

# Ten Fathom Ledge

By Martha Serpas | Volume 2.1 Fall 2015

All that's visible  
is a ribbon of coral,  
briny phrasals above a ledge nearly  
  
erased by silt and scalloped water,  
ghostly and opaque.

Beyond is the dead outer shelf,  
its tragic red surge of blossoms  
bruising the abyss.

What to do?

The others have entered  
  
the freighter's wrenched hull,  
their light beams sliding like opera gloves  
along the awkward deck and sides.

I am left playing with goatfish  
on Ten Fathom Ledge, like the forbidden  
step off your grandmother's porch,  
the first plank as far as you will go  
toward the long bright yard, the pitch

of children rippling from a swing.

Why not be content with spadefish and nurse sharks,  
the confusion of gravity, the wise bezel  
that grasps all our time as bottom time?

A gentle surge toward the wreck, lifts, pauses,  
then sloshes me right back on the ledge.

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Everything lasts forever: the jetties,  
sand, sky, pipers, even the pebbles  
of sea glass, cobalt, old as lace  
doilies. Others can walk down the beach  
toward thin shacks and driftwood shelters,  
toward haze and mist. I'll sit on an unclaimed  
log, which has drifted here, for now,  
and watch a midday sun crystal  
on the waves. Don't be fooled:

The Gulf is not a polished cruiser  
or a V-hull on the dock.

The Gulf  
is not a flatiron idling  
between sets of bowing waves.

Its striated water lifts itself inch by inch  
and closes in on the shore.

It is alive,  
playing its chords, humming its undertow.

You will be welcomed on your back  
as it slides its dress collar over  
your thighs, runs its breezes and tensions  
all over you. It will welcome your face floating down,  
closed eyes or open, breathing  
August's strong sweat.

It will welcome you a thousand times.

It wants you to practice sinking  
and feel how much you belong.

Others can walk the shore's silver brocade  
and pace back again.

Don't be fooled: The sky is complicit.

There's no discerning compass here.

The wings and water pull equally  
toward the beauty of transparency—  
cirri, sea fans, music, love

and the pans and stirrups of pelicans

which weigh that anything is possible,

but that nothing has to be.



**Martha Serpas** has published three collections of poetry, *Côte Blanche*, *The Dirty Side of the Storm*, and, most recently, *The Diener*. Her work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Nation*, *Image*, and *Southwest Review*. A native of Southern Louisiana's wetlands, she co-produced *Veins in the Gulf*, a documentary about coastal erosion. She teaches at the University of Houston and serves as a hospital trauma chaplain. More information about her work can be found at [marthaserpas.com](http://marthaserpas.com).

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Martha Serpas, "Ten Fathom Ledge" from *The Diener* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2015). Reprinted with kind permission of LSU Press.

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Recommended Citation: Serpas, Martha. (2015) "Ten Fathom Ledge," *The Yale ISM Review*: Vol. 2: No. 1, Article 8. Available at: <http://ismreview.yale.edu>