

Connor Wall

The Land-Lover

Sam only ever saw the deep, teal ocean through double-paned brass windows lining his city-bunker off the Atlantic Coast. It was just deep enough underwater that at high noon he could see silver glimmers of krill squirt by during his 4th geometry class.

In his gravelly deep voice, this facilities overseer gave his hourly announcement on the overhead speaker.

"It's 13:00 folks. Break time."

Over the static shrill at the end of the hour's announcement, his teacher shouts "Recess time!"

In a rumble of footsteps, his classmates run for the exit. Every Friday, his friends would play outside. First running to the bay where all their fins, and tanks were, then falling into the water sequentially like marines. Some of his classmates would give him an almost pitiful glance before falling backwards with a splash.

"Not today" he said to himself in a low voice, still in his seat, looking down at his black boots of his uniform.

He walked over to the window to watch his friend -swimming out to the limits of the spotlights, playing tag, blinding each other with handheld flashlights, twirling, making bubble "O"s.

Today his teacher walked over to sit next to him for a change. Just as she began sit, Sam asked "Will we ever get to

see birds in real life? I know pigeons are endangered, but even a real life seagull would be nice." Since 1st grade they would read storybooks like *"Don't the Pidgeon Drive the Submarine"* with funny animal characters. In biology class they would learn about the evolution of mammals and other animals. Sam couldn't stop imagining their fuzzy fur and little feathers. But only he had this dream. His classmates always out-spoke him in class, asking to hear stories of dinosaurs and ancient big fish instead of the subtler beauties of the land. So, he spent his free time reading and learning to love all of Earth's creatures.

Sam listened for his teacher's response.

"I'm sorry Sam. You know the rules. We can't let anyone leave without special permission." His teacher said with an empathetic frown towards the ground.

Since *Diving Day* 149 years ago, this was among the first self-sustaining habitable facilities underwater using state-of-the-art technology. Since Sam's great-grandparents arrived, the social desire to see the mainland was weak at best.

"But guess what? Tomorrow we have a special field trip. We're going to the local zoo on the mainland as a class." Sam looked up, his ears opening at the suggestion of adventure, but only to face a worried expression of his teachers face. "We're swimming up the rocks on the shore to get there." She paused waiting for his reaction.

"I'm hoping your still excited to see all those flowers and birds for real up there. It'll be the first time for most of us, even me." She said optimistically.

Sam sat silent.

When his friends reemerged and ran into the decompression chamber all he could manage was to look at his uniform and twist the black buttons on the cuffs of his navy-blue uniform until the school day ended with the last review session of SCUBA safety.

The dark noon-time water became black in nighttime darkness. After dinner, a restless night, a light breakfast of seaweed and tuna, it was school time again already.

"Good morning class! Let's get ready to go! We don't have all day!" said the teacher urgently.

Sam was last to enter the bay after his classmates raced to put on their equipment. To his surprise, his classmates had already set up his O2 tank, regulator, and even helped set up his fins. All that was left was his snorkel mask. He stared at his mask for a good minute preparing for the brutal frigid water.

In a blur of bubbles, salt, and cold, he entered the water.

Trying not freeze, Sam followed the bubbles of his friends, slowing floating up. His fast-paced breathing only seemed to worsen as he shivered in the dark water. His warm heartbeat only

felt louder in his temples as the heavy, cold vacuum pressed into each eardrum.

After a few minutes of controlled ascent, sun rays flickered through the rough surface.

Sam's nervous shiver became an excited tick. The roar of the wind on surface masked his unsteady breathing and the shallow currents began to pick up and in a confusion of bubbles he discovered the sun on his face with a chilly ocean breeze.

Before any child could make a joke, a flock of seagulls barked overhead. Even with the salty seawater sting in his nose, experiencing this organic sound was like listening to a new instrument: indescribably muscle numbing. He smiled, floating on the water, listening to the absence of metallic echoes, discovering the beauty in playful chirps.

stained from playing hide and seek in the boiler room.

When his classmates would ask questions about dinosaurs
Tigers and butterflies I'll send think about was yellow in red
and green fiber colors of the soil and flowers he only saw in
pictures.

I heard they have some of the most the
his eyes lit up with a smile

"Back in my day I used to make six figures as a cardiovascular
surgeon. Now because of all your new AI the only people can get
a decent job are those pilots that drive up every now and then
to the surface."