to her parents, she'd floated down the road in anticipation. But now she must return to the world beyond the ocean, the world she has lived in always but still knows so little. The waters recede as she walks back up the road and away from the part of her that lives in an undersea palace.

The customary journey to school is a long one, and her feet ache with every step on the cement sidewalk. She feels the world turn as she steps into the school building and becomes dizzy in this familiar, unnatural element.

In the halls she passes the beautiful faces with their beautiful voices that ebb and flow through the corridors. Her heart aches with the wish that she could be like them, that she could fill the silence as they do, instead of being a part of it. But she's afraid.

They call out their "hey"s, and "how's it going"s, not waiting for an answer. She's sure this language does not exist in the palace below the waves. Words are forming at her lips, but they won't come out. She's left with her mouth opening and closing—silent and rhythmic as that of a fish.

The boy with black eyes that dart looks her way, although she barely exists to him. He may not even see her. He may be looking through her with those eyes, the ones she thinks of so often, that consume her as the ocean does. Then he smiles, and she smiles back, her heart skipping a beat. She's careful to keep her mouth closed, not wanting to reveal too much.

He walks away, and she's thankful he can't see the

ocean that roars inside of her.

In class she sits with her ankles hooked around the legs of her chair, anchoring her. With her arms she hugs herself. She sees herself as others must—like the water's surface on a calm day, reflecting the world around her. There's no sign of the sea creatures, the life that thrives on the ocean floor.

She's aware of what's going on in the class. She's conscious of the questions

that are asked and the long arms that rise in a quest to answer them. One of those could be hers; she knows this. The answers are clear, but she can't bring herself to take the risk. The fear of being wrong makes her arms so waterlogged that they sink to her sides. Her mind wanders. The class loses her interest now that she understands she won't contribute. The room and the faces float away, and she thinks back to the dark-eyed boy: eyes like tadpoles, she recalls.

Her image of him shimmers now that he's not in front of her, like an underwater vision. She wonders what it would be like to dance with him. She's never danced, unless she counts the graceful fishlike strokes that propel her through the ocean of her dreams. She feels that dancing would be natural to her, the motions more similar to those of a sea creature than anything she's seen in the world of air.

The sound of the bell cuts through her dream like a knife. In her mind's eye she and the boy with the tadpole eyes part, as she leaves her seat and makes her way to the next class.

In the cafeteria, students swim around her as she eats silently. She is always silent, always watching. They cluster, as a school of fish does, becoming interchangeable as they move among those they know and what is safe. She knows this feeling. It is what draws her to the water each morning. It is why she finds herself looking at the boy.

She notices the way his eyes flash when he smiles, something he does often. But for the first time she realizes that his smile is not reserved for her, and she feels a swift current taking part of her away.

She notices, too, that the others in his element gravitate toward him. She feels pride swell as she understands he is the prince of his world. Reality sets in again:



she is not part of this universe. Looking around her, she recognizes that the place she does belong is nowhere to be found here. Suddenly she resents being a disconnected piece of the ocean.

The next morning she comes to bid the shore farewell. The decision to say good-bye is an impulse. She knows she must stop these pilgrimages, that she cannot let herself be drowned by them.

Even so, on this last visit she is full of sadness. Memories rise to the surface as she says good-bye. Her eyes drown in salt tears, and she gasps for air. Her lungs

are on fire, and she finds herself choking on her own breath.

The undersea palace where she has reigned for as long as she can remember is swept away by a strong tide. She turns her back on the ocean and starts up the gravelly road that leads to school. Each step she takes draws the palace farther and farther out to sea, while the world around her is gently urged in.

Stepping into the school building, she discovers that she's engulfed by the world—she can be a part of it. She sees the beautiful faces, the same as yesterday. But suddenly she's among them. She still can't find the words to say; she still fears being wrong. Immersing herself in humanity has not eased the silence that's so hard to break. Perhaps this is a universal problem.

She feels dark eyes on her. Quickly she pivots until her eyes meet his. For a moment the prince, the boy with tadpole eyes, sees her. The moment—a single wave in the ocean of a lifetime—sinks to the bottom as it passes.

And it does pass. She loosens her hold on all of it. She has changed her life because of him, but she will live it because of *her*. The ocean that brought her here is gone, but she carries its relics within her forever.

She turns and walks with confidence down the crowded hall, away from those eyes, her last reminder of the sea. A strange face and its voice stop her and ask, "Who are you?"

Her lips part as she speaks her name. ★



Uncle Al



Uncle Al is dying
So I think Aunt Addie
will soon be joining
the caravan
with her old dolls and her knitting
She'll be joining
the two stooges
yoo-hoo-hooing
around to old farmhouses
and other exciting truck stops
eating raw cucumbers
and complaining about
various garden parasites
They'll tour the cousins
and make their famous leek stew
They might discuss different styles
of thongs, or the price of roofing
If they get really rowdy or excited
they'll run over a cat or two
and rescue half-dead dragonflies
from the windshield wipers of
their '74 Impala
They might drive out to see us soon,
their wet knee-high pantyhose
streaming out like flags from
the windows
And then they'll all pile out
and make Dad take a bath
in buttermilk
Then they'll be off to visit
"Famous Swamp Discoveries," but I'll
count the days till they return.

—Erica Beeney,
Ninth grade, Castle Rock Jr. High School,
Castle Rock, Colorado

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