Anna dipped her toe in the glassy tip of where water meets wet sand. She hugged her thin green dress closer around her small frame and walked straight into the sea until she was neck-high, tipping her head back to let her hair spread out in the water like a leaf unfurling. The water was a sharp cold, and she felt her heart pumping to keep the blood circulating. Slowly, her skin grew accustomed to the ocean’s gentle sway, and she kicked off deeper into the cove, red toenails flashing in the water as the chiffon skirt of her dress billowed out behind like a drifting jellyfish. Thin, white arms paddled the water until she came to a rocky ledge where the water sloshed against slick black stone. Anna’s foot scraped the rocks as she landed lightly on the shelf, fingers clinging to the rock. Once she felt steady, she reached her hand into a curved crevice, where she felt the rounded shape of a pair of cheap plastic goggles. She breathed into the lenses, rubbing her thumb across them to clear off the salty grit. The elastic rubber strap, hand-tied back together after breaking during a past swim, was pulled neatly behind Anna’s head as she secured the neon plastic frames on her face. The wet goggles shone with the reflection of the cloudy sky’s dull white glow.

She felt a swift movement slide across the back of her knee. A sea plant or small fish, perhaps. She listened to her own breathing, hushed air, in and out, counterpoint to the waves. She arched her back and let herself drink in the sight of the expansive sea beyond the cove, which, in its jutting rocky u-shape, surrounded a deep basin of dark, slow-swirling waves.

The ocean was the place where she felt calm, primordial, just one of the many creatures lilting in the tide. Things were simple—she didn’t have to worry about talking to anyone or looking foolish or being small, quiet, different, and shaky. People were frightening. She didn’t trust them. She preferred to stay silent with clear water droplet eyes, watching, taking in sounds, smells, feelings, and music, until there was a world inside of her, but never knowing quite what to do with it. When someone spoke to her, she felt like a fish. She could stare, she could move, but she couldn’t speak. Lips would merely quiver in a silent gape.

But the sea she understood. Knowing that there were unseen things beneath the surface did not trouble her. It made her feel as if she were afloat inside the rolling depths of her own mind. She had come to dive, as she often did on difficult days, and let her own thoughts mingle with those of crustaceans and corals.

Something moved once again in a quick thrash, this time just brushing her ankle. Another fish? Gyrating seaweed moving up from the bottom? Anna slid her hand to her heel, touching the spot where she had felt it touch her. As her fingers covered the rough, scraped skin, she felt the saltwater start to burn a small wound. Undeterred by what she assumed was a small crab or eel, she shook her leg briskly and got ready to go under.

She pushed off the ledge, downward, plunging herself beneath the waves, eyes open. Her vision was at first distorted through the goggles in the dark water, but as her eyes acclimated to the dim light she saw a bouquet of textures and patches of color that created a layered, living quilt draping over the rocky wall. Rich burgundy corals with vibrant lime ruffles cascaded across the sea floor. Mineral protrusions and stone flowers served as anchoring points for endless soft bodied creatures: nudibranchs like blue, floppy hats, bright salmon tubeworms, sorbet-hued anemones, and the dots and dashes of fast fish as bright as citrus peels. Gazing upward through feathery-ended sea fans, Anna watched grey light filter down through the water.

Looking down at her own fluttering skirt in the current, she felt like an underwater doll upon a living knickknack shelf. She hovered to what she imagined was a swelling orchestral sound that sent a single lingering note through the chilled water. Soon, her lungs stretched for oxygen, and she kicked her way up, breaking the surface with a joyous gasp and letting a bright laugh escape her lips. The water rippled out from where she had surfaced, the only disruption in the otherwise smooth oscillations of the water. Readjusting her goggles, she pondered how an entire world of color and light appeared to be
merely a murky soup from above. Treading water, she wondered if she should swim back over to the ledge, or go beneath for another dive.

A rapid rushing sound cut through the water behind her. A thick impact thudded against Anna’s back, and she reeled around to see a great, black fin sever the surface. She could feel the movement of the shark’s massive body as the suction of displaced water pulled her down. Her chin was just above the lurching sea, though she frantically pumped her arms and legs. She looked wildly around, searching for the dark shape of the shark, but all she saw was the reflection of the cloudy sky in the water that splattered around her. Heart hammering against her ribcage, she knew that the underwater landscape may be the last she ever saw. As her gasps for air slowed into deeper breaths, she felt the living force of the ocean surround her. The fin surfaced again, ten feet away. Anna quickly looked to shore. She knew she would never reach land in time. Kicking her legs free from the twisted tangle of her clinging dress, she made a different choice. With a resolute inhale, she tipped headfirst into the depths.

Fully submerged and staring through plastic lenses, she saw the full length of the beast. It circled her with a silent, menacing sway, as she, in underwater suspension, slowly rotated to keep her eyes on the creature. The shark moved effortlessly. Thick cords of muscle shifted under skin that shimmered like a rippling glass cloth. Dappled light and shadows played on the shark’s body, which curved in its swimming motion as smoothly as a desert sandscape shaped by the wind. The blade of a tail, as long as Anna’s thin body, flicked as the circle tightened. Now passing just feet away from her, Anna’s eyes locked with the vacant black eye of the shark, an eye that seemed at once soulless and filled with eons of memories. Her lungs now burning, Anna gently stretched her fingers out to graze the shark’s side as it circled her. The skin yielded under her touch, as supple as wet clay. The shark’s gills fluttered as the cavernous mouth yawned. Then, with a final toss of its massive head, the shark disappeared into the soundless void of the sea, fins spread like a bird, leaving the cove for the open ocean.

Anna fought the fading vision and dull dizziness that threatened to drown her. She willed hands and feet to move, pushing herself up to break the surface. Lips parted and she sucked in the salty air. Colors began to focus into shapes as she breathed and breathed, restoring oxygen to her bloodstream. As she reached her hand to her pulsing forehead, Anna realized that her goggles were gone. The hand-tied strap had snapped, sending the neon-rimmed lenses to rest on the seafloor. Closing her eyes against the burning salt, she swam to shore.

She walked out of the sea, the soles of her feet making shallow imprints in the sand. The cove now looked stolid and silent, obscuring the intricacies that lay hidden underneath its waves. Anna could not sponge out the image of the shark from her mind, its sheer power and spellbinding beauty. As she climbed up to the road, she knew that she would return to dive again. That evening, she wrote late into the night—her first of what would become many poems that sang the secrets of the world beneath.
6/21 Figuring out what to write...
SO, I’m going the fiction route. Predictably, I’m picking an ocean theme with a vulnerable yet intelligent character with a magical realism twist. I started thinking back on how many similar things I’ve written and how I used to be bothered by the similar-ish things that would crop in to my fiction writings. But then I remember when I brought up this “problem” to Dr. M (my heroine) and I said, “Um... all of my stories kind of end of having the same feel to them.” And she replied, “Oh, could that be maybe, like a STYLE???” That still brings a smile to my face. So I started thinking about this new story to add to my repertoire. THEN, if I was REALLY savvy, I could compile all of my marine magical realism stories together and make a book of it, called Stories from the Shore or something like that. Then it could get published. Wouldn’t that be awesome? As of right now, I’m on fire to do it, in addition to the eight thousand other things I’m responsible for over the course of the summer.

6/23 First draft
Drafting for fiction piece!
Anna dipped her toe in the glassy tip of where water meets wet sand. She hugged her thin green dress closer around her small frame and walked straight into the sea until she was neck-high, tipping her head back to let her hair spread out in the water like a flower opening to the sun. The water was a sharp cold, and she felt her heart pumping to keep the blood circulating. Slowly, her skin grew accustomed to the ocean’s gentle sway, and she kicked off deeper into the cove, red toenails flashing in the water as the chiffon skirt of her dress billowed out behind like a drifting jellyfish. Thin, white arms paddled the water until she came to a rocky ledge where the water sloshed against slick black stone. Anna’s foot scraped the rocks as she landed lightly on the shelf, fingers clinging to the rock.
She felt a swift movement slide across the back of her knee. A sea plant or small fish, perhaps. She listened to her own breathing, hushed air, in and out, counterpoint to the waves. She arched her back and let herself drink in the sight of the expansive sea beyond the cove, which, in its jutting rocky u-shape, surrounded a deep basin of dark, slow-swirling waves.

6/23 Writing Group Feedback
-Love the word choice
-We’re enthralled...
-Is she in danger or at peace (BOTH! Shhh...)
-Perhaps consider setting the stage with weather. If it’s cold and cloudy, we’ll be more convinced that she is there for a purpose other than just swimming

6/24 Self-Questioning During Writing Marathon

Questions about fiction character:
WHY DOES SHE NEED ESCAPE/PROTECTION? Could it be social anxiety? Feeling small or insignificant.
WHERE DOES SENSUALITY COME IN? First encounter or multiple?
WHAT PURPOSE DOES THE SHARK HOLD? He is a protector, a partner, misunderstood, dangerous but also beautiful. He won’t harm her—like beauty/beast tales, King Kong, unicorn legends.
WHAT’S HER GOAL? To be unafraid, to find a place where she’s understood, find her power. Can’t see at first, what is it? Will she just disappear?
WHAT’S THE LESSON? Nature is magical, there is a power that exists in all of us, by facing our fears, we become powerful.

6/25 More drafting, adding on, with critical commentary sandwiched in

The ocean was the place where she felt calm, primordial, just one of the many creatures lilting in the tide. Things were simple—she didn’t have to worry about talking to anyone or looking foolish or being small, quiet, different, and shaky. People were frightening. She didn’t trust them. She preferred to state, silent, with clear water droplet eyes, watching, taking in sounds, smalls, feelings, music, until there was a world inside of her, but never knowing quite what to do with it. When someone spoke, she felt like a fish. She could stare, she could move, but she couldn’t speak.

Every once in a while, her cheeks would burn, and she’d take a long breath in, ready to offer a thought, but most of the time the words had been neatly placed in for her by a gregarious other in the room. She spent her days, silently, placing books back on the shelves at the town library. SDT: Most people assumed she was slow, mute, and delicate.

But the sea understood her/But the sea she understood. Knowing that there were unseen things beneath the surface did not trouble her. It made her feel as if she were afloat inside the rolling depths of her own mind.

Something moved once again in a quick thrash, this time just brushing her ankle. Another fish? Gyrating seaweed moving up from the bottom? Anna slid her hand to her heel, touching to see if any hurt had come to her SOUNDS LAME As her fingers found the rough, scraped skin, she felt the saltwater start to burn the wound. What was down there?

She pushed off the ledge, downward, plunging herself beneath the waves, eyes open. Her vision was somewhat distorted, in the dark water, but she could still find the patches of bright colors here and there in the crevices—a tangerine anemone, a purple urchin, a small red starfish EXPAND. Looking down at her own fluttering bright skirt in the current, Anna felt like a doll upon a living knickknack shelf, imagining a swelling orchestral sound, ending in a single (pure, strange?) lingering note, through the chilled water. Soon, her lungs stretched for oxygen, and she kicked her way up, breaking the surface with a joyous gasp, and letting a bright laugh escape her lips. The water rippled out from where she had surfaced, the one disruption in the otherwise smooth oscillations of the water, moving enough to...

6/26 Notes from the John G. Shedd Aquarium, Chicago

Lime ruffles cascading
Silvery scales reflecting
Blue floppy hat coral
Peach and salmon tubes
Soft bodies
Light filtering down, spiraling
Lemon peel/orange peel fish
Swaying soft corals with feathery ends
Dots and dashes drifting and flitting
Bouquet of textures, depth beyond depth, layered quilts, rich burgundies
Shimmering surface like a rippling glass cloth
Protrusions of rock, sequins, sorbet
Shoreline surf
Stone flowers, horns, zigzags
Thick cords of muscle- shimmering muscled skin
Shadows of dappled rays on skin like white sand shaped by the wind, darkening to black
Tail like a blade- back and forth
Silent power disappearing into endless space
Shaped like supple clay, svelte
Staring black eye, vacant or full?
Silent menacing sway
Fins spread like a bird

(I continued to draft, fleshing out my descriptions with these impressions from the aquarium, turning them to prose.)

7/1-7/15 I just left it alone.

7/18 I spent quality time alone with my draft, adding, honing and perfecting. When I neared the ending, I was still unsure if I would kill Anna off or give her a new life. After many minutes of conversation with my fiancé (which was really just me talking my thoughts out as he looked at me blankly), I figured out where I wanted to go. I was really trying to drive home the metaphor of the sea serving as Anna’s inner being that was deceptively rich, beautiful, and strong despite her social anxiety... she is the shark of her own sea of ideas. When she meets this counterpart during her dive, she realizes the fragility of her existence, but also her own power, and finds her voice by becoming a poet who can expose the secrets both of the marine realm as well as the world within herself. So she lives. That night, I posted to E-Anthology, and got great favorable comments! (Only thing was, I picked “press.” While I was hoping for that critical eye from an outside source, I knew I’d apply my own soon enough)

7/19 During writing time at the UWMWP, I combed through my near-final draft and tweaked things here and there, fixed typos, altered repetitive word choices, and enjoyed drinking in the finished product, which you see at the beginning of this document. Another writing case closed! ☺