



THE MERCURY

THE STUDENT ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE OF GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

Year 2015

Article 10

4-13-2015

Drifting

Nancy J. Clark

Gettysburg College, clarna02@gettysburg.edu

Class of 2015

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Clark, Nancy J. (2015) "Drifting," *The Mercury*: Year 2015, Article 10.

Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2015/iss1/10>

This open access fiction is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

Drifting

Keywords

creative writing, fiction

Author Bio

Nancy is a senior with a double major in Spanish and English with a Writing Concentration. She likes her coffee with just a touch of milk, quotes movies and song lyrics with every other breath, and enjoys napping on the couch with her dog back at home in New Jersey.

Drifting

Nancy Clark

Even as I dove into the water I knew I would never come out. Its grayness enveloped me, coating my skin and forcing my eyes closed. My feet melted into the fins that trickled up my ankles and fused the rest of my legs. The scales crept their way up my back, painting me bluer than the Aegean, and my dorsal fin burst from my spine, pushing against my skin and crashing through like bubbles bursting on the surface of a wave. My last breath of real air rushed past my cheeks as I exhaled and my dive slipped deeper.

I had been on the surface too long. The instant I hit the water the tightness of my sun-dried skin dissipated like a sigh of relief and the tan I had carefully earned was already fading from it. My gills had opened and were pumping air and water happily through my jawline, yet I still felt the starvation pangs crying from my lungs. They ached in my chest, begging me to open my mouth and gasp for air, but my lips pressed together unflinchingly. I sucked them against my teeth and let the pain endure.

The flashing silver of schools of fish obscured the drop-off where the sea broke open its floor. The trench stared at me, a gaping maw waiting to swallow me, or spit the fishbone city out, I couldn't decide which. Of course we needed to settle as far from the surface as possible. We could never be like Atlantis, nestled in a kelp forest with sharks patrolling day and night; no, we burrowed into the deepest trench where not even light could reach us. My tail still shimmered in the last refracted rays.

The sun would be setting soon. It would fall faster and faster through the sky, burning red like a meteor. Then the sea would swallow it, chew it to pieces, and she would spit out the stars to spark sailors' imaginations. The sailors were always her favorites; they were the ones who came and went of their own accord, no tide drawing them back, and so she pined after them until they returned to her.

I dove in.

A school of guards passed me as I crested the cliff. One's eyes, all pupil, caught mine for an instant. His neck was lined with shark teeth and a wound was still inflamed across his shoulder. He could kill me in an instant, at least underwater. But his eyes were hollow; they had grown lazy after a life of living in the depths, never having to adjust. On land he would be blinded by the sun and stumble on spindly, unused legs like a newborn

lamb. I flashed my fangs; he nodded, and I swam on.

The city sparked in and out of the darkness with bursts of bioluminescence. The rib cage of an ancient whale arched in the center of everything, leading to the great cave. Stretching from the sand to the darkness, the bones were tethered in this would-be oasis while everyone and everything floated around them. I drifted to them and through them, an instinctive tide drawing me in to the inevitable. Whispers bubbled around me; the abyssals were clustered in gossiping, tails curling together like twinned conch shells as they shot me looks that were entirely unsubtle. I sank closer to the spine and let my tail clip each vertebrae I passed.

I closed my eyes as I entered the cave. Not that it mattered; anything that glowed was forbidden from this last sanctuary of submarine splendor. My webbed fingers ran along the wall, which was smoothed and polished daily by dedicated servants so that it could not tear even the most delicate finnage. My forearm brushed what seemed to be a warm, fleshy bulge in the stone. I opened my eyes and in the last ripples of light could barely see the eye-less, squid-like man crouched before me. His tentacles anxiously pulsed against his rocky perch, making greedy sucking sounds.

"Tribute?" he asked. I skirted to the side and swam past him to the deepest darkness where the queen herself sat.

"Hello, Mother."

When I opened my mouth to speak, the water rushed in, floating over my lips and washing my tongue in brine and mud, crashing against the back of my throat. I could taste the dirt stirred up by the queen's ripples as she rose.

"Darling," she purred, petting my cheek with her long, claw-like nails, "you've come home."

*

"Of course, *they* will want a feast for you. They *always* want a feast, even for just spotting a migrating school of tuna." I felt the water shudder as Mother flipped her hand the same way she had when she dismissed her attendants. "If I gave a feast for every fish they claimed was good luck, all the ships on the waves would be empty. Frankly, I thought you dried out ages ago. But somehow there's still water in your veins; you can explain to me how you managed *that* later. For now, go get yourself cleaned up while I rest." She swooped onto her throne, constructed of the jawbones of sharks that the greatest hunters had captured and brought her as tribute. "Send the captain in; we will need her best floaters to fetch us some sailors." As I left, I heard her listing off orders. "No peg-legs, now," she told the captain. "We need all of the meat intact."

A school of abyssals swept me away to scrub the remnants of surface life from me. Their white faces, bleached from never leaving the trench, circled like sharks, one after the other, scrubbing at every inch of

me. They picked the skin that still clung around my protruding dorsal fin and plucked the hairs that peeked out from between my scales. Question after question streamed at me in the moans of baby humpback whales. They echoed off the rocks, off the whalebones, out of the chasm and into the world and back again.

“I’ve never seen so much skin!”

“How long were you up there, anyway?”

“Didn’t you leave five moons ago? How did you stay dry for so long?”

For a moment, my gills forgot how to work. They caught, seized, frozen shut, and my whole chest was suddenly hollow and collapsed like a sunken wreck with treasure still inside, somewhere. Then a bubble breached the blockage and I could breathe again. The abyssals continued their questions and I let them speculate their way through my silence.

How *had* I stayed dry for so long? It felt good to have so much water on my skin again. Spare days spent on the shore splashing in the waves had helped, but even then I had to sneak away at night to keep from cracking open. But I *could* sneak away. Even Gus, the innkeeper, only laughed when I came back sandy in the morning from sleeping on the shoreline. “You sure love the sea, dontcha?” he would chortle. Then his wife Margaret would come out and untangle some seaweed from my hair, hand me my apron, and lead me back to the kitchen before the sailors woke up for breakfast. The steam filling the kitchen helped me through mealtimes, and in the slow hours I would follow the sailors to the docks and let the spray wash over me.

As the moon drifted in the clouds I would sit with the landlocked sailors and we watched the sea wave at us, beckoning us home. They would point out ships cresting over the horizon and tell me about the tradewinds and the faraway England and rumors of sharks and sea monsters and mermaids, and when I giggled they told tale after tale of the watery sirens who sang to men who had been at sea too long before dragging them to their watery graves. Each story became more and more extravagant as they took my silence for amazement; with every word I could feel my chest crack open like the shells of the crabs Gus would catch early in the morning for the shipfuls of navy boys. They could laugh, like I had heard sailors before them laugh to me, and in my ears the sound turned into the gargles of my drowning prey.

*

“Darling, you look so lovely now that we’ve washed that tan away.” Mother uncurled her long fingers, stretching the shimmering silver tissue between them, and traced them along my tail. Her smile snapped to anger when she reached the edge. I looked down. The rocks and whale bones had

caught and torn my delicate finnage. I had barely even noticed, like how I had mindlessly chewed at my nails while waiting for pies to bake until Margaret brought me all manner of towels and rags to fold and keep me busy. But Mother's dorsal fin flared, intricate spines reaching from the nape of her neck to her lower back. She clutched a handful of my tattered tail, and as I tried to pull away the thin flesh ripped off and hung limp in her hands, draped over her perfect webbing.

I looked away from her and back past my own shoulder. It wasn't until Mother grabbed one of my hands that I noticed I had been wringing them together, pushing my teal webs until a few of them had split.

"Why do you do this?" The blackness of her pupils seemed to stretch through the rest of her face, leeching all the way to her creamy fangs. "Do you want to look like a scrounging treasure hunter with these ripped hands?"

"No, Mother." I could barely bubble out an answer. *Breathe. Just breathe. You remember how to breathe.*

She relinquished my hand and held my tattered tail in my face. "This is *not* how you respect the sea." *Or her queen.* "Ladies, trim her tail. Make it look delicate again."

The queen swam away and the abyssals returned to work, this time with razor-sharp knives that shaped intricate points into my tail fins again. I closed my eyes. At least on the surface you could cry.

*

Margaret had caught me lurking in the cove and calling to the drunken sailors that stumbled out of the pub. Thinking I was desperate for work she brought me to the kitchen; little did she know that she was saving her own customers rather than saving me. Even after months of working by her side I would catch myself watching her float about the kitchen; she was too graceful for someone on land; she had to be secretly swimming.

"Nah, lass," she told me once as we drained the last dregs of table wine. "Truth be told I never learned to swim."

"But, you mean... never?"

She shook her head, her bun coming loose and dripping tendrils over her ears. "I've lived in this pub with Gus for thirty years, right off the docks. I've poured ale for captains of the navy and pirate sloops alike. I watched my boys run out to the waves day after day until they ran out to ships to see where else the waves could go. But I have never, swear by the Holy Cross, never stepped a toe into the salt water."

One Sunday, when she and a disgruntled Gus returned from the chapel, I brought her to the cove. Behind the rocks I led her into the waves, and my golden hands guided her onto her back where the sea could cradle her. Without even a toe anchored to the sand she hung suspended and sur-

prised on the water that offered her and her husband and sons their livelihoods.

*

I stood beside Mother and a few of her select guards at the mouth of the queen's cave, careful to hold my hands still and display my newly polished finnage. The floaters arrived with a half dozen sailors in tow. Billowing shirts flapped like flags in a storm as they dragged them deeper and deeper. The bodies were dropped in front of my mother, but slowly each one began to drift skyward. The floaters tried to hold them down. The leader of them grew flustered as she tried to acknowledge the queen without losing her bounty.

"Sorry, your majesty. I only wish dead men stayed sunk."

Mother nodded, then took a trident from one of her guards. She speared the troublesome sailor in question, the golden points reaching straight through his chest and into the muck.

"That ought to hold him."

The blood trickled upwards where the men could not go. It drifted in curling streams, reaching and swaying like leaves in the kelp forests. The blood drifted up and I felt my throat catch. The last time I had seen blood was when the butcher was sick and Gus insisted on carving up a pig on his own. He had cut himself and come running into the kitchen with swine blood covering his arms and his own pouring out fresh from lord-knows-where. Margaret had struggled to wash him off, having me run buckets back and forth from the well, everything running off the back steps and pooling in the street.

A small smile crept across Mother's lips as she tasted the metallic notes on the current; I was just far enough away that I could barely smell it, but it was still as if it had dug its way into my throat, grasped my windpipe and wrapped my gills, pinning me under with those sailors. I could almost feel their blood mixing with my own, tightening my veins and coursing through to my still-beating heart. It was filling me, rushing faster and faster through my limbs and pulsing in my skull and all I could hear were their already silenced screams echoing through my chest. I could not watch; I had to escape their gargling cries. I rushed out to the place in the whale's arching ribcage to float where it might have once had a heart. The abyssals murmured like low tide over a rocky beach, but I let all sound drift from my ears.

I closed my eyes and pictured myself lifting out of the water, emerging to a rising sun. It would crest the horizon as I did, breaking the barrier between earth and sky. I always loved surfacing between tides. Feeling the ebbing water rip against itself as it crashed from its high. Churning with the flooding seas that rushed up to their full potential. Moving from the

frothing foam to the stones that pressed warm and round into my feet. The scales would drip from my legs along with the seawater, falling to the rocks and shimmering in the morning light. I could feel the warmth, feel the light. Away from the abyssals, away from the belly of the whale, away from the currents pulling me back.

With my eyes closed to the water around me, I was there.

My scales fell, one by one, flashing green in the blue-tinged water. They hit the ground, shed and abandoned. They settled into the bottom, their color suddenly flat. Legs emerged beneath them. My fins disintegrated and my toes tickled their way out of the dissolving webbing. I dropped onto the spine of the whale, feeling the whole of the bones under the soles of my feet.

With no sun to tan my flesh, it was left somewhere between gray and sallow. I stood for a moment, mid-transformation, neither shimmering nor glowing, water pumping through my gills with my feet firmly on the ground. Anchored.

I looked my mother in the eyes. For a moment I thought she might understand. Months ago I had awoken on the shore from nightmares of Margaret finding me with scales, of Gus bringing other floaters' tails in to boil for stew. The sound of the waves against the night had made me wonder which side of my life was a lie, which secret was the one pulling me into the drowning sea. I saw my gills reflected in the blue of the queen's eyes. They were fluttering, gasping, waiting for normalcy to reestablish itself. Longing for the rhythm to stabilize. The sun to rise. The tide to ebb.

"This isn't who you are," she said, glaring disdainfully at my feet.

"Yes it is." She understood me as much as she understood the way the sand clung to the waves. She knew me the way she knew how it felt to have the sun crisp her skin.

The water washed through my gills one last time before I forced them closed, and suddenly the shifting of my respiratory systems left it with nowhere to go. It was sloshed through my throat and chest as my tissues grated against each other like rusted gears before clicking into place. The saline seeped stingingly into my muscles and spilled into my still raw trachea. My lungs flooded and seized like a fish leaping and flapping on the deck of a boat and each muscle in my chest and gut spasmed wildly in an attempt to cough. I felt tumbled like the small children I had watched toppling in the crashing waves. Then I had laughed when their toes emerged before their heads, every inch of them matted with wet sand. Now there was panic and rocking and I sucked my lips tight against my teeth just to feel something solid. My nostrils flared as the last bubbles of surrendered air escaped and my jaw struggled to open but I held it closed. There was nothing to breathe here anyhow.

My chest fell forward in my empty coughs and my feet stumbled ahead to catch the rest of me. My toes caught on the vertebrae of the giant, ancient whale and throbbed in time with my ever-quickenening heartbeat, but my heels smacked harder, bone to bone, trying to stabilize themselves. My fresh skin felt the rough sand that had splayed over the ossified creature and somewhere under everything else my nerves pondered the difference between the smooth of the whale and the grating of the mud it had sunk into. I could see the abyssals rushing in, waiting to feed on my chaos and scandal. Perhaps they would spend the next millennia discussing how the daughter of the mighty sea queen, who had brought her people so far from the surface-worshipping Atlantis, had turned human before their very eyes. Wouldn't that be a story.

But as they rushed forward I saw that their eyes darted about with the same confused panic that filled my entire being. In every corner of my being I could feel my nerves surging with electricity like the beasts that brought light to the deepest caverns of the ocean, to our trench, to our darkness. And suddenly that's all there was: the darkness of the deep sea flooded my eyes and drowned the last of my vision despite my pupils' gasps for light.

The last thing I could make out was my mother waving her hand dismissively. "She'll change back," the queen declared. "She's a floater, just looking for drama."

The rippled waves from the converging abyssals threw my sea legs off balance and I fell. The ripples of darkness had washed through my head before I could land with my own spine in line with the whale's.

And then I floated.

The sun grew brighter as I drifted to the surface. The water brushed softly against my arms and legs that hung like clumps of seaweed in the surf. Then I was there, belly above the waves, and there was nothing but light.