

Sally Ann Hunter is a biologist and environmental policy officer. She has published a collection of poetry called *The Structure of Light* and a biography called *You Can't Keep a Good Man Down: From Parkinson's to a new life with Deep Brain Stimulation*. A paper she wrote on the biography was read on ABC Radio's *Ockham's Razor*, as was a paper on living with solar power. A number of her poems have been published in anthologies and online. She lives in the Adelaide Hills with her cat, Francis.

Sally Ann Hunter

TRANSFIGURED SEA

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Coast

The Sea Sprite

The Sea Sprite's mother wades majestically out of the ocean. Her dripping dress is dark green, trailing embroidery in the same colour. She has come to gather up the Sea Sprite in her arms to take her home.

The mirrors in her heart open as if for the first time. Reflected light shines between them like sunlight on the surface of the sea.

From this radiance, she muses on the nature of the sea and the coast. The sea represents a whisper of emotions and a memory of intuition. It can be said to be the fullness of the subconscious.

The coast is a transition zone, always changing. It keeps on changing its dynamics, perpetually, in both space and time. It changes on a small scale, from waves and tides moving in and out, to currents moving along the coast with the force of the prevailing wind. Even the insubstantial wind can change direction and shape.

By these means, on a large scale, rocks wear down, cliffs are hollowed out, and sand is shifted. Even the level of the water is never the same, rising and falling as the glaciers melt or grow. It also changes on an even larger scale as sediment

load makes the ocean floor move, in addition to tectonic plate margins warping and continents shifting. The exact edge of the sea cannot be delineated.

Are dreams less real because they are temporary? Or are fleeting, moving, changing things examples of their own kind of reality, a different speed? Like the sea, the sand, everything at the coast, which is moved by tides, currents, waves and winds. The sea is a dream.

In that dream, the Sea Sprite's mother resumes looking for her daughter. Although she has looked for and found the Sea Sprite before, this time she cannot find her. She wades up and down in the shallows calling for her. The sea water splashes at her ankles, the sand squelches in between her toes. There is no answer.

The sea reminds her of the interior of an abalone shell. In this light, its colours are blue, green and white.

While her feet are splashing in the water, she finds starfish and flattened sea urchins. If she looks carefully, she can see a few, scattered fish that are well camouflaged. A paper nautilus floats on the surface. This shell, created by an octopus, has a spiral shape. It reminds the mother of the fondness that the Sea Sprite has for spirals.

The mother feels inspiration in her heart because she loves the multitude of creatures belonging to the ocean. Biology has, for a long time, been her favourite way of knowing the world. Here it comes to life.

Her wet feet now take her out of the water, up to the waterlogged sand. This is where the sand doesn't dry so there are bristle worms. They are buried, except for their bristly feeding tentacles.

She moves a little higher on the beach. Where the sand is covered with water on a regular basis, she finds fan-shaped double mollusc shells. These only open when they are covered by water – otherwise, they are shut tight.

This is like some people, thinks the mother, perhaps myself and the Sea Sprite.

Then she walks further up, to the hard, crisp, dry sand. There remains almost no sign of life up here, but she knows that ghost crabs make burrows above the high tide line. These crabs are pale in colour, and only come out at night.

The thought of them reminds her of the Sea Sprite, who in some ways is rather waif-like. She also tends to scamper to the side like a crab, in her spirit. She avoids confrontation and being tied down to a commitment. It is hard to obtain a straight answer from her because she always looks at things from alternative points of view. As the mother knocks a pile of rotting, smelly seaweed with her foot, tiny sand-hoppers suddenly fire themselves high into the air.

Then the mother is mindful of female turtles, which climb onto the beach on a certain day of the year, at sunset. During the night, they labour to dig holes with their flippers, then lay their eggs in these holes. By dawn, they have buried their egg clutches and returned to the ocean. They seem to be very trusting of the nature of the coast. When the young turtles hatch out, at night, weeks later, they make a dash for the sea, on their tiny, sturdy legs. They already have great strength, sweeping through the sand, their sole focus honed for the sea.

The mother's thoughts return to the moment and the place where she is. She seems to stop breathing for a moment as she

discovers a delicate, white shell, almost hidden against the white sand. At first, her eyes are only caught by its shadow.

She picks it up with care. It is too delicate to express. It resembles alabaster, but the colour is soft not shiny. It has long spikes projecting from it. It also has a papery mantle and a papery mane, projecting from different edges of its curve. They are all but transparent. As she turns it over, it feels light in her hand.

Indians believe that the blast of a conch shell will banish evil spirits, avert natural disasters and deter poisonous creatures. Does this delicate thing have the strength of character to offer such protection? Or is it safer to seek protection from Nereides, as the Sea Sprite has an affinity with them. A nereid is an ethereal creature that lives in the sea. She is a sea nymph.

Nereides dwell in the Aegean Sea, with their father Nereus, the Old Man of the Sea, in the depths, within a palace of gold. They symbolise everything that is beautiful, and kind about the sea. It is said that their melodious voices sing as they dance. They are graceful, barefoot young women, crowned with branches of red coral and dressed in white silk robes edged with gold.

The Nereides offer protection to those on the sea, coming to the aid of those in distress. Each one is connected to an aspect of the sea: salty brine, sea foam, sand, rocks, waves and currents as well as various skills of the sea. When they are not in their golden palace, they sometimes spend time in their silvery grotto, an alternative dwelling. Later, they run with small dolphins or fish in their hands. At other times, they ride on the backs of dolphins or seahorses.

While the mother is holding the precious shell, she begins to be aware of shells from other places. This shell in her hand must have a visionary quality. Some of the shells that she sees are pink and beige, like lingerie, others are shaped in the forms of scorpions or octopus. Some shells look like coral.

The shells are textured, smooth or shiny. Their sizes range from tiny to huge. Some have internal surfaces like mother-of-pearl, including nautilus shells and abalone shells. The Sea Sprite would like these. Some others are precise in their form, while others again seem furry or jagged. Some shells are striped, others are patterned with lines of dots. Some are covered with African designs like dress material or modern art.

Shells

flowers of the sea

all shapes

all colours

textures

blossoming now

and will not fade

these shells

these flowers of the beach

The mother is amazed at how many different shells there are. There are shells in bright colours, others in pastels. Some are spiky and hairy, some are smooth inside, white or pink or green. Some could be mistaken for seaweed because they are

dark brown and spiky. Some shells are very detailed in their surface designs: some look like embroidery, others are covered with blobs and dots.

Some shells have pointed cones, others have flat tops. Some are crinkled, like folded material, and some are dainty like paper. Some pagoda shells are shaped into the forms of fairy tale castles or palaces. The Sea Sprite would like these, too.

One shell seems to mimic a flower with its red lip, dotted with white. Other shells also look like flowers or candles. Some have delicate, parallel spines, others are frilled.

The Sea Sprite's mother, whose real name is Laura, puts the original white shell in her dripping pocket and the visions cease. She takes a few steps. She is familiar with some eastern religions, and her thoughts go there, now. One of the ones she knows is Buddhism, which says that the conch appears as an auspicious mark on a divinely endowed being. She takes a few more steps.

Then, for a moment, Laura stops again and stands still. She thinks about waves.

Waves of the sea represent constant change and movement, sometimes circular like the molecules of water in a wave, sometimes terminal like the crash of a wave, sometimes large like a tidal wave, or a storm surge, sometimes small like a ripple on the surface. The sea represents Chaos, the primordial potential, the original Mother from whom life emerged.

In the dream of the sea, the Sea Sprite plays in the surf. In the air, there is the salty smell of the ocean. Foam drips from her projections as well as crowning her head. She wears the water like a garment. Seaweed joins her in the fun, as she lets

some of the waves break against her body. They nearly knock her over. At other times, she catches the wave before it breaks, and rides it like a billowing balloon in to shore. She arrives, deposited on her chest on the silken sand.

On the shore, there are pebbles, made smoothly round by the continual washing of the waves. She crawls over so she can see them better. Some of the pebbles are green or brown, and some of them are black. The black ones are shiny when wet by seawater and they seem to have depth. The Sea Sprite thinks she can almost catch a glimpse of her face deep within them.

What she sees is reminiscent of a female spirit of the sea. It looks like a nereid.

Now, standing up, the Sea Sprite notices that golden-brown sprays and garlands of seaweed, decorated with brown berries, are strewn around on the beach, as well as sponges and pieces of white ‘cuttlefish’. Tiny crabs make patterns on the crisp sand. Leaving their holes, they roll sand into little balls, which they spread out into shapes that resemble butterflies or even mandalas.

There are also shells on the beach. Some of them are pink and shaped like fans. Some of them are pointed, spiralling inward to secret places. The Sea Sprite holds spirals in high regard. To her, they represent the spiritual journey, which always moves forward, is always similar to what went before but always a little different.

Some of the shells on the beach are from abalone, full of graceful curves. Inside them, the blended pinks and blues and whites reflect the fluid, milky soul of the Sea Sprite. Silhouettes of tall rocks are reflected in shallow water and wet sand.

Then, leaving the dream for a moment, Laura, the Sea Sprite's mother, stops again to stand still. She listens.

At first, she can't hear anything, except the *shoosh* of the waves on the beach and the cry of the seagulls. Then she hears it – a soft murmuring in between breaking waves. It is coming from the rock pool around the corner of the headland. Laura makes her way in that direction. Her journey begins as she moves from one part of the sea, one part of the coast, to another.