**The World Was Once an Ocean**

Jessica Barksdale

I dabbled in ocean waters, nestled my body in the shallows, slid across its fine surface in boats.

But first, I crawled out, gasping, my flippers and fins and gills sodden. Then, at some point, I lurched across the plains to find myself in the middle of the middle. Hot earth in my clutched paws, palms.

Later, lots of walking on fours, on twos. Then boats. So many of them, from all directions. Then more dirt. More scrabbling. More yanking myself from place to place to finally land in this life exclusively on a coast that looks toward a sea I fly over.

No matter where I go, always, I come back to this western shore.

I am not sea-worn, bleached by water and salt and wind. I have no sea-legs, not even after a seven-day Baltic cruise. Not after rocking back and forth for hours on my grandfather’s fishing boat. For hours after disembarking any vessel, I feel the water trying to pull me back.

I am a land person who can swim. A land person who loves the water. A land person wanting the interstitial, the intermediate, the place between the hot earth of the middle of middles and the depths of the far below.

I’m worn, cracked and brittle, dry to the touch. I’m a skein of dried kelp, sanded, airless, flattened. I’m driftwood pale, hollowed out from worries about mother, children, world.

The sea and I are old, distant friends. The sea ignores me, yet crashes at my feet, laps at my toes, throws forth mist and spray, insisting I remember the journeys.

I can take you back, the sea says. I can crush you, toss you high, rip away everything.

Don’t take your eye off me.