

As seen in *The Washington Post*
Book Club

Reviews and recommendations from critic Ron Charles
March 3, 2023

Underwater

The challenge was easy then:
dive off the boat at high tide,
swim down, down till you touch
the white sand, then translate
the messages signaled from above.

I remember sitting on the bottom,
watching the greenish sun wobble
or trade one shape for another
until the sky became a watercolor map
only my cousin and I could decipher.

Each wave made the thin paint
shimmer, another wash of light
rippling across the canvas.
Nothing looked the way it should,
and sounds — like poorly aimed arrows —

deflected off the surface.
Yet when she leaned over the side
of the boat, arms waving like seaweed,

I knew what she meant. *Stay there.*
Go this way. I'm the queen.

We didn't need words, not when
an invisible chain ran from boat to sand,
a family secret that flowed through
our veins, an ancient script tattooed
on our fingers, long before we were born.

Soon enough my lungs would burn
and I'd kick toward the surface,
reclaiming the world of sound.
Salt never stung, as I recall,
until I broke through the swells.

The sky is mine. I own the sun.
Hold your breath, hold it.
We understood metaphor then.

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