

Young Writers Award – 2009 winner

the lunar coast

by Megan McGrath

I was seventeen when the tide went out. I felt it in my lungs. At the height of its run, my breath snared in my chest. I clutched my school shirt, gasped.

“Lee?” Alex gripped my shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

I saw my agony mirrored in his eyes.

Alex and I had grown up on the lunar coast. It was a treacherous, northern stretch of coastline with rocky headlands and monstrous tides. Each day the moon peeled away the sea exposing an atlas of silver sand spits that spiralled into the sea. Our coast protected ships and deterred them.

We were a fishing village that thrived through the winters when the tides were kind and sun stayed low. Over the summer season of storms, we repaired boats and nets and re-told stories of great catches and disasters.

Alex and I loved the summers. The days seemed endless and our fathers stayed home. Though not related, we were a family. Our fathers were boyhood friends. They’d lived off the lunar coast, just as their fathers had done, and we would do. They’d taught us to fish, to read the seas and the stars. We were fourth generation fishermen, or soon would be. The lunar coast was in our blood.

In those summers, salt crunched like gravel at low tide. We’d walk the lunar coast, collecting shells and driftwood and sun-bleached bones. We’d roam the rock pools when the weather was right. The rocks scorching from the sun, the water warm to touch. The rock pools were galaxies all of their own, with weeds and crustaceans and fish trapped within. Worlds interrupted by our touch. We’d catalogue our finds and relay them to our fathers. Our knowledge grew as we did; broadening over the summers.

Alex had the spirit of the sea inside him. Like his father, he was practically made of salt. He was careless in the sun, his shoulders browned to a crisp, his dark hair matted and lips chapped. His feet were broad and tough. I wasn’t built for the weather the way he was

and to keep up, I wore soft-soled reef boots, zinc cream, swimming goggles. My feet remained pale and wrinkled from the wet.

But out there we were equals.

He was always picking things up despite my warnings of stingers and barbs.

“What’s this?” he’d ask, running his fingers through a tube anemone delighted by the way it would suck back in.

In those days, we were ageless. Time melted away only to be revealed in the evening by the extent of our sunburn. We were explorers, pioneers, companions and brothers. Every day was like walking on the moon.

But we did grow up. For years it felt like it was light-years away, then suddenly it was upon us. The rock pools lost their charm. The salt flats seemed less magical. We wanted to take risks, to be challenged and to feel fear.

We found what we were looking for at the headland, where the rocks hollowed out into caverns. There was a vertical, cylindrical cave that went right through the headland. We called it the sea-shuttle.

When the swells were right, we could swim under it and as a wave came in, water would fill the hollow and jettison us to the top. On days with big swells it would almost blow us right into the sky with a whoosh of sea foam and exhilaration.

If we didn’t clear the top of the tube, and we rarely did, we would have to grab onto the rocks inside the cave. We had to be swift, and hold strong while the water fell away. If we missed the rocks, and we sometimes did, we’d be sucked out with the swell, tumbled into a whitewash of foam, trapped under the rocks and take water in as breath. While Alex had the courage, I had the lungs and could take two or three rides in a row while he watched enviously from the opening above.

Explaining the cuts on our hands and the scratches on our backs was a nightmare, but the summer was ours and we were delirious with adrenalin. Our fathers would kill us if they knew.

If fishing was the heart of our town, our fishermen were the soul. They were all beanies, whiskers and rubber boots, distinguishable only by the gruffness in their laughs and the kindness in their eyes. We were a superstitious town, like all fishing towns were, and Alex and I were regarded with caution. It was said that our families could feel the sea.

Sometimes we believed it, sometimes we didn't. Our fathers' boat was one of the few that operated the nets and the long lines alternately. They relied on the weather to dictate their catch. They were both humble and proud. But like all fishermen, we were slaves to the sea, and sometimes her master.

The night the tide went out, there were big seas. The wind whistled through the weatherboards and Alex and I stayed awake listening to the reports on the radio. Neither of us mentioned the absence of the moon.

At dawn, we went to the ramps; the air was still thick with foam and mist. Our fathers had already returned with an empty hull. In the eerie morning light, I watched them mending the nets. Alex hunched his shoulders against the cold.

"Anything?" I asked.

My father shook his head in the sullen way of his.

Alex's father chuckled his pirate laugh.

"Ah, you can feel it," he said, pressing his palm to my sternum. Through my jumper I could feel the roughness of his hand. I looked away from the sea, as though my unease was casual, irrelevant.

"You can too, my boy," he winked at Alex. "We all can." He laughed again but there was a sorrow about him.

My father remained silent, but stopped working on his net for a moment and rubbed his own chest, as if irritated by indigestion.

The tide never came back in. Over time, our beach became desolate, shifting from silver to grey, its fine sand becoming pebbled and coarse. The wind stripped the surface revealing craters and debris. In the evenings, as the boats set out, I watched the sea birds circling against the sunset. At night they did not return to our shore.

Each day the fishermen left earlier, with further to sail they combined crews taking fewer boats and more fuel. Our town had retired their nets, relying on the long lines to pull in fish of higher value. But eventually, even they became elusive. It was clear the fish had fled the lunar coast. I couldn't blame them.

When enough days had passed, they stopped going out all together.

"I think it's time we speak seriously about your future," my mother said over dinner of tinned tuna. I'd been set to start my apprenticeship with Alex on our fathers' boat in autumn.

"We were worried something like this would happen," my father said, not looking at me.

"I know..." I pushed the flakes around my plate. "I'll go."

I left for college the following week. Alex didn't even say goodbye.

It was six years before I returned to the lunar coast.

Our town had changed dramatically. The boats had all been hauled ashore and lay tilted unsettlingly on the banks, their keels exposed. The ocean-front stores, once hardwares and bait shops now sold ice creams and sunhats.

I'd heard through my family that Alex had taken a job as a tour guide, driving the coast, pointing out nail-tail wallabies and spinifex.

My parents, with Alex's family, had opened a small bakery on the foreshore and now my mother smelt of pastry. Her hair had grown long and she kept it tied up in a messy knot. I couldn't help notice she smiled more.

My father hadn't changed much. He sat with Alex's father on our patio, watching the sun bake the beach. I was overjoyed to see them together.

As I sat, he squeezed my shoulder with his large brown hand.

"Seen Alex?" he asked.

"Not yet."

"You should."

"I know."

I met with Alex cautiously at first, over a beer at the tavern, then for dinner with his family. Eventually, we began to spend the days together. It was never going to be like the old times, but unlike him, I wasn't giving up.

A week after my return, we drove his company 4-wheel-drive to the point. We'd only ever walked the coast, but now the distance seemed too far to contemplate.

“Dad said you wouldn’t come back until the tide turned,” he said eventually, as though

the ocean had brought me back, not my family, and not him.

“Has it?”

He said nothing for a while, then smiled. “I think so.”

We parked on the beach then climbed the headland, the rocks were brittle, leaving powder on my knees and hands. At the top, I looked out over the coast.

“Well?” Alex asked with laboured breath.

“I think you’re right.”

The sea was coming back. We watched it for some time, awed, as it rolled back in carrying dried weed and wood, drowning the sand. And then, just a few metres out, that unmistakable flash in the water. There, and there again.

“Did you see that?” I pointed and Alex followed my gaze.

“It can’t be...”

It was.

We raced to the beach and peeled off our clothes. We had to get a closer look. Amongst all the salt and the sun-burned kelp there was a fish. No doubt about it.

“Come on,” he hurried me, as I pulled on my boots. While he had never mocked me before, he did now.

“What is all this stuff anyway?” he snatched at my diving mask and my towel laughing in the cruel way of teenagers made desperate by his age.

I was just another city boy to him now. Our history had fallen with the tide. Erased by my time away and the distance I’d put between us.

Despite his cruelty, or because of it, I pitied him. Life on the lunar coast had him beaten. I was fitter than I had ever been, yet he had developed a paunch. His body sagged in a way I had never imagined it could. Time had been fierce to him.

We entered the water. I waded to my chest, before diving in. The water was murky with salt. It flooded my mouth swelling my tongue. I could hardly see even through my mask. When I looked back at Alex he had his eyes squeezed shut.

At the headland we bobbed on the surface. The wind had picked up, chopping the water into messy white caps.

“Did you see it?” he asked.

“No.” I spat into the water.

“I think we should check the shuttle.”

I’d forgotten all about it.

We rounded the headland and were fully exposed to the wind. The tide was rushing in, as though making up for lost time after half a decade of slack water. It had already moved more than a metre.

I’d expected this landscape to be foreign to me, but as I swam, I felt my body guided by the sea. With familiar strokes I pushed under the surface and into the opening of the rocks.

I broke the surface and gasped, holding tight to the rocks. It had been a rough swim, the visibility making it nearly impossible to navigate in the hollow. Still, Alex came up grinning.

“Grab the rocks,” I said leading him to the wall. “I can hardly see anything.” We were in a washing machine. The surface churned with foam.

“It’s down there,” he said with certainty.

“Did you see it?” My back scraped the rocks as I rose with the next surge of water.

“No, but I feel it.”

“We’ll climb out and have another look.”

“We don’t have time for that.”

“I just wanted to know what kind it was.”

“Lee, we can’t let it get away!” He smiled devilishly before letting go of the rock.

“Alex!” I grabbed at his wrist but he slipped free.

I waited for him to resurface. I calculated the climb to the top. It was just a few metres. I reminded myself I’d done it hundreds of times. I counted to ten. Alex still wasn’t back. Shit.

He'd played tricks like this before, pretend there was a giant squid dragging him under then take wretched hold of my ankle. Or he'd come back up with a handful of sand to rub in my hair. But this felt very different.

I put my face in the water. Nothing. I kicked out with my feet hoping to brush something other than rock. I looked again. It was like swimming in storm clouds. I couldn't see anything.

I took a deep breath and let go of the rocks.

My body plunged into the darkness. I was surrounded by bubbles and foam. Down I went, trusting my memory of this passage. My hands stretched out feeling nothing but water and rock. I kicked against another surge, I had to stay down until I found him. I felt the pressure on my lungs but knew I could beat it. I reached again, hitting the sand with my shoulder. And then, flesh! I grabbed Alex with both hands and pulled him towards me.

I dragged Alex up the lunar coast and lay him on his side. Was he breathing? Was I? I pulled off my mask and held my ear to his face. I felt the steady thud of his heart under my hand, his breath on my cheek. I stood up and gulped down my own lungful of precious air. I watched the rise and fall of my still-pale chest. I looked at my skinny ankles in my boots. I was dripping, exhausted, alive.

So was Alex.

Only then did I notice the fish clawed in his hand. As though coming out of a coma, it began to flap on the sand. Its body contorting, frantic, feeble. I knew then why he'd gone back down. This fish, the first to return, was the one thing that could restore him. To catch it would make him a fisherman after all these wasted years.

"Oh, Alex..."

But the fish needed to be in the sea if we had any hope for the lunar coast. It needed to be alive. I bent to pry it from his grasp, but Alex sprung awake. His eyes jolted open, he looked from me to the fish, first confused then ecstatic with pride. He raised himself onto one elbow, leering at the fish on the sand. With his free hand he took hold of my mask in his fist.

"Alex, no!"

He punched down with all his strength. When the mask crushed its skull I felt it in my lungs.