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MEDITATIONS ON “HOME”



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When I was five years old and we lived in Guam, I had a fantasy that my real family were dolphins, and that I had been left behind with humanity to teach them something about the dolphin’s world. I had been watching a great deal of *Man From Atlantis*, and even taught myself to swim like he did, with my arms at my sides, doing a dolphin kick.

I wanted to live underwater. I would stand at the edge of the ocean and command my imaginary dolphin family mentally, glaring at the ocean surface. *Please come back for me! I want to go home!*

Nothing came of it. Except that I developed a great deal of lung power, able to hold my breath underwater in high school for 75 yards.

Everything in the air always seemed a little less beautiful, a little worse. Everything underwater felt beautiful, right, lovely. And to this day, I still feel happier when I sink below the surface of the water and the sounds in the air can’t get at me so quickly. Each movement to the surface to breathe feels like a relief and a betrayal.

It’s always amused me—the feeling of being alien, the delusions of grandeur, the personal mythology of that childhood fantasy. Years later, I understood it

a little better—the year before my father had been living on the Tektite II Underwater living experiment. He was an oceanographer, and the project wanted to see if humanity could live below the sea. He sent us postcards while down there—my brother, who was just 1 year old at the time and couldn't read, received one that said "Dear Christopher" and then was covered with hand-drawn fish, signed "Love, Dad".

I think my desire to see my father and his living under the ocean without me, it turned into this. But now I can never think of a place as really my home without thinking of the sea. And it doesn't explain how I felt when I first saw the bones inside a dolphin fin, the way it looks like a hand. I felt the nick of a recognition. I wanted to reach out and take it, clasp it. Swim away with it. I thought of the myth of the sailors Dionysus turned into dolphins, Etruscan pirates he surrendered to the water forever after they tried to trick him, turned into messengers for the god of the sea. But we've speculated as well that dolphins are more intelligent than us--we know they have a larger brain to mass ratio than humans and that they have their own language and communities.

What if they're the next step? What if we're the aberration, the ones who should have gotten in the water and we didn't? And what if they're what we're meant to be, once we finish melting all of the polar ice caps and the surface is too warm for us to live on? Will they welcome us, or will they meet us with anger, for the long years we've polluted their ocean? We think we're the smartest of the earth's species, but is it smart to poison the planet? Is it smart to render the place you're born unlivable?

Perhaps the dolphins know this, and are just biding their time, waiting for us to make the earth uninhabitable for ourselves. And when we pack ourselves off in the ship we'll have to build to reach the next planet we'll poison, will they rise to the surface to celebrate?



Alexander Chee was born in Rhode Island, and raised in South Korea, Guam and Maine. He is a recipient of the 2003 Whiting Writers' Award, a 2004 NEA Fellowship in Fiction and fellowships from the MacDowell Colony and the VCCA. His first novel, *Edinburgh* (Picador, 2002), is a winner of the Michener Copernicus Prize, the AAWW Lit Award and the Lambda Editor's Choice Prize, and was a Publisher's Weekly Best Book of the Year and a Booksense 76 selection. In 2003, *Out* Magazine honored him as one of their 100 Most Influential People of the Year. His essays and stories have appeared in *Granta.com*, *Out*, *The Man I Might Become*, *Loss Within Loss*, *Men On Men 2000*, *His 3* and *Boys Like Us*. He is a graduate of Wesleyan University and the Iowa

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