

SFPL Writers Sprint
Honorable Mention
Marlena R

“Fish Out of Water”

Jellyfish were not meant to be kept in small tanks, in small rooms of large houses. Jellyfish were never supposed to be taken out of the widest expanse of water in the world and be put into the homes of unhappy children. My jellyfish was a bribe. A tacky way for my father to apologize for bringing me to his new house with his new wife; for dragging me from the city to an endless sea of grassy emerald slopes. I didn't mind the switch, whether or not it came with a jellyfish. I may have resented my stepmother, but at least in such a large house there would be distance between the two of us.

I placed the final pink pillow on my new coral-colored bed and opened my windows to admire the velvety clouds that hung over the green slopes. I took a deep breath of the new air, which was tainted with the fumes of gasoline and fertilizer. I sagged onto the silky sheets of my bed to watch the jellyfish dance around its tiny tank. It really was a beautiful creature.

A subtle flap of wings sounded from my window sill and I averted my gaze from the jelly. A pigeon was perched on the brink of the window, peering in at me with hungry eyes. It was a scrappy bird, missing toes; a remnant of my fifteen years spent in the city. I stared at the pigeon for a moment, hoping it would see itself out of my room. It cocked its head at me with the same expectation, claiming my window as its roost like an old man claims his favorite rocking chair. With a hasty motion I tried to scare the pigeon back into the outside world, but it instead ascended to the innermost corner of my pink room.

I anxiously turned my vision towards the jellyfish, whose tank was wide open without the lid that broke in the moving van. The pigeon followed my vision.

Without taking my eyes off the bird I called for my father. No response. He was often out with his new wife, barely at home even when we lived in our little apartment.

In another panicked movement I startled the bird again, and suddenly I was surrounded by a flurried hurricane of feathers, beaks, and my own flailing arms, as the accursed bird descended upon me. I screamed and covered my eyes as the flapping of wings grew louder, so close that I could feel a downy finger brush my ear. I fell into a small ball, collapsing in on myself as the noise of the pigeon grew quieter and quieter until it had ceased.

I opened my eyes to little feathers coating my floor, dotted with red. I then with horror spotted where the pigeon had landed. The bird glared at me intensely from its new perch on the side of the jellyfish tank, waiting for my move. I slowly lowered my arms from my head, seeing that I was powerless now. Even the jellyfish itself seemed to realize the danger it was in, and had huddled into the bottom-most corner of its den. Its periwinkle tentacles were raised over its head like mine, the soft bulb of its head was gracefully pulsating. We were both waiting for the pigeon to make a move.

Tears dribbled from the sides of my eyes, spilling onto my cheeks like a wave crashing onto a shore. *If you or I survive this bird I promise I release you back to where you came from* I thought to the jelly, as if it could hear me. She and I were the same I realized, as the both of us kept our arms lifted above our heads. I looked around slowly, from wall to wall. There was nowhere to hide from the bird if it decided to attack me or the jelly. Nowhere to run, crawl, shrink. No one to call for if my screams had gone

unanswered. The room began to feel confining, like a tank I had already outgrown. It seemed to shrink against my sides as the bird and aquarium drew closer. I didn't want this to be my life, I didn't ask for it. I was fed and sheltered just like the jelly but at what cost? I had left behind a school, an environment that I was made for. Perhaps I should be making promises to myself, and not the jellyfish. *If this bird ever leaves you alone, I said to myself, I promise I will release you back to your old home, your old life, the friends you love.* I looked up at the pigeon again as the walls around me finally stilled. I glared. It glared back.

I rose from the hard, cold floor, wobbling a little, like the first steps of a newborn giraffe. I was careful to avoid stepping on the residue of feathers that had escaped the pigeon's wings. The bird and I never left each other's gaze as I carefully approached the tank. I came to a stop in front of the tank, and held out a hand. A peace offering. The pigeon seemed to understand. I held my breath as it stuck a delicate two-toed foot onto the fragile skin of my hand, then the other foot. The bird's miniature claws dug into my fingers, but with an overload of adrenaline pumping through my head, I could barely feel its frail weight. Thoughts ran through my mind like a river current, a new fear being introduced before I had time to consider the last. On unsteady legs I carried the bird to my still-open window, my breath shaky. With a final determined motion I shoved the bird from my hand and crashed the window pane shut with so much strength that the *bang* resonated in my ears like the aftershock of an explosion. On my hands were small red dots where the sharp claws of the pigeon gripped onto me, the only proof I had that the bird had really been there.

My father never asked why I wanted to put my jellyfish back into the ocean, but he seemed somewhat saddened. Neither of us spoke during the drive, but his unvoiced words about the jellyfish and the bandages that covered my arms and hands were draped between us like a thick smog.

I was alone when I stood on the beach holding a large plastic bag with my jellyfish in it. There was much that went unspoken between us too.

The jelly slid elegantly from the bag into the sea and was pulled away quickly, like how milk spills out of a new container. The jelly almost seemed to leap. Its transparent body bobbed a little in the water, then disappeared. I closed my eyes and listened to the pitchy squawks of the seagulls and the rush of the ocean waters, then opened them and turned back to the car.

I think my father had expected what I said next. "I'd like to stay with mom in the city for a little longer. I don't know if I'm ready to move here yet."

"If that's what you want. Your stepmother and I would love to have you here any time."

"I know, Dad," I smiled softly. I took my last breath of the salty ocean air, and as the car pulled away I watched the gulls flutter gracefully above the rising waves, then vanish in the horizon.