

MERMAID by Nancy Allen

At Lake Tashmoo in the summer of '96
I sit by the water's edge
The sand gritty on my skin
From my daughter's hands.
I'd brought her here to the place I love,
The island of summers gone.
She balances on my lap,
Then struggles to be free
At one, she cannot stand
But crawls back to the sea,
To the element she would teach me
Is the place she needs to be.
The sea is in my blood and
in hers as well it seems.

I follow close behind,
The water unweights her;
I see her dark eyes shine
with a lightness not often there.
She tips beneath the surface
And I pull her from under the sea.
She blinks and peers around,
Unperturbed by her submersion.
I carry her to where the water is shallow
And splash her playfully.
But
She turns and scrabbles her way out again
Like the seals who foretold her coming,
Only her dark head shows.
Deep, so the water wholly embraces,
Her nose above the surface,
She seems content.

I remember in Ningbo
On her adoption day.
The layers of clothes removed
the peeling red skin revealed
I lowered her into the warmth:
The first bath
In her nine months of life.

Her grey green skin
dark against my white legs,
And for the first time I felt
her body relax into me
not stiff, pushing away
from my cradling arms.
I should have known then
Like a mermaid, awkward on land,
She was born to the sea.