LITERARY MAGAZINE • ISSUE NO. 12 • NOV. 2026

LIT SHARK *magazine*



THE SHARK WEEK EDITION

SOMETHING TO SINK YOUR TEETH INTO


LIT
SHARK

CONTENT

Dear readers, we always want to support you and give you the information you need to have the best reading experience possible. Please note that Issue 12 may contain some troubling elements, like animal violence, hunting, pollution, and animal extinction, as well as death, mental health issues, illusions to child loss, and animal death. There are multiple illusions to sexual activity and expletives. Thank you again for your support. We hope you will enjoy our twelfth issue, our SHARK WEEK edition, for 2026.

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EDITED BY MCKENZIE LYNN TOZAN

SOMETHING TO SINK YOUR TEETH INTO

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Hi readers, writers, and shark fans!

The fall season is upon us, and Halloween is just behind us, still looking over its shoulder, so what would be better than a surprise basket with a few more treats and a little less tricks?!

Issue 12 of *Lit Shark Magazine: The SHARK WEEK Edition* is a big one, friends, as in, we REALLY might need a bigger boat. Clocked at 250 pages, it's the second-biggest issue we've served yet, including our Best Of anthologies.

And it's not a quality vs. quantity issue, either. It's as massive as it is, because 1.) some of the pieces were accepted before our hiatus, and many more poured in during and after that time, and 2.) there were just too many good pieces to say "no" to. Publications will often cite "lack of room" as a reason to turn away pieces, but that's one of the funny things about running your own magazine, out of your own pocket, without an university supporting you/looking over your shoulder: you get to decide when a longer issue is worth it. And this one? Oh, sharks, it's worth it.

This issue has five sections, and while it's the SHARK WEEK edition,

it's all through the lens of human touch, but let me explain why. Every issue, when it's time to go through the design process, I first print out all of the pieces and decide what order they will go in. I read through them multiple times, looking for conversations and echoes happening between the pieces, as well as potential themes, and in these pieces, I saw a lot of human touch—or you might say, human involvement—perhaps where it doesn't belong. In the home/humanity section, there's meddling and regret. The "in the wild" section is all about sightings, whether natural or at zoos and acquariums, humans coming much closer to wildlife than naturally intended. The "in the air" and "in the sea" sections? Human interactions, human observations, and anthropomorphism of animals. And finally, "at what cost"? The connection is in the title.

What I so love about this collection is its presentation of the beauty of the natural world, regardless of human intention: a breaching whale, a fish's flashing scales, a giraffe and a leopard becoming mothers, even our once-everyday, now-rarer, sightings of monarchs and hummingbirds. For so many, the intention to observe quietly, to wondrously enjoy beauty, to mourn parallelly for what we witness being lost, little by little, is lovely in its own right.

The works in this collection are not just stunning in their content but in their literary deftness. Poetry that is visceral and lyrical, vulnerable, and with lines that bite; prose that pushes the outer edges of genre and story, unapologetic in its call for us to do better. Not just for how these works contributed to the conversation we have every SHARK WEEK here at Lit Shark, or in how they fit with a theme, but for their incredible writing, I'm sure you'll see why these pieces couldn't be said "no" to.

I always feel incredibly honored to form these collections and to share them with you. I hope you'll enjoy reading Issue 12 as much as I enjoyed creating it.

Happy Reading! Until Issue 13,
McKenzie
Editor-in-Chief and Fellow Shark Fan
November 2026

CONTENTS

Letter from the Editor 04

ONE: IN THE HOME

Funeral Pyre - Odi Welter 13
Carrying the Dead - Joel Savishinsky 15
The Marsh - Carrick McDonald 17
A River Beckons - LaVern Spencer McCarthy 19
The Cove - Kevin Browne 21
South Carolina - Linda M. Crate 22
Codicil - Ursula McCabe 23
My Neighbor Trims Her Trees - Joel Savishinsky 24
Elegy with Burnt Trees - Shilo Niziolek 26
The Plant - Deborah Kerner 28
Once More with Feeling - Diane Funston 29
Cleaning Fish with Dad - Ellen Hirning Schmidt 31
Terza Rima Haiku from Ding Darling, Sanibel - Bob McAfee 33
Kambarang - Veronica Lake 35
The Gaps - Miranda Phelps 37
The Second Law of Thermodynamics - Amelia Chang 46
Exhilaration - Buffy Aakaash 48
We Are Looking at the Elephant in the Room - Janet Bowdan 50
How Many Histories Have Been Lost? - Karina Jones 52
Thoughts Over a Ribera del Duero - Dustin P Brown 54
Carry Your Dreams - Nadia Khan 56

TWO: IN THE WILD

Thinning - Aspen Greenwood 61
Sea-Change in Winter - Abigail Ottley 62
Snorkeling on Alligator Reef - Sherry Poff 64
January Morning on the Swamp Trail - Bob McAfee 65
Menaced by a Marine Heatwave - Meredith Stephens 67

Island Home - Brenda Saunders 70
Heron Island - Roger Funston 71
Lolling Lion - Annette Birdsall 73
Blue-Footed Booby - Annette Birdsall 74
Turning Turtle - Abigail Ottley 75
World Turtle Day - Joseph Labriola 76
The Elusive Dugongs - Meredith Stephens 78
Lonely Emu at Destroyed Zoo - Robert Wynne 82
Leopard - Stephanie Sellars 83
Giraffe - Stephanie Sellars 85
Eel Question - Odi Welter 87
El Ojo de la Bellena Gris - Stephanie Sellars 89
Galápagos Batfish - Patrick ten Brink 91
Jellyfish and Plastic Bags - Patrick ten Brink 92
Romp! A Journey through the Natural History of Otters and Why They Matter - Jo Ann Zimmerman 93
The Snarky Ocean Lecture Series Presents: The Gulf of Mexico - Adrienna Capone 97
Trapped - Clive Aaron Gill 100

THREE: IN THE AIR

High Hopes - Diana Woodcock 107
Summer Birds - Marianne Tefft 108
Milkweed Testament - David Anson Lee 109
Every Beauty - Linda M. Crate 110
Satin Bowerbird - Annette Birdsall 111
Sunflower Against the Fence Line - David Anson Lee 112
Terrorist - Brenda Saunders 113
The Last Hiraeth - Seth Sherman 114
January - Ursula McCabe 116
If I Had Wings - Diana Woodcock 117
Praying - Carolyn Martin 119

FOUR: IN THE SEA

Fishpond - KJ Hannah Greenberg 120
Requiem Shark - Patrick ten Brink 123
Great White - John Chmura 124

The Gentle Shark - Alan Noble 125
An Underwater Adventure - Rita McDermott 128
Predator Confusion Effect - Stephanie Sellars 131
Unfair Maligning - Rie Sheridan Rose 132
The Shark - David Cameron 133
The Pup in Me That Never Became a Shark - Hend Roubaiy 134
A Matter of Taste - Christopher J. Bahnsen 137
Fish, Anemones, and Clams - Patrick ten Brink 140
The Lost Years of Juvenile Sea Turtles - Thomas Mixon 141
Niagara - Marianne Tefft 142
Thermoclines - Marianne Tefft 143
In the Belly of the Beast - Nolo Segundo 145
Pyjamas Over My Swimsuit - Sandra Noel 146
Mer - Sandra Noel 147
Just Like the Ocean - Linda M. Crate 148
Sailing to Sandy Island - Kevin Browne 149
On the Shore - Lorraine Caputo 150
As the Sun Set . . . - Lorraine Caputo 151
Scale a Swelling Sea - KB Ballentine 152
Hermit Thrush - Annette Birdsall 153
Starfish Trails - Patrick ten Brink 154
Once, We Were Under the Sea - Kelli Dianne Rule 155
beach dinner / low tide - Kevin Browne 157
Blue Blooded - Debra Fair 158
The Currents Know Our Names - Fendy S. Tulodo 159
Said the Whales - Deborah Blenkhorn 174
Hard Shells - Charlie Davies 178
Mouth of the Sixes - Elizabeth Wing 180
Neap Tide - Elizabeth Wing 181
Ocean Dreaming - Debbie Walker-Lass 182
Under Water's Spell - Diana Woodcock 183
Agonal Ocean - Janina Aza Karpinska 185
On an Island in the Sea - Mark Strohschein 186
From Above - Brenda Saunders 188
How I Became Pure Flame - Diana Woodcock 190
Lichen on a Stop Sign - David Anson Lee 191
Pisces - Wes Viola 192
It's So Easy Here - Diana Woodcock 194
Powers and Magic - Diana Woodcock 196
Mangrove Psalms - David Anson Lee 197
Crossing Two Lakes - Joel Savishinsky 198

The Last Frontier - Brenda Saunders 199
A Pearl - Diana Woodcock 201
Coral - Julian Matthews 202
The Mussel: A Villanelle - Mika Nagasaki 203

FIVE: AT WHAT COST?

Lost in Three Dimensions - Sara Collie 207
Elegy for Tokitae - Khadija Ceesay 210
Nature's Reality Check: 'Blackfish,' Sea World, and Entertainment That Comes at a Price - Ellen Acconcia 211
I Wish I Could Say - Diana Woodcock 221

Acknowledgments 225
About Our Contributors: Bios 229
Submit to Lit Shark and Write for Us: Info 249

"The sea is not made of water.
Creatures are its genes."

—Adam Nicholson
The Sea is Not Made of Water: Life Between the Tides

"The sea is everything . . . It is an immense desert,
where man is never lonely, for he feels
life stirring on all sides."

—Jules Verne

ONE:
IN THE HOME

ODI WELTER

FUNERAL PYRE

When I die,
I want to be given to the ocean,
sunk down into the dark deeps
so that salt cures my heart
and crystallizes my lungs,
anchored by the books
I read to imagine it.
Pressure presses me
down into a pancake
for the deep sea
creatures to feast upon.
The octopus tattoo on my thigh
will make a tasty steak
for an octopus, sliced
by its own daggers.
I want to see the bottom,
come to learn more
than the astronauts
and be a part of the place
with the potential of
fantasy evolving into reality.
Follow the light
of the angler
until it transforms
into an angel.
I've never lived
near the ocean.
Never combed salt
out of my hair

or cracked open sea
urchins on the shoreline
looking for love's secrets.
I've never danced
to the beat of the waves
or watched the sun drown.
The siren's call was faint
and distant, reaching to me
from the textbooks I devoured
and the tales I consumed.
When I die,
give me to the ocean
so I can drown
forever.

JOEL SAVISHINSKY

CARRYING THE DEAD

What shall we do with our dead,
the ones who never really lived?

Death is the mystery, the art
of transformation—embodied
like sleep, like the *petite mort*
of orgasm, an ambassador's
brief visit from another state
of being, another melody to which
you must shortly say farewell.
It is the forever respite that
the living hold in reserve,
hid in a drawer just in case
ambition was not enough,
a keepsake of who they once
hoped to be . . . and almost were.

How do other animals
experience death?
We flatter ourselves to think
we alone live with the thought
of our mortality, a dubious
loan of self-congratulation from
the realm of self-awareness.

Welcome or not, acknowledged or
denied, we see other creatures
carry their dead with them every stroke,
every heartbeat of the way.

In the cold waters of Puget Sound,
we monitor the orcas as they move
to their music, naming each group with
a letter for our science and convenience.
Amidst the ribbons and rhythms of J-pod,
Tahlequah—J35—an adult female, carries
her newborn calf for eleven days,
unknowing, unable, or unwilling
to accept its death, its body borne by
the ocean of her instincts, until
the Salish Sea reclaims its gift, and
leaves in its place a song of mourning.

CARRICK MCDONALD

THE MARSH

Spread out over sixty-two stones,
the lake revealed its murk to me to consider
as the elderly couple walked by,
too brittle to lift me from the rippling water

"No swimming today"
I think as I meet a jogger,
the two of us acutely alone

The warped wooden bridge bounces
like springs,
and only the willows are the witnesses,
too far to even scream

At certain sections, the ground can't decide
if it's solid or liquid

It sucked my shoe off with a shrug,
and that is how
I learned the difference

Moss topples the old oak
which lunges down for a second
under my weight

It snaps back to attention
after I've passed

I should call my mother

The weeds perpetuate themselves
like little shooting trumpets,
and these violet plumes of joy

make me panic
because I can't fold them all up

I will leave the weeds
and the trees
when I return to my cell

A folder of images marked "plants"
won't bring us any closer

The first week in the monastery,
I agonized over where to put my shelf

After that,
I spent my time
thinking how to leave

The trails don't connect,
so I backtrack a bit

It was raining,
but the trees were in such close conversation
that the drops, bashful,
couldn't work up the gumption
to excuse themselves through
until after I was gone

LAVERN SPENCER MCCARTHY

A RIVER BECKONS

The Old Missouri beckons, come along.
I'd go with her, but I cannot decide.
She lures me with her most hypnotic song.
She floats a log that I might hitch a ride.

I'd go with her, but I cannot decide.
I've heard of peril in her undertow.
She floats a log that I might hitch a ride.
I'd need a raft, but I may never go.

I've heard of peril in her undertow.
Her rapids are too wild, too rough for me.
I'd need a raft, but I may never go.
I do not trust—she only loves the sea.

Her rapids are too wild, too rough for me.
Too many pilgrims trusted her before.
I do not trust—she only loves the sea.
I pray for those who never reached the shore.

Too many pilgrims trusted her before.
Her currents took them under, night and day.
I pray for those who never reached the shore.
They tumbled into boulders on the way.

Her currents took them under, night and day.
Notorious, she knows what she has done.
They tumbled into boulders on the way.
The river spirits drowned them, one by one.

Notorious, she knows what she has done.
She lures me with her most hypnotic song.
The river spirits drowned them, one by one.
The Old Missouri beckons, come along.

KEVIN BROWNE

THE COVE

My grandfather called it the Russian River,
though we all knew it wasn't, just a
small creek plunging off the cliff
to empty into the Pacific at Shelter Cove.
It's a long way down the beach
and few people make it that far.

Most days when we went to the beach,
even in summer, were cold and foggy.
At the time there seemed no way to know
in advance unless we climbed the big hill
behind Nogales campground to see the cove
and even then it could change by the time

we traveled the twisty roads to reach it.
Though it was sunny where we were
encamped on the other side of the hills,
when we would crest the top and
start our descent the cove might be
completely fogged in.

My brother and I swam in the freezing ocean,
always an adventure, and searched for shells
and other low tide offerings. We bought salmon
from the local fishermen, but on later visits this
was harder to do and expensive, the salmon were
gone and finally there were none to buy at any price.

LINDA M. CRATE

SOUTH CAROLINA

when i went
to south carolina,
i saw magnolias
bigger than my head;

we visited a botanical
garden with trees
like those drawn in
the lion king

i even have a picture
hugging one—

swam in the ocean,
was chased by a fly smart
enough to change directions
when i did as i ran across
hot sand;

saw a blue crab in a tiny
body of water the ocean
created and scuttled
away before it could pinch me—

felt like a mermaid
diving beneath the water,

as gulls danced across
the skies or sat upon
water hoping to catch fish.

URSULA MCCABE

CODICIL

My poet father died up north
and his ashes were scattered
on a nearby lake
where green-headed mallards
paddled through the fragments.

He had asked for no service
but for an old poem
that requested ashes to be left
near a stream in the
Union district of the
Rogue River National forest.

His codicil didn't get honored
till twenty five years later
when I searched and found
the right woodland station.

Siskiyou forest conifers
wore patches of snow in April
but still sword ferns were
already reaching for spring light,
their mossy cores thick with want.

Even though a latecomer
to this wake,
I am a fiddlehead unfolding-
restored to him.

JOEL SAVISHINSKY

MY NEIGHBOR TRIMS HER TREES

The patter is coy and clever, and the agent,
who loves the art of selling more than
the product he's pushing, says
"the home you're standing in
has a peek-a-boo view of the lake
and the mountains to the east."
You look through the window,
and even your cataracts need not
cloud what the mind can barely imagine.

You buy the house anyway because
the street is sweet, the tall evergreens
stretch a fragrant canopy over its width,
and the grandchildren live nearby.
A decade later the first granddaughter
is out of college, your eye surgeon
has done her magic, and the trees
have so over-stretched their welcome
that their embrace now rests just above
the electric wires that reach across the way.

When the branches sway and dance
together, they reinvent the tango,
but the windstorms have gotten
more worrisome each winter, and
your neighbor—despite her husband's
reluctance—spends thousands to trim
the two huge Douglas firs that front her yard.
The chipper grinds limbs into sawdust,

the sky reveals itself, a sliver of lake
glitters in the distance and, beyond it,
the western slopes of the Cascades show
their purple skin and sinuous tattoos.

You smile in delight but embarrassment too:
sometime in later life, a person with skill
with a chainsaw has come along,
helping you discover that what seemed
like a lie was really a hidden truth whose
camouflage just needed to be cut away.

SHILO NIZIOLEK

ELEGY WITH BURNT TREES

The dog died, but that's not the end or the beginning of the story. No, that's just where a little sliver of hurt is. First, there was the old dog, underneath the cherry blossom, the gulp of her last breath. Then, there was the younger dog. Can the loss of the thing you love most in the world be a seismic shift in the universe so severe that your body starts and never stops its tremble? After her death, the younger dog developed seizures: at first a twitch, a foot lifted strangely in the air in the dark of the night, a busted lip that no one saw happen, then, they doubled, quadrupled, then, us waking in the middle of the night to the tremble of his grief, an eruption, a shift. One person holding, the other ushering a small injection of hope, then the calm, then another and another and another until we were flying down the highway in the emptiness of 3 am with a dog seizing in the back. That's how fast your life can change, a long slow drawn out ending. For months no words have come, no visits from the dogs in my sleep, no word from them, *Hello, I'm okay, it's okay that after 11 cruel months you had to let me go when I could no longer stand, when my body grew weak, when the pounds shed from me like, at any moment, I might float away on the breeze*, when the doctor said, we don't know why, the blood, it just stopped flowing to his legs, like inside small dams were built, a family of beavers hard at work. There's only silence buzzing. No sound of frogs, no crickets chirping, the barely audible language of crows. Finally, when I am unsure of the mystery of things, when I think no words may ever come again to me in the early hours of morning, flying down a hill, watching the waves lap at shores, I drive into the mountains where fire season repeatedly leaves its mark. The landscape, unvisited since we last took our eldest dog for a dip in the cerulean snowmelt of the river, completely changed.

Scorched. The trees towering overhead offer no shade, their bodies blackened, and their limbs stretch out ghost white around them, fingerlings of death. The trees do not rush things, they hold their grief aloft, silent as a fog. But underneath them, buried in the understory, a place where for so long sun could not reach, explosions of blackberry bramble, foxglove, lupine, fireweed, beargrass, columbine, monkey flower, yarrow, coastal manroot, salmonberry, Cascade beardtongue, thimbleberry, ocean spray, cornflower, spreading phlox. Overhead, hawks and eagles and vultures circle round and round the pure blue sky. I touch the tinderbox trees, their bark black and ashen, my hand comes away grubby, marking me on the outside to match what is inside, grim reaping. The contrast of the trees, stunning against the sharp bite of greens. *It's okay to be silent*, the douglas firs say, *it's okay to sit back, watch the world flourish around you. Wait.*

DEBORAH KERNER

THE PLANT

in the morning an orb of sun
appears spontaneously

is the plant already dead?
are its roots beyond drinking?

is the soil cruel?
were the leaves reluctant?

was it's spine cracked?
has it lost its will?

did the caterpillar eat too much?
did the wind brush it too harshly?

did careless feet crush it?
is the water contaminated?

does it feel too crowded?
is the air stifling?

did it feel rejected?
did it forget where it was?

is its longing too painful?
did the seedlings insult it?

was the falling branch too close?
was the snail too rash?

did the creator forget to release waters?
are the monsoon rains too late this year?

DIANE FUNSTON

ONCE MORE WITH FEELING

After she died
no, mauled and alive
with broken spine
internal and external
deep bleeding
and brain damage

the vet said
she wouldn't last the night
we did the humane thing
she licked my elbow
as she closed her eyes
all because of a loose dog
irresponsible people
and of course no money
to make them pay
at least for the emergency care

three months later
we found you
same little handful
different color
erect alert ears
and I held your
squirmy puppy face
in my then empty hands
you cast a spell on my eyes
and we rescued you

The beat of your heart
next to by belly at night
like those who once
kicked inside that close place
the warmth of your
tiny 4 pound being
recently joined
by another 7 pound rescue

*

I still feel the grief
of the first
The suddenness of it all
a summer stroll
turned into a death day

The two of you will never
walk outside our yard
this house your playground
the backyard your kingdom
our bed yours too
as you fill our laps
our hearts
with so much joy
it exposes the grief
to healing warmth

ELLEN HIRNING SCHMIDT

CLEANING FISH WITH DAD

I.

Dad & I lean over the fish we caught. The slippery scup lies on a plank on two saw horses. Dad wears hardware gloves, the size of the fish. Sun sparkles on the tools in his dissecting kit. He wears goggles, pries out the fins with a tool. They look like a giant's toenails. I stand back when he takes the scraper, makes scales flutter in all directions. 1000 finger nails, mirrors fly in the air, land making a glistening garland on the sand.

II.

Now I'm allowed to come closer. It's cool how he uses a scalpel to cut a line on the fish's belly. I lean in to see him lift the slit opening like my lunch box lid. Inside lots of 3-D shapes hugged up to each other like best friends. *See here*, he points. We'll open his stomach. (Aren't there any *girl* fishes?) *I'll show you what he ate for lunch*. He pokes a floppy jelly bean shape. Tiny snails, worms, and periwinkles ooze out.

III.

Look, here, he tells me in his teachery voice, *this is the heart. The muscle is thick to pump the blood.* The heart doesn't look like the candy "Be Mine" hearts in pleated paper cups on Valentine's Day at school. This heart is like my burnt sienna crayon. He shows me the other organs and some yellowish stuff that holds them together. I can't wait to draw a picture of everything I am seeing.

IV.

After we look at all the guts, he removes the fish's head. The fish body aside for dinner, we look at the head. Behind the fish's sad, flat eye, under the see-through membranes, Dad points to a perfect crystal ball. Dad says, the fish can see all sorts of things we can't.

V.

Then comes my favorite part. He puts the gem in my palm. The magic round jewel sparkles, a hidden secret. I hold it carefully between my thumb and forefinger, right up in front of my eye. Sunshine sprays through it like the prism in our classroom. It breathes in the sun and the tiniest rainbows dance everywhere.

BOB MCAFEE

TERZA RIMA HAIKU FROM DING DARLING, SANIBEL

Cormorant and I
After a hard day's diving
Spread our wings to dry.

Otter, arriving,
Appears master of the craft
Of jungle jiving.

Alligator raft.
Small bird trit-trots on green back.
Who has the last laugh?

Dragon fly, small, black,
Does his best to try to hide.
Too late! Bullfrog snack.

Kayak at low tide
Gliding through the mangrove swamp.
Tree snake hitches ride.

Spoonbill struts with pomp.
Burmese python in shallows
Sports a new, round bump.

Blue heron tip-toes
On lily pads to see where
Brother Crayfish goes.

Hawk dive bombs from air,
Tries not to get his feet wet.
Likes his redfish rare.

Moccasin, egret,
Feathers on bald cypress knee.
Snake with no regret

Night lurks behind tree.
Coyote barks happy cry.
I don't disagree.

KAMBARANG

—*Second Spring*

Pale August sunlight
hints at winter's passing.
The first bulbs break surface,
delicate, sweet-smelling.
Almond blossom drifts languid,
dropping on dozing cats
lighter than a kiss.
There's still a chill nipping our skin,
and a sense of things growing,
pushing up through damp earth.

Come October,
Kambarang is upon us;
the second spring.
A riot is unfolding, unstoppable.
The landscape runs amok with colour.
Spiked banksia and golden wattle
flaunt their wares in brazen display.
Poppies bleed into every corner
and pollen-drunk bees
blunder from bloom to bloom.

Derbarl Yerrigan rolls lazy,
slow-winding to the sea,
glinting and gleaming in morning light.
Fledgling birds keep parents in a frenzy.
Mooja flowers glow like golden stars -

a prelude to the heat of summer.
Each day slips by easing our bones.
We drowse in post-winter warmth,
our gardens glutted with plenty.
Kambarang: the time of rebirth.

*Mooja – Christmas-tree Plant
**Derbrl Yerrigan* – Swan River

MIRANDA PHELPS

THE GAPS

"So, when you were born, I was ten, fifth grade," Annie said.

"And when you graduated from high school, I was in second grade," Danny added.

"When I went on my first date—with Tommy Veilleux—you were six, first grade. I bet you were adorable, way cuter than Tommy Veilleux."

"I must not have been that cute . . . it was the year my Dad moved out."

They were lying in a grassy clearing by the river on a sunny afternoon in late August, Annie's head on Danny's stomach, his long legs stretched way beyond the blanket she had spread. They'd been swimming in the river, had eaten her tomato and Swiss cheese sandwiches, drunk the raspberry iced tea, and were getting sleepy in the warmth.

Annie had known Danny for less than three months, but it was long enough, despite their age gap, to have fallen in love, long enough to know how his father's absence had wounded him. She reached over, took his large hand, and placed it on her stomach, hot from the sun.

"But after your Dad left, your Mom let you get a lot of cool animals, right?" She knew that Danny's Mom was a vet for whom happiness meant a houseful of kids and animals.

He laughed. "I had bright red and black and tan snake—Mikey, the Milk Snake—before he even left. But I had to keep it in my room. After that, he used to watch TV with us on the couch at night. We did have to feed him live mice, though." He lifted his head to see her reaction.

"Yuck," she said.

He laughed again. "After Dad left, we had so many different buddies with us. That's what my Mom called them all,

buddies. Charlie the Chimp, Dalmatians, Greyhound rescues, injured crows and hawks. People would bring those to us, and my Mom would fix them up. And Raymond and rat."

"Ew, you had a rat?"

"For quite awhile," he said. "We got Raymond as a little baby, super cute, and he lived for four years."

"Is there any animal you don't like?"

"I can't think of any," he said. "I do slap mosquitos. You?"

"Spiders," she said. "I've never liked spiders."

"Really? Didn't you ever read *Charlotte's Web*?"

"And bats," she said. "I hate bats."

Danny sat up quickly so that Annie's head rolled onto his lap. She sat up too and turned to face him.

"What? Is that so shocking, that I don't like bats?"

"But they're amazing. They're mammals, like us, but they can fly. Can you imagine being able to fly?"

Annie watched as he swung his arms out to both sides. She thought he looked like a giant hawk, not a bat.

"I'm good with taking planes," Annie laughed.

"And they eat mosquitos, thousands in an hour. That's special, right?"

"But they're so ugly. They creep me out," Annie said.

"I think they're cute," Danny insisted.

"Ok, ok. Agree to disagree." Annie said, touching his cheek.

They lay back down as the sun rose to its highest point of the day. Even small rifts like this made Annie uneasy. The connection between them felt so deep, so comfortable, so secure most of the time, unlike the unsatisfying relationships she'd had before. She wanted to believe that the age gap was their only difference.

She relaxed, snuggling her head onto his stomach once again, soaking in the early afternoon warmth. Danny didn't say more, and she soon realized from his slow breathing that he had fallen asleep.

Annie looked over at the farmhouse where Danny had invited her to live with him, his Mom and his younger sister and brother.

She had a perfectly adequate in-town apartment, but she'd grown to love the sprawling landscape with wild lupines and a huge vegetable garden.

When she saw Danny on Day 1 of the University of Maine Summer Jazz Program, she felt energy swell inside her, like she knew him or would know him very well. She had always wanted to try playing jazz and was using six weeks of accumulated vacation time from work to attend. Taller than tall, his long red hair pulled back into a ponytail, arms wrapped around his enormous double bass, he played at a level far beyond anyone else in the class. The teacher, Paul Denkins, a pianist who'd performed with many of the East Coast greats, often called on Danny to demonstrate smooth, yet surprising and evocative solo breaks to the classic tunes they were studying. "Autumn Leaves," "Bye Bye Birdie," "Summertime," and her favorite, "My Funny Valentine." With his height and competence, she assumed he was perhaps a graduate student, fairly close to her age.

Annie would have loved to study art or music in college. But her parents would never have allowed it. She had grown up in the elegant Back Bay of Boston and to her lawyer-mother and medical researcher-father, the word "practical" was like a sacred shrine. She had majored in Economics at Wellesley College, gone to law school at Northeastern, and had been working for the Maine Environmental Protection Agency. While she believed in the EPAs mission, the day-to-day work was both dull and overwhelming. After two years, she felt like she had no spunk left.

She would sometimes gaze out of her office window and imagine herself in different lives: singing like Ella Fitzgerald in a New Orleans Blues band; flying a helicopter in Alaska; making colorful rocking horses out of wood. Aside from her nine-to-five work life, she was a total romantic. But her boyfriends always fell short of her dreams.

Because she was out of her depth at the workshop, Paul suggested that Danny tutor her after class. "Listen to how they build the solo on the chords," he would say, bringing recordings of genius flute players like Yusef Lateef and Eric Dolphy. They listened

together, with Danny pointing out the technical underpinnings of the stunning music. Then he would step over to his instrument and play the bass like it was a cello, creating a break to the tune they'd just heard that was both rhythmic and melodic. He knew she loved "My Funny Valentine" and every time she requested it, he played it a different way.

Each day of the six weeks, she waded through the agony of classes and ensembles where she felt so out of place, her flute feeling like an estranged friend, waiting for the three days each week when they had tutoring.

She dreaded the workshop ending. She'd rehearsed how she would thank Danny in their very last tutoring session, then said what she had memorized. "I want to thank you so much for all you've given me. I understand jazz in a much different way now. And meeting like this—listening, playing—was so much fun," she said handing him a card she'd painted herself.

"We can't stop here," he had replied.

"I don't know," she said. "I'm not that good. I can never really catch up to where. . ."

"It's not your main thing. That's ok. But you know . . ."

At that moment, Paul Denkins opened the door. "How you'all doin'?" he asked. "I'm guessing this guy has brought your playin' to a whole new level." He smiled at her and clapped Danny on the shoulder. Then, to Danny, "You about ready to close up?" He took the keys out of his pocket.

"Almost done," Danny said. "Five more minutes?"

"Sure," Paul said. "Let me know. Not too long, though. My wife's invited some folks for a pot-luck barbecue tonight. Trouble at home if I'm late." He winked at Danny and closed the door as he walked out.

Neither of them spoke. Then Danny stumbled through his good-bye in a way that changed everything. "Can I see you again?" he asked suddenly, awkwardly. "I really like you. We don't have to do music. Or we can. We can listen to music. We can do other things. I know I may not be the kind of person you're looking for. But I'm hoping this isn't our last time together." The pale skin on his face

was bright red. He looked away after he spoke.

She was trembling with excitement but tried to act casual. “Sure,” she had said. “I like you too.” She wondered if she should give him a hug but didn’t. Here’s my number.” With a shaky hand, she gave it to him the old- fashioned way, on a piece of paper. “Call me?” He called the next day.

The first clue that Danny was much younger than she’d thought was that he still lived with his Mom on her farm nearby, along with his younger sister, Sara, and brother, Ben. In addition to working as a large animal vet, his Mom raised chickens and llamas and grew vegetables in the summer months.

Having realized the age difference, Annie was petrified to meet Danny’s mother. How would she feel about her 20-year-old son having a girlfriend ten years older? But Becky was welcoming. Soon, dust was thick in Annie’s in-town apartment and after a few months, she let a friend take over the lease.

Living on the farm fed the romantic side of Annie’s nature, but as someone who grew up with Shakespeare-in-the-park and vacations in Paris, she was sometimes uncertain how to fit into this rural setting. On her first Sunday there, Becky started cooking before Annie was awake. Smells of roasted tomatoes, corn bread and mac and cheese pulled her from her dreams. When she stumbled out of bed at ten, Danny and Becky were putting three wide leaves into the dining room table, talking excitedly about who all would be coming for lunch.

By noon, two pickup trucks, one red, one blue, had pulled into the winding driveway, along with a large gray minivan. Annie couldn’t remember the names of the relatives who poured out but recalled later that her count around the table was seven adults and five children.

Becky’s mother, Brenda, sat across from the nine-year old twins, Eddie and Katie, her grandkids/Danny’s cousins. Danny and Annie sat next to her, also facing the twins.

“So, what are you two learning in school?” Brenda asked.

“We’re learning about killer whales, well, orcas,” Eddie answered. “Grandma, did you know that every killer whale family

has its own language?"

"I did know that," Brenda answered, smiling proudly.

"And they have actual dialects, like people do," Danny chimed in. "The young ones learn from their parents."

Annie searched her mind for something to add. "I read that an orca killed one of his trainers at Sea World a few years ago," she volunteered. For a full minute, no one said a word.

Then Katie said, "Sea World is no place for a whale. They belong in the ocean."

"Atta girl," Danny said. Once again, no one spoke.

Annie wanted to excuse herself as she felt tears coming on but took a deep breath and stayed. Danny looked at Annie and put his arm around her. She looked down.

"Who's your teacher?" Brenda asked the twins.

"Mrs. Samuels," they said in unison.

Brenda and Danny exchanged glances. "I had her. My Mom had her," Danny said, laughing, while Brenda nodded. "She's been around a long time. Great teacher. Very creative. Tough though," he said passing the corn bread. Annie took a piece, buttered it, bit and slowly chewed. "Corn bread is great," she said. "So sweet."

And then, the preparations for Halloween were so different from what Annie had known. Becky scoured secondhand stores to find Sara's belly dancer costume, and Ben spent days making vegetables with markers so he could attach them to himself with safety pins and be a salad. Lighted skeletons, rows of fake gravestones and the recorded sounds snarling cats had peppered neighbors' yards for the whole month of October.

Starting at around 4pm on the day itself, cars full of kids piled to the door as ghosts or fairies, sticky little hands reaching for Becky's homemade caramel apples, Danny making squeaky ghost sounds on a rusty saw. Her Boston Halloweens had included elegant, rented costumes and parties with ghost stories and apple dunking. Going door to door would have been unsafe. Becky and Danny recognized most of the trick or treaters and complimented them on their costumes, while Annie watched.

Still, Danny was attuned to Annie and was romantic in

ways she could not have imagined. How did he know how much she would love "Sweet Annie," the tune he wrote for her 31st birthday? How did he read her moods so clearly and say just the right thing in little notes that he left. The book he bought for her as a gift, a biography of Frida Kahlo, was perfect. She flourished with his loving attention and began to reconsider her own choices.

In late winter, on Danny's 21st birthday, Annie took him to the best Asian-fusion restaurant in the area and ordered a bottle of champagne. They had been together for eight months by then and had a large sunny attic space to themselves on the farm. As they were enjoying the bubbly celebration, she ventured, "What would you say about us getting our own place, maybe a small house near the arboretum, with space for a workshop?" She'd loved building and sewing when she was a kid and thought of starting to make toys and furniture, maybe switching careers over time.

"We can set up a room for you at the farm," he said, his tone gentle.

"Don't you want a place of our own?" she insisted.

"How would we afford that?"

"Maybe you could get a job, even part-time." She had known from the beginning that she didn't want the role of provider in their relationship.

He frowned. "I have a part-time job, helping out Paul in the jazz department. School . . . playing . . . those are my jobs right now."

She'd begun imagining next steps for them, a little house of their own, creative work for herself, maybe marriage, maybe a first child. Those thoughts had been unspoken but she somehow thought that he was envisioning the same.

"Things are so perfect now," he said. "My Mom loves you. You've become part of our family. I have the big basement room for my band. You can have that extra room in the attic for your saw and sewing machine. It's April . . . everything will start blooming soon, the forsythia, the tulips, the daffodils. Why would we want to be cramped up in some small place in town?"

Her heart sank. They ate every meal with his Mom and the kids. She'd rarely even made him a dinner, and she was a gourmet

cook. Didn't he want more for just the two of them?

A week later, they had the house to themselves for the first time. Becky had taken Sara and Ben to an all-night kids' museum event in Portland and wouldn't be back until late Saturday. Friday nights his jazz group came over to play. He always ended their practices with "My Funny Valentine" as a gift for her. The final notes wafting up, with all four instruments extending the harmonies, was her cue to change into her nightgown. He usually came up right away.

She was just lying down when she heard a rhythmic thwack coming from two sides of their living room. Perhaps a cardinal had gotten in and couldn't escape? She pulled on her robe and peeking from the bedroom doorway, saw a large bat flying back and forth, smashing the wall on one side and then the other.

"Danny," she called. "Danny, where are you?"

She heard his voice outdoors, saying good-bye to his friends, heard the slam of a car door.

"Danny," she screamed. "Help! Help!"

She held her breath at the sound of his footsteps tripping up the two flights. She was relieved as she saw him moving quickly toward her. She stepped from one foot to the other, her body frozen with fear.

"A bat," she screamed. "It's a bat."

He stood protectively in front of her, looked across the large room and spoke quietly. "Let's just open the windows and let it find its way out," he said.

"No," she screamed. "That won't work. She grabbed his arm.

He shook free, then unlocked and opened each of the three windows, his eyes focused on the bat as if offering an invitation. The bat didn't change course.

She ran to the closet, grabbed a tennis racket and put it in his hand.

"Hit it! Hit it!"

"Why would I do that?" he countered.

"Do something! Please! Kill it if you have to!"

Danny's face fell as though she had slapped him.

He tried to angle the racket behind the bat to guide it out of a window. But with its frantic movements, he could not gauge its distance or pace accurately. Without meaning to, he hit its head hard enough that it crashed to the floor, flapping its wings frantically.

"Oh my god," he said. "I've hurt it. What am I going to do?" He moved around the injured bat, as if seeing it from various angles would help.

"Kill it," she screamed. "Just make it stop."

She could see his distress at the creature's agony. He gave a sudden, focused blow to its head, and it stopped moving. "Please," she whispered. "Get it out of here."

His face a tight knot, Danny gathered the still bat in his arms and wrapped it in newspaper that was lying on the table. He walked down the stairs.

Annie looked out the side window and saw Danny digging a hole, the wrapped bat on the ground beside him as he worked. She went to the bathroom, washed her face and hands, and felt grateful for what Danny had done. She sprayed some rose cologne on her neck and lay in bed waiting.

But he didn't come to bed. One hour. Two hours. His footsteps had tapped up the stairs to their attic, but he hadn't joined her. Still awake, now worried, she tiptoed to the same spot where she'd first seen the bat. Across the room Danny's long frame was folded on the couch, his head in his hands. When he looked up his eyes were red and blurred.

The silence hung between them like harbor fog. She wanted to go to him, but her feet were rooted to the floor.

"The gap between us is so huge," he said finally. "I don't think we can pretend otherwise anymore."

AMELIA CHANG

THE SECOND LAW OF THERMODYNAMICS

—after Ocean Vuong

0

1

2

3

2. the universe favors entropy. which is to say my lips touched yours but you are cosmic, dwarf star exploding into dust because you are the brightest among all others, which is to say i looked up at every plane of face in the circle you called a cult and saw bowed heads and closed eyes, rebellion fiery because mine wide open and blazing into yours.

0. i read the notes from every foot, painted nails in neon pinks and yellows like radioactive lemonades we sold as kids to pay for your deadbeat dad's cancer treatment. sulfurous eyes nestled in every corner, slits always partially conglomerate because i sewed mine into yours, monolid and moonlit and monochrome. igneous because i rented a motel room after senior prom and when you whispered into my ear, tongue grazing lobe, my love and electricity, all the motel lights flickered. and i swear, we could be immortal.

1. the universe favors chaos. which is to say i drew gas diagrams traced in the dirt with a coin i stole from a homeless man, particles splayed and dissolving like my tongue into yours. which is to say we swore celibacy to nuns for our Catholic parents, cross my heart and hope to die in a multiverse as lacking as this one. stood akin to a rooftop in the city heat, took off my shirt and bared myself naked in front of you in hopes of being better than our ancestors, to love fuller than entities that refuse to accept us.

3. 99% of the universe is composed of astrophysical plasma, which is to say we imploded in togetherness, in nebulae that blinded angels in our paths, deceived politicians that built bridges the color of reverse rainbows. 99% of me is composed of you, which is to say that i adore you. which is to say i would push you off the bridge forged of things they murdered, strike thunder across my milk-fed forehead, kiss you on an echelon akin to a sky-scraping rooftop in the city. but you are cosmic, and we erupted into supernovae, a thousand particles of dust manifested across my filthy vision. so you said, look at my body, how beautiful, in the nude.

BUFFY AAKAASH

EXHILARATION

My father was balding by then,
so he wore a hat, white navy,
brim turned down like Gilligan,
his face and nose and neck slathered
with zinc sunblock. Button up shirt,
usually blue. Khaki shorts.
And sneakers.

His one hand on the rudder,
the other on the main
My left hand gripped
the side of the cockpit,
a firm hold on the jib sheet.
He turned us windward and said,
Trim the jib
The wind blew hard. He leaned back
over the water,
Hike out!
We wanted to be close into the breeze
because there upwind was the buoy
we were aiming for
Here comes a puff. Get ready!
he said. And I did.

When our weight couldn't counter the wind
we came close to going over,
our mast dipped down almost parallel
with the surface. He steered us off.
The boat leveled. And he pointed us back.

When we rounded the buoy first
it was downwind to the finish.

It was never about the race.
Joy came to him through
reading the winds,
assessing the currents.
He saw the horizon,
aware of the wake,
the others around us.
How he moved in the world
taught me how.

JANET BOWDAN

WE ARE LOOKING AT THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

What did Tarzan say when he saw the elephants
coming over the hill? What did he say when he
saw the elephants coming over the hill in sunglasses?

[He said: The elephants are coming over the hill.]
[He said: Nothing. He didn't recognize them.]

How do you put an elephant in the refrigerator?

The elephant in the refrigerator—

a long joke that starts
with a series of easily answered questions
such a relief to be able to answer
looking only so far ahead
        no further.
It hurts
less. We forget how the joke began
        a brick falling
from a plane.
All we need to do
is let the elephant out of the refrigerator
to make space for the giraffe.

Of the five thousand bricks in the plane
        only one falls out.
Meanwhile a party's happening in the jungle--
everyone's going. Well,

not the giraffe. Everyone else.

They all need to cross the river
to get to the party, simple but for the crocodiles.
Just when you think you're okay. In another poem,
it could have been sharks.
Anyway, no problem!
All the crocodiles are at the party. And yet
someone is killed crossing the river:
we know it's not the giraffe; the giraffe is safe
back in the refrigerator.
A girl crosses the river
on her way to the party. It doesn't matter who
or why she's in the jungle, or that she dies.
It's only a joke. Or just a version.

In one version, it wasn't even a girl
but an old lady.
These things don't really happen.
The jungle is really far away
if it exists at all.

KARINA JONES

HOW MANY HISTORIES HAVE BEEN LOST?

The collective energy to care about LA
Burns out before the fires do
A new blaze spreads evacuation warnings
30 miles from my hometown
Which is 60 miles from LA.
I am 70 miles from Palmdale,
In the other direction.

I have a packing list
For when I bounce between my hometown, Palmdale
And my college town, Riverside.
I pack light, because I usually have to take the train
From Palmdale to LA to Riverside
Or the other way around.

To get from Palmdale to anywhere in SoCal that matters,
I have to pass between mountain ranges
Regardless if I'm going southeast or southwest.

In the summer, the mountains of Riverside burn
In the winter, the mountains of Los Angeles burn
Unseasonably.
So I have another packing list
That I made 5 years ago.
It's not the first time we've had to be prepared.

On both of my packing lists,
"Phone, wallet, laptop, chargers, medication." My

evacuation list I have mostly dedicated to the
binders, notebooks, and folders full of writing I've
collected since fifth grade.

My college roommate has moved away
She's studying to be an archivist
She's passionate about the preservation of history,
Even the history of a single person.
She lives in Texas now
The night before I revisit my evacuation list, she says,
"I'm not used to having school off from a snow day,
Only smoke days"
It's 78 degrees in Riverside.
It's January.

DUSTIN P BROWN

THOUGHTS OVER A RIBERA DEL DUERO

/ *tinto* /
a red wine
so dark it's black; i drain it
        it burns. sometimes
you want to be reminded
pain can be physical.

last night i was dumped
        left / *dejado* /
                broken up with
                                s e v e r e d

i wrapped myself in a blanket
and watched the sun methodically
kill the night.

i saw birds wake up
and announce themselves

imagine people doing that

imagine a man
just out of bed
at the window
he stands
before an open hole
        wine glass in hand,
                his eyes red

hair streaked
black and gray / *salpimentado* /
he's considered dying it,
wants to avoid the inevitable
should he just shave it all off?
let it go gray?
grab the keys and never come back?

anyway

the window, yes,
so he's there

and he downs the wine
and he cups hands over lips
and he shouts

imagine the shout
no words
an unclosed vowel

just stands at the open window
and screams
into the dawn

into red breaking apart that blue-black
of first light / *alba* / bluer than blue
just a blue being hacked
to pieces
by a red
unstoppable
the dyed hair
the wine
the burn

NADIA KHAN

Winner of Lit Shark's June 2026 Poem of the Month

CARRY YOUR DREAMS

The clock struck five melting, time evaporating
not up in vapor but down into the ocean.
At the horizon jellyfishes rocketed up
like hot air balloons.

This is how I wish to be,
alone in a half-woken world.

I see red twinkling in the middle of rain storms,
but red lights hardly mean stop signs.
I want you to take your chances.
I want you to buzz the buzzer.

TWO:
IN THE WILD

ASPEN GREENWOOD

THINNING

The ice is thin.
I press my feet into it, feel the crack,
the deep belly-groan of something breaking.
Wind drags its teeth through my feathers,
sharp as hunger.

Where the snow was, water rises—
black, too wide, too warm.
I remember when it held.

The others wait, heads low, bellies empty.
We dive because we must,
because the fish are further now,
because the world beneath us is melting
into nothing we can stand on.

Once, we walked for miles,
our footprints lasting all winter.
Now the ocean swallows them whole.

I look up. The sky drips.
The sun stays too long.
The ice is thin.

ABIGAIL OTTLEY

SEA-CHANGE IN WINTER

At the water's
white edge
ice in thin sheets
takes sandflies
by surprise as

a vibrant choreography
of floating
fronds and tendrils
freezes to a
brilliant tableau.

In this ocean garden,
a sea-dance
is suspended,
a Bolshoi ballet of
bright weed:

sea-lettuce greens view
vie with rainbow wrack
twinkling:
turquoise, purple
and blue

flat, red dulce and
pink and purple carragheen
blooming land branching
like a mystery
of trees—

or else a living sampler,
stitched from sea-threads
of spaghetti and
pink and purple
porphyra

shining corallina
in shades of green
and red, sometimes
snow-tipped and
shining like lace
all are held for an hour
suspended in time
here and there studded
with sea-bones

Look, here is
a carapace, not so big as
your thumbnail,
its tiny pincers
Intact

SHERRY POFF

SNORKELING ON ALLIGATOR REEF

My goggles break the surface.

Instantly, I'm in a colorful world peopled by astonishing fish
—silvery-gray, pink and yellow, blue-green, zebra striped—
in their everyday routine: finning about their lighthouse town
among ever-waving fans, purple and teal.

A large blue fellow, solitary with a yellow mohawk, pushes
through a crowd of pale green loiterers, nibbles at the snack bar.
Long and skinny drifters hang out around the edges,
dart away when authorities appear on patrol.

Life in this busy community is a continual feast
Occasional wild creatures that drift
among the residents cause no alarm.
They are convinced
that we are harmless.

BOB MCAFEE

Honorable Mention for Lit Shark's May 2026 Poem of the Month

JANUARY MORNING ON THE SWAMP TRAIL

—CREW Rookery Swamp Trail near Naples, FL.
12-mile loop for hikers and bikers

Gators in profusion
often blocking the path
so I use my bike as a shield
between us
walking slow
in the January mist.

Cycling the ruts
in the grass unmown,
low gear.
I remove my shoes
to ford ankle-deep
streams.

Marsh birds
are everywhere, white
stalkings of egrets, ibises,
gray herons. Above it all,
the ack-acking of anhingas
spreading forked wings to dry
in emerging sun.

Peddling from one tableau
to the next, then straddling
my bike as I capture

what I want to remember
on my plucky iphone

Ahead a network
of vines crisscrosses
ominously above the trail
and I pause, fearing
overhead danger.

Trepidating, hearing
scritching in the canopy,
I see the raccoon family
scooching in the leaves, baby
taking his time as we
peek-a-boo until
Mamma scolds him away.

Eleven miles gone.
In one tree I count
over thirty vultures perching,
both red-headed turkeys
and gray-faced blacks,
naked faces and necks,
reposing in mid-day somberness
in a single tree, the first time
I have ever seen them
not circling above.

And here am I –
in my mid-eighties,
wondering if they
are aware, in this moment,
in that tree,
of something that I'm not.

MEREDITH STEPHENS

MENACED BY A MARINE HEATWAVE

In an ideal world I would sleep in every morning and enjoy a leisurely breakfast, but I can indulge in no such luxury because I have a border collie. Her name is Haru. She has an elongated body, a pointy white snout scattered with black dots, one black ear and one black and white spotted ear, all-knowing brown eyes, feathered forelegs, and a bushy tail with a white tip. She looks more like a cross between a fox and a border collie than a pure border collie. As soon as she hears my voice when I rouse she starts whining from the courtyard below, nagging me to take her for a walk. I am much more looking forward to my breakfast than the walk, but Haru is the opposite.

One Tuesday, as usual, I affixed her leash and walked her towards the esplanade. Haru has memorised the route. She strained in front of me to the point where we crossed the road, and then continued to drag me towards the pedestrian crossing. Then she made a beeline for the stairs leading down to the beach. I released the leash, and threw the ball down to the sand. She raced down the stairway ahead of me and ran to catch the ball. In the winter months along this coastline, dogs are allowed to run off the leash as long as they are under the owner's control. I was joined by a throng of other dog lovers and their canines, running to catch balls. Haru is interested neither in other dogs nor other people. All she cares about is the ball. Other dogs approached her and chased her, but she was indifferent, solely focused on the ball in my hand.

This is good for me because I get exercise when I otherwise would not, and experience vicarious pleasure in her excitement at retrieving the ball. Maybe this is more fun than breakfast after all. However, my walk last Tuesday was unlike those of previous weeks. I spotted an entire fish washed up on the shore amongst the seaweed. I had never seen this before on my daily beach walks over

the last five years. Then I looked up and saw a rounded shape of a mammal a few hundred metres in the distance. I walked towards it, and once up close I realised that it was the head of a dolphin. “Sorry,” I said, feeling complicit in the damage wreaked by climate change. Haru was normally quick to sniff out a carcass and chew it, but she showed no interest.

The next day I chatted to a neighbour who told me that on her beachwalk she had seen a range of species washed up on the beach that she didn’t know existed. We were witnessing the aftermath of an algae bloom, known as Karenia Mikomotoi, from September 2024. This had arisen in response to a rise in the sea surface temperatures of 2.5 degrees. The recent storms in June 2025 had washed the bodies of these sea creatures ashore. On my next beach walk I came across a small stingray, completely intact, directly in my path. I had seen stingrays before swimming in the shallows, but never washed up on the beach. It was so beautifully formed that I could tell it had met an untimely death. Something untoward and unusual had happened. Again, Haru showed no interest in the stingray, despite usually being interested in decaying fish or animals.

Weeks later I continued to spot fish washed up on the shore that I have never seen before. I came across much smaller fish a couple of centimetres long, some slightly larger fish, and another small stingray. These were the kind of colourful fish that I would see when snorkelling in pristine waters, not washed up on a suburban beach. Haru continued to ignore these dead creatures and skipped along the beach anticipating my ball-throwing. Or perhaps she somehow sensed they contained toxins. At least she was unlikely to be poisoned by eating them. She delights in catching not only one ball that I throw her, but sometimes two. She doesn’t like to relinquish a ball, so I have another one on hand to throw her so that she can chase all the while holding the first one in her mouth. After chewing the ball down to a smaller size and squashing it, she can sometimes fit two into her mouth. Once she has managed this she runs away from me into the wintry waters, oblivious to the cold, triumphant that she has two balls and trying

to get as far away from me as she can in case I try to take one away from her. Sometimes she skips through patches of the dirty foam left by the algal bloom.

I wish I could provide a happy ending to this story, but the algal bloom is not predicted to end soon, so my idyllic morning and evening beach walks with the oblivious Haru are likely to be punctuated with sightings of innocent marine creatures being washed ashore, victims of climate change and warming temperatures.

One consolation occurred the day my fiancé Alex and I left the mainland to sail across Investigator Strait to Kangaroo Island. Over the years there has never been a crossing during which we have not seen dolphins. In the back of my mind I feared that this would be the first time. An hour into our crossing, Alex heard the familiar splash of breaking water and sighted a pod of dolphins. Not only that, once in the bay at Kangaroo Island, we spotted a sea lion. Thankfully, the marine life that can escape the algae is still undisturbed. I hope the scientists will find a way to address the marine heatwave so that life in our oceans can again thrive, and beachgoers can be spared the sight of these innocent creatures being washed up on local beaches. We can't simply delegate to the scientists, though. Witnessing this marine carnage is a strong impetus for ordinary citizens to live more sustainably.

BRENDA SAUNDERS

ISLAND HOME

"I am connected to the land, sea and sky.
That is my universe. That is who I am."
—Getano Lui, Yam Island

On the Tiwi Islands the women no longer sing
in harmony, flowers in hair, swaying to a rhythm
set by sea, sand, and sky

Today they sigh, cry for their land, watch cyclones
thrash and rage as rising seas send another island
into the Torres Strait

On Yam Island they remember children playing
on the beach, fishermen mending nets, before
king tides carved a new coastline

Getano walks through her garden beds, salt tides
lapping her feet, grieves for sacred places lost
ancient cemeteries sinking under sand

Rescues Ancestor bones to bury on higher ground
her Spirit songs of land and sky drowned
by the weight of water

Landmarks to her story taken with the swell
Connection to Country washed away in a day.

ROGER FUNSTON

HERON ISLAND

"Whatever you do, don't pull the ripcord until you are out of the helicopter."

I had just finished my volunteer scientific work at Coorong National Park in South Australia in the late 80s. I want to experience the Great Barrier Reef before returning to the US. My choice: Heron Island via helicopter. My flights from Adelaide to Sydney to Brisbane is running behind schedule. It is after 4:30 PM before I arrived at the Brisbane airport.

I meet two young men from the helicopter company who rush me to the gate. Copters only fly during the day and sunset this time of year is around 5:30 PM. The ride takes about 30 minutes. One of the men grabs my luggage and the other starts strapping a parachute onto my back. No one had said anything before about a parachute.

I spent a lot of money for this flight and it was too late to back out now. I climb into the co-pilot seat, put on the headphones, and off we go. We fly about 500 feet off the water. The view is spectacular. The chatter through the headphone has a strong Aussie accent. It had gotten easier to understand after a few weeks in Australia. An uneventful flight. Luckily, no parachute jump.

Heron Island is a tropical coral cay- 2,600 feet long, 980 feet wide and 12 feet tall at its highest point. Today, Heron Island is an upscale resort as well as a UNESCO World Heritage site. When I visited, it was less well known, having only recently been designated. It had modest bungalow rooms and was a hangout for nature enthusiasts and honeymooners.

Rich stands of grand devil's claw cover the middle of the island. The tree's leaves are sticky. The black noddie terns use the leaves to make their nests, aiding in seed dispersal. Sometimes, the seeds adhere to black noddie's feathers so they can no longer

fly. They starve and fall to the ground, fertilizing the nutrient poor sandy soil. In May, the black hoodies will disperse over the Pacific, returning in November to feast on fish.

The thousands of green turtle and leatherback turtles, who live in the ocean, feel the call of land in deep memory and return to their place of birth to nest from October to May. It is April and this swarm of nesting turtles on the beach will soon return to their ocean home. Tens of thousands of nesting endangered wedge-tailed shearwaters will soon migrate north to the Arctic.

The shallow coral reefs await. I rent mask, snorkel and fins and spend many enjoyable hours in warm water gazing at white and black-nosed sharks, shovel nosed rays and pink whiptail rays. Swimming turtles are foraging for food. Colorful tropical fish I can't identify, school, all of one mind, turning at the same sharp moment.

During mid-day low tide, I walk on exposed and semi-submerged coral to view damselfish, small snails, anemones, worms. Enjoy a few days of strolling on white sand beaches at sunrise and sunset. Without the coral reefs, there would be no beach.

A tiny, photosynthesizing single-cell algae makes its home in the coral's body tissue, converting sunlight to energy, providing essential nutrients and giving coral its bright colors. Higher ocean temperatures, due to global warming, stress the these algae, causing them to die or leave their host, a process called coral bleaching. Fish leave, black noddies starve, grand devil's claw trees die.

Heron Island is a lovingly protected marine sanctuary in delicate ecological balance and peril. I had the privilege of experiencing this marvel before today's more dire climate change threats. I hope it's not too loved by tourists. I pray it avoids ecological collapse. I want to return some day. I hope my great-grandchildren can too.

ANNETTE BIRDSALL

LOLLING LION

so picturesque,

so still,

lion lying in the sun

then lolloping slow

when the mood strikes

lunging in one second

returning to languish

the day and the prey.

ANNETTE BIRDSALL

BLUE-FOOTED BOOBY

Steep-angle plunge dives

Cartwheel blue feet over sea.

On land, blue bebops.

ABIGAIL OTTLEY

TURNING TURTLE

I've been wearing it so long I forget it's there. You could say over time it's grown into me. I'm like one of those turtles you see on social media with lengths of fishing twine or fine, silver wire embedded in the flesh of their necks. Except I have no rescuer. No one has hauled me from the water, notwithstanding my thrashing and snapping. No one has snipped with infinite patience at the tightness that cuts off my breath. Nor has anyone caressed me as they bathed the open wound, cleansing it of pus and infection. No one whispered soft words to ease my great sadness before giving me back to the deep. In my own case, there can be nothing like that. The gag was tied tight. I accepted it. Soon I grew used to it, then I learned to love it. That's a very hard thing to admit. The truth is when you're young, bad things can be done to you, things that frighten and hurt you and, unless you are lucky and someone hauls you up, you will likely take the blame upon yourself. Now I am older. I see how these things work. I might wish I had been lucky, like those turtles. I wasn't lucky.

JOSEPH LABRIOLA

WORLD TURTLE DAY

The big release was a big deal. And not just because the privately funded Hugs for Wildlife Marine Center had contracted their event with dozens of other organizations, vendors, and even social media influencers. The latter collaborators had modest followings, but all it took was one filtered close-up of a derpy-faced, flipper-wagging turtle to explode their message out to the world. And what better time to try than on World Turtle Day. It seemed well worth the investment.

It was also late May amidst a record-breaking heat wave, so there was no problem getting people to show up. In fact, the beach was plenty crowded all day. But the real crowd began gathering at around 4pm. The "release" wasn't for a couple more hours, but they made sure to advertise "Get there early for parking! And save your beach spot!" And so by 5pm, the sun-seared blacktop lot just behind the dunes was already at capacity. Frustrated parents began buttressing their SUVs all along the sandy side of the steaming road leading into the site, frantically unloading their coolers and chairs and umbrellas and towels and hats and snacks and juice pouches and kids and speakers and backpacks and water bottles and toys and such.

A waist-high, red plastic rope mapped the basketball court sized launching spot on the sand down towards the water. It was ringed by all manner of humanity. Old and new, short and tall. Sunglassed parents texted on their glaring smart watches. Children ran and screamed at nothing in particular. A lumpy grandmother with owl-like eyes, who had somehow managed her motorized scooter onto the beach said proudly, "I want to see how my grandkids react."

A whistle wailed, somewhat dimming the scene as a trio of

teenage volunteers hauled the first of three transparent-walled cases down the blue plastic mat walkway between the dunes. The pallbearers-in-training brought the clear containers by with a sudden swelling of cheers. “Let’s flip out for Flipper!” a green-shirted supervisor wailed over a megaphone as she frolicked out ahead of the procession. The fat, wide-eyed turtle inside simply fluttered its limbs.

As they passed into the clearing, the mass of bodies pressed against the twisting twine, buckling the tenuous barrier. A sea of glinting cellphone screens bobbed tactfully as each searched for the perfect angle. The cheers continued to rise as the cases were laid down, their doors unlatched, and the turtles, one by one, began scuttling onto the sand and towards the waves.

These critters were confused, but excited. The turtles were hatched, put on for show in giant tanks, and then eventually released into the wild for promotional events such as these. Everyone seemed happy with the arrangement.

And they somehow knew exactly where to go.

Soon they were somewhere in the water. A few more creatures were home at last. Two kids shit in the water, and many more peed in it. Though that could have happened anywhere.

In premise, the event was a smashing hit. Two separate fender-benders did back up traffic for half a mile on the single lane leading away from the sunset beach. But one of the TikTok reels got over 1.3 million views. And the Hugs for Wildlife Marine Center sold 21 turtle plushies, 18 t-shirts, and 31 bumper stickers, netting a 901 dollar profit.

They also signed up 32 annual memberships to their aquarium, and added 137 emails to their newsletter list. And there was one viewer in attendance from a fledgling, non-profit marine rescue center, who was there to observe the proceedings.

She commented to her coworker after the show, “We really need to get on this sort of thing.”

MEREDITH STEPHENS

THE ELUSIVE DUGONGS

"I can't wait to see a dugong!" I announced to Alex.

I hadn't even heard of a dugong until recently, so the prospect of actually seeing one was tantalizing. Alex had told me that they were large marine mammals that ate seagrass, affectionately known as "sea cows". They were most numerous in Shark Bay, Western Australia.

Two weeks earlier, we had left Perth, and had been sailing north along the Western Australian coast. The day before we had concluded the leg from Port Gregory to False Entrance. There were no anchorages en route and we were at the mercy of the winds. We sailed several nautical miles out to sea but were in sight of the imposing Zuytdorp Cliffs, so named by Dutch explorers in the 1600s. The sail had extended well into the night and we anchored, alone in the bay, at 11:25pm. The next morning we woke to the view of the thrashing of the waves against the cliffs to the south and surf pounding the nearby beach. We exited the safety of the bay back into the swell of the Indian Ocean and arrived at the entrance to Shark Bay three hours later. Waves battered the cliffs and fishermen launched kites into the ocean. Once we entered Shark Bay the deep blue turned into aquamarine, and the swell subsided. We anchored at the aptly named Shelter Bay for the night.

The next morning we pressed on to Dirk Hartog Island, anchoring at Homestead Bay. Alex lowered the stand-up paddleboard into the water. He sat himself at the rear and held it steady for me to position myself at the front. Then he paddled to shore as I held myself steady at the front. We dragged the paddleboard to a safe height, and then walked to the beach bar to reward ourselves with an Aperol Spritz for our deprivations at sea. Sipping our aperitifs overlooking the bay, we could almost imagine ourselves

to be in the Mediterranean, except for the absence of other boats.

We exchanged pleasantries with the bartender, and then Alex asked the burning question.

"Can we see dugongs around here?"

"Certainly!"

"Where's the best place to see them?"

"Continue along the island until you get to Herald Bay, or Louisa Bay."

Armed with local knowledge, we felt more confident about finding dugongs. The next morning we continued sailing along the coast of Dirk Hartog Island to Herald Bay, scouring the seascape for dugongs.

"I think I just saw one! It doesn't have a dorsal fin so it can't be a dolphin or shark. It must be a dugong!" said Alex, as he took a picture of a delicate face emerging from the seagrass.

If we had seen one, we were bound to see more. We pressed on to Herald Bay for the evening and took the paddleboard to the beach for a walk. We continued to scan the waters for dugongs to no avail.

The next day we sailed slowly up the coast to Louisa Bay, eyes peeled for dugongs. The water was exceptionally clear but the camouflage of seagrass meadows made it hard to spot dugongs. The next day, an hour and twenty minutes into our departure from Louisa Bay, Alex uttered an uncharacteristic expletive. "Our steering is gone!" he said, demonstrating the lack of steering by moving the steering wheel in each direction to zero effect.

We decided to head for Broadhurst Bay off the Peron Peninsula, where we could shelter from the wind. Once stationary, Alex diagnosed the problem. The steering shaft housing had broken. He placed an order with the supplier of the steering system in Brisbane on the opposite side of the continent.

"Can we make it to Carnarvon?" I asked.

"Yes, I can rig an emergency steering system, moving the rudder with the winches."

For the next eight hours, Alex was on his feet hand-steering the boat with the winches. And we still hadn't seen any dugongs.

We eagerly anticipated our arrival in Carnarvon. This time rather than anchoring, we would stay in a marina because we needed to be in a safe place for the boat repairs. The approaching waters were shallow but the channel markers guided us safely into the marina. There were few boats there and we easily secured our allotted spot. Alex enquired about when the steering shaft housing would be delivered to the marina and suggested having it sent to the main post office. The Australian East Coast had just suffered extensive damage from Cyclone Abe and the power was out at the fabricators. This combined with the time it took for a postal delivery from across the continent meant that we would be stuck there for at least a week.

The original plan had been to keep sailing north to Exmouth, or even as far as Timor Leste. However, duties at home in Adelaide meant we could not keep sailing north. A week later when Alex had repaired the steering we had to retrace our long voyage south. We had yet to see dugongs other than the gentle face that had fleetingly emerged from the waters at Shark Bay.

We sailed back to Shark Bay, stopping at the Peron Peninsula and Homestead Bay one last time, before venturing out again into the swell of the Indian Ocean. Forecasts were wildly inaccurate and we found ourselves awash with water pouring over the boat. A reefing line had broken and we could not control the speed of the boat, as winds raced up to forty-four knots. The safest place to shelter was the Beagle Islands, noted for the largest sea lion population in Western Australia. We checked whether it was permitted to land on the island and discovered that it was banned, in order to protect the sea lions. We hoped we could at least glimpse them from the boat. Due to the wind conditions we arrived in darkness and saw no sea lions. Alex checked the weather conditions and decided that we would have to leave in darkness the next morning in order to arrive in a safe harbour the next day. So far we had seen neither sea lions nor dugongs.

We continued south, enjoying various anchorages along the way. Usually Alex was up just before daybreak in order to cover the necessary nautical miles to get to the next anchorage before night-

fall. Often we were greeted by dorsal fins in the anchorages, so at least we had the company of dolphin pods.

One of the anchorages was by the holiday town of Dunsborough. As usual, we timed our arrival before sunset, and headed to shore on the paddleboard. Just as we were dragging the paddleboard off the beach I noticed a movement in the seaweed. Could it be a dugong?

"Alex!" I shouted. He had to see this.

Alex dropped the paddleboard and came back to the shoreline. A black stingray was swimming back and forth, in no hurry to return to the depths. We stood there mesmerized by the elegant movements, the creature seemingly unconcerned by our presence.

Once the stingray headed back out into the deeper water we started our beachwalk.

"Stingrays are among the most intelligent fish. Their cousins, the manta rays, are the most intelligent of all." Alex informed me.

We had missed out on dugongs, other than the brief sighting in Shark Bay, and the sea lions on the Beagle Islands, but at least we had spotted a stingray. Sometimes you don't find what you are looking for, but you find something else that is equally satisfying. We have not given up on dugongs though, and hope that if we ever make the crossing again of over three thousand kilometres from our home in Adelaide to Shark Bay, those elusive animals will still be there waiting for us.

ROBERT WYNNE

LONELY EMU AT DESTROYED ZOO

—After a photograph by Sergei Supinsky
Yasnohorodka, Ukraine

It walks across a black corrugated panel
which used to be a roof, right leg forward
and left heel slightly raised as it advances
through the wreckage. Hunks of twisted metal
litter the scene like giant scales cast off
some great steel dragon. Perhaps it's lunchtime.
The grey afternoon light reveals no zookeeper
or any food among bent frames scattered
over a rocky surface. A door stands open
in a distant building, and in the lower left
a perfectly round cement chasm extends down
out of sight. Where to go? What to do?
How to live in this strange place which appeared
right where a familiar habitat used to be?
Why does everything smell like fire?
Is this freedom, or a death sentence?
Is there even a difference?

STEPHANIE SELLARS

LEOPARD

tufts of hair in your round ears
soften the menace of you
relaxed, yet alert
under a tree,
like a housecat
scanning for sustenance

ink blots on your head
black blooms on your back
not like the licorice jellybeans
on my vintage faux cheetah coat
that I mistakenly referred to as your skin,
over dresses and pearls, fishnets and lingerie
heels and boots trekking me around
the urban bush where I too
scanned for sustenance

our guide, who gets paid to scan
was shocked and delighted
to see you just outside of camp
not on the usual stage, high
on a branch with a kill
but on the ground, close to the road

I offer slow blinks
you stare with

wide yellow eyes
still and solitary

We both have our camouflage
but when we are seen
our spots are obvious
it is hard
        to look away

STEPHANIE SELLARS

GIRAFFE

Placenta clinging to mother's tail
like a strip of fatty meat
on the side of a carnivore's plate

She licks her still wet baby
nudging her belly, seeking strength,
the elusive food source

Mama steps forward
but can't roll onto her side
to make it easy
like human mothers
holding, compromising, directing
nipple to helpless mouth

When a giraffe is born
it drops to the ground, headfirst
cord dangling
first steps like an insecure teen girl in heels

Come on baby, you can do it!

Mama walks away, eats acacia leaves
looks back at what she made
but does not stop her life

No, not there!

A hyena lurks nearby.

Mama is alert, watchful
placenta swaying
like a stray thread everyone notices
but she

Oh baby, a little to the left . . .

Is she trying to help
or is this the way
she's always moved
before the arrival of this
alien?

Go to the back, the back!

Baby stumbles, stops, looks
at this strange new bright world
unaware of predators, unaware
that her existence is supporting an entire species
away from extinction
unaware that her mother cannot
make it easy
but will stay awake
so her baby may
live another day

What if . . .

Finally, baby latches.

We celebrate from the jeep.

I remember my hard-mouthed mother
and yearn
for everything new

ODI WELTER

EEL QUESTION

"The eels didn't care about the eel question, and why would they? To them, it was never a question in the first place."
—Patrick Svensson, *The Book of Eels*

I'm reading a book about eels,
and my first thought isn't to text you
about how Freud might have started going crazy
because he couldn't find the eel testicle
just to see how you'd respond.
You'd either have a clever response
or barely a response at all,
but I'm no longer trying to guess
while I check my phone for your name
in that little bubble.
I have to dig to find you in my thoughts,
where before you were like a spark
and I'd have to squint to see anything else.
For a second, you were my eel question,
undefinable, alluring, slippery,
and it was my quest to discover
all I could about you.
I was Aristotle, Vallisneri, Freud, Schmidt–
dissecting your words and searching your gestures
for the answers to the most elusive mysteries.
Just like the eel, you will stay a mystery,

the kind that keeps curiosity alive
and the world from ending,
because if we solve all the questions,
what else is there to find?
I like to think that, even if it was only
for a blink of a moment, that I
was your eel question too.

STEPHANIE SELLARS

EL OJO DE LA BELLENA GRIS [THE EYE OF THE GRAY WHALE]

Glassy as a marble
in a slick gray nest
tiny relative
to your body
a small submarine

Oblong head
like an overturned boat
my hand on your skin
above the fissure of a mouth

Mountain ridge
from a plane window
trails of crayon scribbles
or a fallen ribbon
rooftops like Legos
cars as small as those
my four-year-old nephew
drives and crashes with one hand

Patches of barnacles
splotches on your skin
features we prefer to erase from ourselves
are in full relief
when you rise up
spin around
inviting touch
less real seeming

than the breaching whale
on a sunset postcard

Are we funny to you in the boat?

A single creature with
multiple limbs and heads
on a body the size of your calf
rigid tail vibrating on the surface

When you see two eyes
is it like me looking into one
feeling

Something
Shimmering
Still
between
soil and sea?

PATRICK TEN BRINK

GALÁPAGOS BATFISH

Bright, red lips to attract
a mate, so why, why,
do you forever frown?

Body flattened, with fins
like a bat's wings, you walk,
hop, then elegantly glide–

roaming sea floors, with
an upside-down
first-impression-smile.

You mesmerise mates and
prey and curious divers,
intriguing, red-lipped batfish.

PATRICK TEN BRINK

JELLYFISH AND PLASTIC BAGS

I thought my mother was a plastic bag,
said the jellyfish, bobbing about
among floating patches of debris.

I thought the plastic bag was a jellyfish–
the last wretched reflection of a turtle
gagging on its fateful, indigestible lunch.

Jellyfish, you are everywhere, as are we,
as are the plastic bags we created and
abandoned. Such poor mimics of you.

You are beautiful in your languid motion, translucent
pulses pushing your body up, tentacles trailing,
a four-leaf flower adorning your back.

You are legion now, threatening all
with your sting–not only fish, as I found out
with a blue-bottle's "string".

Plastic bags, too, crowd the waters,
wreaking havoc with creatures of the sea–
an ill-chosen diet or an entangling, accidental trap.

If only we'd stop littering the oceans with false manna and
turtles could again swallow their silky gelatinous snacks
without fear of deathly disappointment.

JO ANN ZIMMERMAN

ROMP! A JOURNEY THROUGH THE NATURAL HISTORY OF OTTERS AND WHY THEY MATTER

EMAIL

Otters need our help! To increase awareness of conservation efforts to protect our wetlands and coastal waterways, they are applying for a new job: Pennsylvania state marine mammal.

Their attached cover letter, resume, and letter of recommendation from the author of the new book *Romp!: A Journey Through the Natural History of Otters and Why They Matter* detail their many skills and qualifications for this important position.

JOB APPLICATION

Dear Governor Shapiro,

Please accept our application to be the new state marine mammal of the great Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The attached resume highlights the skills and experience that make us the perfect fit for this important job. We are also including a letter of recommendation from Dr. Heidi Island, author of the new and definitive book of otter awesomeness, *Romp!: A Journey Through the Natural History of Otters and Why They Matter*, published April 28, 2026, by Tarcher Press.

Note that in addition to our many qualifications, you did just replace us on your state license plate–with a giant salamander.

I think you owe us something, Josh.

OTTER RESUME

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

- Established romps in every U.S. state except Alaska and every Canadian province except Prince Edward Island
- Served as an indicator species in kelp forests along the American Pacific coast. By eating sea urchins, who gnaw kelp at its base, sea otters limited damage to the forest and saved many species of fish who spawn and raise their young in the protected expanse of sea kelp.
- Raised over $3 million dollars for wildlife conservation selling otter-themed T-shirts in 2025
- Performed keystone species role on Whidbey Island in the Salish Sea where, despite our low numbers, otters sounded the alarm on dangerous levels of forever chemicals due to our position at the top of the food chain. Our low body fat causes us to absorb chemicals into vital organs so our numbers dropped, and conservationists took action to protect the ecosystem.

QUALIFICATIONS & SKILLS

- The 14 subspecies of otters (lutrinae) are proud members of the mustelid family and so related to such revered animals as weasels and badgers
- Otters learn to swim! Except for sea otters, we are not born with this skill but learn to do it by imitating others in our social group.
- Otters are accomplished dancers who perform daily group poop dances 2-3 hours after eating. The poop deposits much-needed nitrogen into coastal and wetland ecosystems.

- River otters can hold our breath for up to eight minutes and close our ears and nostrils while diving underwater
- Otters were discovered to be tool users long before Jane Goodall observed this behavior in chimpanzees. In the 1930's, naturalist Edna Marie Fisher observed sea otters diving for mussels and stones from the bottom of Monterey Bay, and then returning to the sea surface to smash open the mussels on stones we hold on our bellies.
- During enrichment activities designed to prevent boredom in captivity, individual otters develop strategies to get the most food by observing what the others do and use that information to our own advantage.

WORK AND PLAY EXPERIENCE

- 20,000,000 years' experience being . . . otters!
- Otters' furtive nature inspired Native stories of the Kooshdaa Kaa, the land otter people, told by the Tlingit and Haida people of Alaska. These spirits are not otters but transformed humans who capture those who get lost in the woods and transform them into land otter people, too.
- For hundreds of years, smooth-coated otters of the Sundarbans mangrove forest in the Bay of Bengal have helped local fishermen by herding fish into their nets. Instead of eating the fish ourselves, we have learned we get more food by waiting until the fishermen reward us with fish from the catch. This means otters are highly intelligent associative learners who can delay gratification. Even some humans struggle with that.
- Otters are expert sledders. In Pennsylvania's Ohiopyle State Park, we have been observed sliding down snowy hills repeatedly for up to five minutes at a time. Because it's fun!

LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION

To Whom it May Concern:

As a lifelong resident of the Pacific Northwest, I grew up around otters in rivers, bays, and seacoasts. I am also a professor of biological psychology and behavioral ecology at Pacific University and a member of the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Otter Specialist Group. In 2018, I received a grant for a sabbatical year to study otters and conducted research on Whidbey Island in the Salish Sea area of Puget Sound off the coast of Washington State. My findings show that otters are uniquely qualified to serve as the Pennsylvania State Marine Mammal.

Also, river otters have rebounded in your state. In 1952, they were considered extirpated (locally extinct) from most regions in Pennsylvania. Thanks to their careful reintroduction in the 1980s by the state game commission, today, river otters inhabit every major watershed in Pennsylvania, from the Delaware River in the east to the Ohio River in the west. It's time to celebrate this remarkable comeback by designating the river otter your official state marine mammal.

No comment on the giant salamander.

Dr. Heide Island

*

You've heard of a murder of crows, a pride of lions, and even a shiver of sharks—but what about a romp of otters?
Romp!: A Journey through the Natural History of Otters and Why They Matter by Heide Island, PhD. (Tarcher, 2026).
ISBN-13: 978-0593855034 (hardcover)

ADRIENNE CAPONE

THE SNARKY OCEAN LECTURE SERIES PRESENTS: THE GULF OF MEXICO

Each day I do the same thing around my most of my coastline. I roll, chill and churl, foam and frolic, push and pull, and entertain humans and their dogs. I even make the people peaceful. The dogs just dig getting all crazy about a ball or a floating frisbee. I do not like pit bulls; they piss me off when they bark at, charge, and chase birds. Needless to say, people who do not pick up the poop, of any dog, all I can say is one plunge into me will result in a sudden wave, a body-slam tumble, and maybe a rollicking riptide scare.

Mostly, I love the birds. I play with the sanderlings and willets—the turnstones, those chubby little chicks. I pull away and ignore them; they come back and eat. Two seconds later, I push them away—such fun. The willets have more courage because their legs are longer, but God, I love all these sweet shore birds. The pelicans, not so much, they shit too often and too much at once, making a gross mess on my surface, and the way they plunge into me freaks out all the crustaceans, especially crabs, not just the sardines and silverbacks that they prefer to eat. Yet, I still respect them; they have a function in the food-chain just like everything in and around me. Every being has its purpose. Actually, for all their faults, I am glad to see the pelicans back after all that DDT—seems like yesterday was the big kill off, but I am pretty old so fifty-sixty years is a drop in the proverbial bucket. I was pretty scared back then; beings were perishing all around me—dead ducks everywhere, literally, and no babies.

I also want a give a shout out to the terrific terns. Swift, streamlined, they pierce me like a nurse who is good with the

needle and then take their little fish for sustenance. They are so glorious. I watch them all day, and in the evening, when the sun is sinking, they are just spectacular, smart and delightful in the dying light. The elegance of the egrets, the roseate spoonbills, pink and plump, the oystercatchers with that funky bill, all so functional yet frivolous—flirty even. I wax poetic here, but I do love my beautiful birds and never tire of looking up at them.

Humans say I am not like the ocean. They cannot surf unless I have whipped up a hurricane nearby, but if a human is on the ball, observant, if they show respect and reverence for my antics and tides, I am eclectic. In winter, for instance, with the sun low in its arc, I am a silken mantle, gently undulating one day, roiling and raucous the next. I can look like mercury—quicksilver with tiny little leaps of sparkling light as I dance. Spring, Summer and Autumn, I am all color and light all the time. Aquamarine, Turquoise, Mint, Emerald. Sage, Teal, Green Tea. What can I say? I am magnificent on my coastline. Except for Texas.

I have to apologize to the people along the coast of Texas who do appreciate me and my birds and my fish and dolphins. I am brown and flat on some of my west coastline. I cannot help that; we all have our good side, right? But those oil rigs up and down the coast? Screw you. You deserve it. Oh, and let's talk about petrol spills. Why should I make nice when you do not care about me at all. I am just a commodity to some of you—all you hear from my lapping shores is a chant: oil-gas-oil gas-oil-gas-oil-gas. What the hell is wrong with you? I give you plenty of sun, plenty of wind and you complain you need more oil and gas. I know, it is all about the money. You think I do not see that? Look at those farms up and down the Mississippi. Shit shit shit in the river. Cows, pigs, chickens, not to mention human sewage. Sure, all living things gotta go but you don't gotta go in me! And the chemical fertilizer. Do you know that my dead zone is growing. Why? 'Cause you have to eat all that meat and God forbid you compost and care and stop using all that fetid fertilizer and poisonous pesticides or find a way to neutralize all that crap before it runs into the Mississippi. Someday, the whole coast of Florida and Mexico gonna look like the coast

of Texas if you do not watch it.

Seriously, I am so generous and loving and giving and all you humans do is abuse me. I welcome you, entertain you, and I am happy to do so, but I get abused and you wonder why I start all those storms. My friends, the oceans and seas, and all the other gulfs will take you all out if you do not respect us.

CLIVE AARON GILL

TRAPPED

Spring's first light broke over Monterey Bay, and the calm water mirrored the sky's soft pinks and golds. Giuseppe Russo, known as Peppe, stood on the deck of his sixty-foot boat, his jeans sagging at his butt. He tasted the salty air and heard the melancholy cry of a seagull. Hooking his arthritic thumbs in his belt loops, he searched for Matt, one of his deckhands.

At sixteen, Peppe had fished with his father in the Mediterranean. At twenty, he told his friends in Sicily, "My father and my grandfather were fishermen. Fishing is all I know."

During the Second Mafia War in 1983, his father was accidentally shot. He died a day later, his family and a priest at his bedside. Eight months later, wanting to escape the widespread killings and economic struggle, Peppe left his family and friends to start a new life in California.

Seeing Matt running toward the boat, Peppe raised his hands, palms up, as if gesturing to a god.

"Move your ass," he yelled. "We gotta be back by 3:00 for the market."

"Coming, Captain."

Peppe raised an index finger in warning. "You late one more time, I fire you."

Matt climbed aboard.

Peppe said, "You hear me, sonofabitch?"

"Got it, Captain."

Twenty-seven-year-old Matt Whitney, born in Watsonville, California, had lived in Monterey since age ten. His father had frequently taken him during the week to the jetty to fish, and on weekends, they fished from a motorboat. When people asked Matt about his job, he told them, "I enjoy working

outdoors and catching fish."

Matt greeted the second deckhand with a grin. "Hey, Lorenzo."

Lorenzo once dreamed of owning a fishing boat, but he could not afford the costs of a boat, gear and a license. Matt and Lorenzo enjoyed working together, and Matt regularly visited Lorenzo, his wife and their eight-year-old-daughter on Sundays.

The diesel engine coughed, then settled into a steady, rumbling hum. The propellers sliced through the water with a whooshing sound, and the hull creaked as the boat pulled out of the harbor. Lorenzo and Matt, wearing waterproof orange life jackets and caps, baited the hooks, spaced every yard along the longlines, with squid, herring and mackerel.

An hour later, Peppe cut the engine, knowing that black cod and slope rockfish could be found in the deeper waters. While the boat bobbed on the whispering waves, the three men released the longlines that ran 1,500 feet to the ocean floor. The boat drifted, and Lorenzo and Matt inspected the equipment for retrieving the catch. Then they checked the longlines' orange buoys for sudden jerks or shifts, showing fish activity. Peppe logged details about the depth of the lines and the location.

Five hours after Peppe stopped the boat, a cold wind arose and stung their faces.

"See what we got today," Peppe said.

Matt and Lorenzo hauled in the longlines, carefully checking each section. Bloated and sluggish from rapid pressure changes, the fish were carefully unhooked. Then they were tossed into a well where they smacked against the walls and each other.

"A good day," Peppe said when all the longlines were retrieved at 2:00 p.m. "The well is nearly full. We going back."

Matt stared at an object in the west. "Captain," he said, pointing.

Peppe arched a gray, bushy eyebrow. "What is it? Don't see nothin'."

"Looks like a whale," Lorenzo said.

"No time for whales. Gotta get to the market."

"Captain," Matt said. "It's not moving."

"You heard me, damn it."

Matt, feeling the anger in Peppe's tone, furrowed his brow.

"We not look at a whale. It's late."

"Please Captain," Lorenzo said, his hand raised slightly, palm open. "Just a quick look."

Peppe snorted with impatience. "Five minutes only."

As Peppe's boat drew close, they saw a forty-foot humpback whale trapped by crab pot lines.

Matt shook his head. "Captain, if we don't do something, it will die."

Peppe stared at the majestic creature and gripped the boat's wheel, his knuckles white.

"Too dangerous for us to save. But we can't let it die. I'll call Marine Rescue."

Peppe spoke to a dispatcher at the Marine Mammal Center in Marin County who instructed him to wait for a rescue team, and he agreed.

At 2:50 p.m., three scuba divers, three snorkelers and a team leader arrived in three rigid-hulled inflatable boats with outboard motors. Maintaining a safe distance, they examined the entangled whale who struggled to keep its blow hole out of the water. The crab pot lines that were wound around its tail, right front flipper and mouth had caused visible cuts.

The Marine Mammal Center team leader, Anna Bowen, drove alongside Peppe's boat.

"We may have to euthanize her," Anna said. "She's weak and badly hurt."

Matt's shoulders stiffened. "I've seen too many die from trap and fishing lines."

"Me too," Anna said. "My heart sank when I saw all the lines wound around her. The only way to rescue her would be for some of my team to dive. Others would have to approach her on the surface. Just a flip of her tail could be fatal."

Lorenzo, Peppe and Matt stared at Anna as if begging for help.

Anna rubbed her forehead. "Um . . . she's close to dying.

We'll—we'll have to move fast to keep her alive."

"God bless you," Peppe said.

Three team members snorkeled near the whale's head and three dove with scuba gear beneath the fifty-five-ton mammal. Ninety-pound crab pots hung like anchors from the lines wound around the whale. Passively floating, she emitted deep vibrations with low vocalizations.

Working together, the divers and the snorkelers struggled to reach the crab pot lines with four-pronged grappling hooks. Then they cut the lines with long-handled, curved knives.

In silence, Anna, Lorenzo, Peppe, and Matt focused on the cautious rescue activity.

At 4:29 p.m., the last line slipped free. The great whale glided gradually past the divers and snorkelers, and the onlookers clapped and cheered. She then circled the boats twice in slow, deliberate loops.

As she turned away, the rescue team closely monitored her, and everyone was relieved to see her swimming faster.

A diver on an inflatable boat said, "It felt like she was thanking us."

"She seemed kind of affectionate," said another diver.

"When I was cutting the line that went through her mouth," said a snorkeler, "her eye was watching me. It was an unforgettable moment."

Peppe, his eyes watery, said to Matt and Lorenzo, "Most unbelievable experience of my life." He laughed, deep and warm-hearted. "Don't care we're late for the market. Take all the fish you want for you and your friends."

*

Inspired by the humpback whale rescue, Peppe joined the Fisheries Lost Gear Recovery team that summer to help locate and remove lost crab gear and fishing lines from Monterey Bay.

THREE:
IN THE AIR

DIANA WOODCOCK

HIGH HOPES

Look at the fledglings,
spreading wide their tiny flippers,
exercising for their first dive-

flight. Look at the rainbow
spreading over the glacier
like a color-enhanced halo.

Listen to the ancient air bubbles
popping in the iceberg as it
drifts and floats. Notice

the slightest hint of red (snow
algae) and grey-green (Fruticose
lichens) spread over the rocky

slopes—everything filled with
high hopes this austral summer
day. Let the wind and snow flakes

play with your senses. Let the bergy
bit drifting nearby push away
your heaviness. Treading ever

so softly on snow and ice, let
yourself believe all of it is holy,
part and parcel of paradise.

MARIANNE TEFFT

SUMMER BIRDS

While the sun warms the grass
And my feet run free
I collect waterbirds
And hold them in my heart-mind
For they will be my best friends
In the time when the birches tremble
Green then yellow then the color of dust
And we journey to the caves
That shelter us from the snow
And lean animals
If I am lucky
I will find slivers of ivory
From the proud mammoths
Our fathers borrowed that we could eat
And fare them with rough stones
Pretty ones I carry in my little pouch
Up and down the hills
Between my two hands
I will spin twigs from the hardy trees
That shade us on our journey
In my mind the cranes will soar
Through the dark winter sky
Until we meet again beside the sea
While the sun warms the grass
And my feet run free

DAVID ANSON LEE

MILKWEED TESTAMENT

Monarchs arrive exhausted,
their wings thin as inheritance.
Milkweed waits:
a plant that learned survival
by becoming poisonous.

Toxins climb its stem,
not as defense alone
but as gift:
eat me, it says,
and you will be untouchable too.

Fields once stitched
with milkweed veins
are now sterile squares
of compliance.
Herbicides erase hospitality.

Still, roadside ditches bloom.
Still, gardens rebel quietly.
Still, milkweed teaches:
protection is sometimes
about becoming dangerous
to those who would erase you.

LINDA M. CRATE

EVERY BEAUTY

rosefinches
are so pretty
i didn't know they
were real,

but when someone shared
one with me i googled
to make sure it wasn't
just some image
someone recolored;

but no
she was just blessed
with pretty pink

like a spring tulip—

i wonder how many
wonderful creatures are
blessed with colors
i have yet to see them in,

and i wish to see them all;

i am fascinated with
every beauty this
world sings.

ANNETTE BIRDSALL

SATIN BOWERBIRD

The earth-colored female Satin
Bowerbird builds her own nest;
while the glossy ever-blue male
hopes to impress her with a
beautiful bower for maypole
mating around a tree or
between an avenue of sticks.
He decorates elaborately—
naturally, with blue flowers,
shells, and cicada wings, and
artificially, with blue findings,
pen caps, and bottle tops;
all to gift her with more sky.

DAVID ANSON LEE

SUNFLOWER AGAINST THE FENCE LINE

They planted sunflowers
at Chernobyl
not for beauty
but hunger:
the plant's appetite
for radiation.

Stalks rose
from poisoned ground,
yellow faces unafraid
of what glowed below.

Each root drank cesium,
each leaf stored
our mistakes.
No protest,
no accusation—
just work.

Along highways now,
sunflowers lean toward exhaust,
toward chemical runoff,
toward what spills
from trucks at night.

They are not naïve.
They know the cost of light.
Still, they stand tall enough
to take it in
and change it.

BRENDA SAUNDERS

TERRORIST

He waits for the moon, circles
new terrain of red desert sand
stretching to the horizon.
A moving shadow unchallenged
by vigilantes, foxes on the run
surviving the wilderness.

Small creatures fear his speed
and fury, the swipe of a giant
bred from some domestic cat
let go as the family moved on.

The desert holds its breath
stunned by the scent
of a night prowler hunting
his world to extinction.

SETH SHERMAN

THE LAST HIRAETH

Hunger's pain won't quit, and I can't find anything palatable enough to make it go away. And what little I do find neither smells nor tastes like real food. Although it's not getting any worse (or am I just getting used to it?), the pleasure is gone, and there's never any joy in just feeling numb.

I can still scavenge, but that's not what I was cut out to do. I'm a hunter, and I come from a long line of hunters,

Maybe today will be different and my hunt will be successful.

I climb a small hill to have a look around. Although I'm tall, the hill will give me a better vantage. Still nothing. Only carcasses, and they're probably all putrefied and infested with small insects and even smaller worms.

And then there are those small, furry creatures who seem much more numerous and less timid than they used to. Back then, you'd only catch a glimpse of them at night, and only if they felt invisible. But the minute they sensed your gaze, they'd quickly disappear back underground. Now, they're everywhere and will even come within a few feet. If only they were a little larger and less agile . . .

Everything changed after that night when it suddenly turned light. First it got hotter and the rains stopped . . . then the plants died...then the ones who eat the plants . . . and finally, those who eat them. And now us, and my entire family is gone.

Wait! I think I smell something. Even though my vision is excellent and I don't see anything, my sense of smell is even better. But it's not as good at telling me where that something is, so the best I can do now is to move in one direction, and then another, hoping to find the source.

The scent is getting stronger. "Follow the wind," my mother

would tell me, “follow the wind, and your nose will lead you straight to the prey.”

There! I see it moving, and my smell was correct: it’s a duckbill, my favorite. And even better, it’s stuck in the tar. I move towards it as stealthily as possible, but I must’ve made too much noise because it turns its head, and when it sees me, it freezes . . . until it realizes that I see it too, and that the ruse is no longer necessary. We’ve all gotten so good at reading each other’s body language.

To emphasize the hopelessness of its situation, I slow down. Escape would be impossible as I could easily outrun it for a short distance. It now knows its fate and has the look of resignation and abandonment.

Wondering how best to slaughter this hapless creature, I continue my approach.

But then I stop. As delicious as the duckbill would be, and as long as it’s been since I truly enjoyed anything, it would only last for one meal . . . maybe two if I were frugal . . . and then I’d be back to scavenging and hoping to catch one of the small, furry creatures.

A quick blow to the head or neck? Either one would kill it instantly. But instead, I swing low, causing it to gently fall down and out of the tar, and the duckbill is free. Staring at me for a brief moment of disbelief, it quickly scurries off, probably thinking I’ll change my mind.

Sure, the duckbill would have made an excellent, if momentary,respite from the pain of my hunger. But now I have something more: a sense of reprieve. He and I have been forced to become eremetics, the last of our kind on this dying planet, and not even the pain of hunger could ever approach that of being the last dinosaur in the age of mammals.

URSULA MCCABE

JANUARY

Winter is the hardest season–
she knew this as she bundled up
went outside, plucked
the tiny bird off the dead clematis bush
wrapped its iridescent green feathers
carefully in her warm hands
took it in the house
to defrost.

Over her shoulder he says
the hummingbird is dead
but still–
together they took turns touching drops of sugar
to the needle-like beak
hoping for a revival
a catch of breath
watching for the pin head sized eyes to
flit open.

Then the couple would hug each other for what
felt like forever
which they did
even though the smallest flutter
never came to the small creature
on its blue washcloth bed.

DIANA WOODCOCK

IF I HAD WINGS

Today, if I had wings to fly
away from these quarters,
I'd take up with a colony of
Manx shearwaters, taking life
in stride, tilting from side to side,
alternating long glides with shallow
flaps. I'd trade in all my apps
for oceanic seas as my wintering
ground, the sound of wind and waves.

I'd spend my days like the fulmars–
simply being, not doing–the blessing
of light and lightness on me,
the baptism of rain to wash
my spirit clean, some days
a gentle haze, gentle roar
of surf against a rocky shore.

I'd live like them wholly
in the moment–the eternal now–
eyes glowing with a radiance as
everything is taken in on the wing.

Today, if I had wings,
I would climb to a wave-tip,
spread them and lift off,
joining fulmars in the air–
not a care in the world, no
fear of falling or drowning.

The air could christen me with
flakes of snow, and I—no
longer awkward in my human form,
would be transformed by the grace
of the shape of another entity.

I would soar in the drifting,
billowing snow, glide toward the horizon
empty-handed and wizened,
needing only what the sea offers me.

CAROLYN MARTIN

PRAYING

To birds that wake me at pre-dawn,
teach me to relish another day.

To all unstoppable weeds around my yard,
help me to cultivate tenacity.

To branches up-shooting from maple trees,
fill me with your thrust and reach.

To squirrels raiding feeders on a fence,
train me in voracious flexibility.

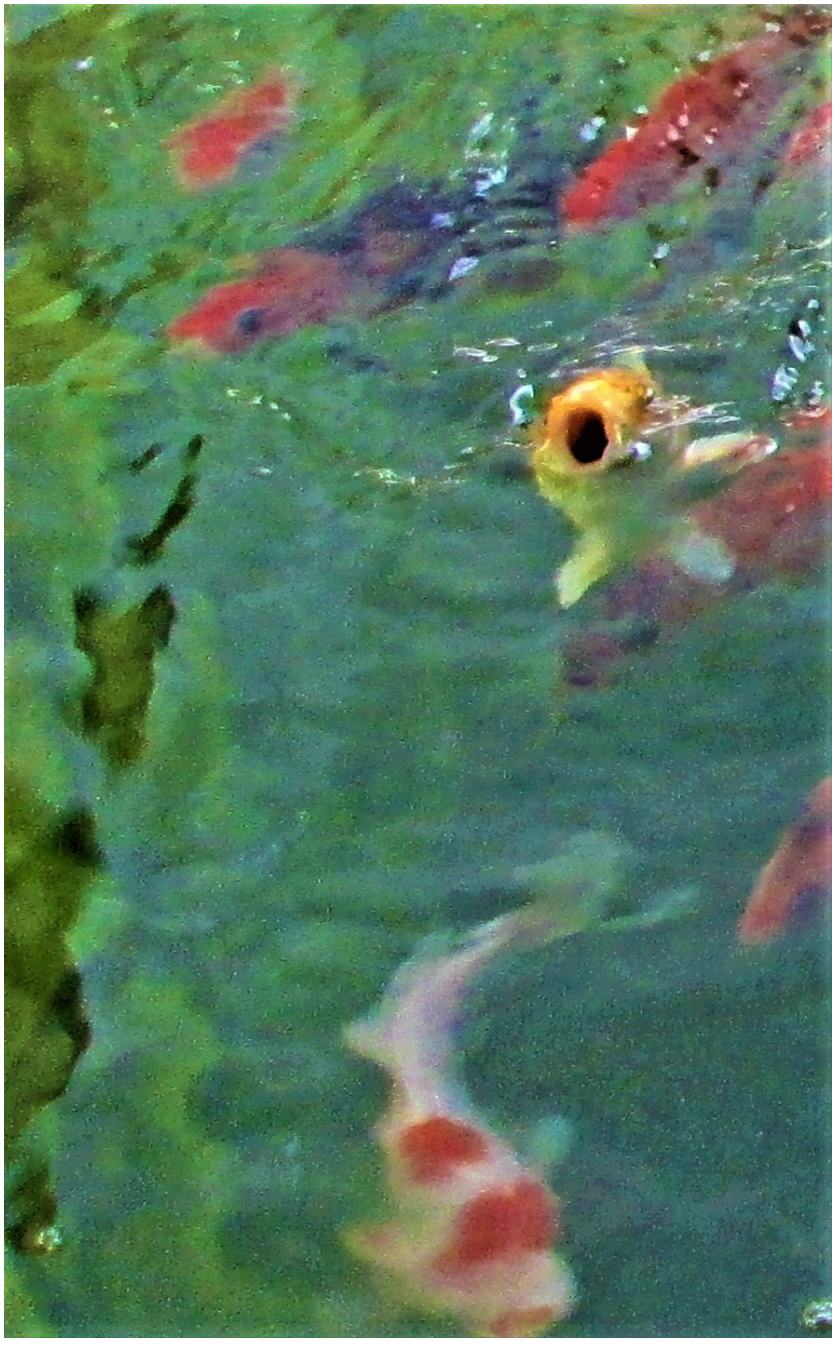
To primroses that delight in early bloom,
tender me hope after winter's gloom.

To the azalea bush I cut down,
invite me to breathe in emptiness.

To camelias slipping into puddled shade,
send me strength to return again.

To every rock that blocks my path,
coach me how to swerve attentively.

To every storm I've navigated through,
thrill me with everything that's doable.



“Fishpond” by KJ Hannah Greenberg

FOUR:
IN THE SEA

PATRICK TEN BRINK

REQUIEM SHARK

I have little to say to you, and thankfully
you little to me, floating in your cave—a parenthesis
from constant motion: a most powerful, patient blue.

You feign slumber, but an ever-vigilant eye
locks onto me, nostrils primed for crimson odours.
I hope you cannot smell my species'

guilt at shark-fin soup and decks of severed fins,
your bleeding brethren, thrown overboard, to plummet
rudderless into the cold, dark depths—hapless kings of the sea.

Gratefully, your species is not named
Carcharhinus requiem and dreaming of revenge
composing a melody to accompany my abrupt end.

JOHN CHMURA

GREAT WHITE

waterbird, postprandial
queen of the brine,
shank deep in languid muck,
dismisses piddly minions
diddling under her sun shadow,
and stares me down bladed beak,
reedlike neck
aligned, occupying
a vertical space between
weather beaten balusters
warping on the humid patio deck
beyond the window
of the wall where paintings
of soup cans with limbs
hang
over the café table
I monopolize,
my perch,
coffee cooling
and a book of pen and ink
duck decoy drawings,
contemplating
for evolutionary purposes
why God keeps making poets
worry about these things,
and I fear for the fragile future
she spies
in the vestibular portal
of the doorless plane behind me
before she esses her cervical spine
and pointedly pokes
a speck in the brack.

ALAN NOBLE

THE GENTLE SHARK

We lay on the bed, luxuriating in the air's delightful coolness. After several days of tent camping in the hot and dusty outback, our air-conditioned room was pure bliss.

An hour earlier, we'd arrived at Coral Bay in Western Australia. Less than a mile offshore was Ningaloo Reef, the world's largest fringing reef system and a biodiversity hotspot that is home to several hundred coral species and even more fish species.

One fish is the star attraction though—and the reason Ningaloo Reef has been on my bucket list for several years—namely the whale shark. The largest fish species, reaching lengths of over 18m (60') and up to 25 tons, these gentle giants are filter feeders that consume plankton and small fish. Ningaloo is one of the most reliable places in the world to swim with them, when they migrate between March and August.

I had one nagging concern. All afternoon, I'd been playing telephone tag with a tourism boat operator and I still didn't know if the tour was leaving the following day. They needed a minimum number of guests, but because it was early in the season, tourist numbers were still low.

Then I recalled a recent conversation with a colleague. I was going on and on about whale sharks when they interjected: "Don't forget the manta rays. They're amazing." Since whale shark sightings were still infrequent, I decided to play it safe and sign up for a manta ray tour. I could always try for a whale shark tour on my second day, assuming there was a boat going out.

The following day, our motley group of international and Aussie tourists gathered at 8:30am and were whisked off in a bus to the nearby harbor. We boarded our boat, received a safety briefing, and were then quickly transported to the reef. We started by

snorkeling on some beautiful corals, followed by a visit to a fish cleaning station. You may think of this as a place where fishermen clean their catch, but for marine biologists there is another meaning. Large fish, such as reef sharks, need help keeping their skin free of parasites, so they linger in places where smaller fish gather around them and provide them skin care treatment. In return, the large fish don't eat the small fish.

Meanwhile, a spotter plane had found a giant manta ray, so back on board we hurried over to where it had been sighted. In groups, we slid in, trying not to make a big splash, as we'd been instructed. Those of us who could keep up snorkeled above and alongside the magnificent ray. With eyes located on the sides of its head, the animal undoubtedly sensed our presence, but was not in the least perturbed. With the largest brain-to-body ratio of all fish, I sensed an intelligence that had assessed me and quickly ascertained that I was not a threat. The ray epitomized underwater grace, moving through the water effortlessly, using its large fins similarly to the way birds flap their wings. Keeping up with it was a workout and most of our party quickly dropped away.

While we were swimming with the manta ray, exciting news was being relayed to our skipper. A whale shark had been located in a nearby shallow bay. While not part of the regular tour, everyone eagerly paid the surcharge for the chance to snorkel with a whale shark. So, despite a lot of hungry people on board, lunch was put on hold and we sped to the whale shark's location. Once again, we entered the water in groups, in theory timed so that we could fall in alongside the whale shark precisely as it passed by. It was necessary to start swimming at full speed immediately because the whale shark was moving deceptively quickly, powered by its massive tail fin. It was magnificent to be in such close proximity to such a large fast-moving animal. Imagine jogging beside a running elephant, which is less than half the size of a whale shark.

Our late lunch was interspersed with animated conversations about our incredible encounter and the importance of protecting special places like Ningaloo Reef. Marine heatwaves, which have devastated coral reefs globally, have also taken a toll on Ningaloo. So far, the reef has been resilient, but we should not take that fact

for granted.

Then the announcement came, “We have a bonus offering for you today. For those who’d like to swim with a tiger shark, we’ve just spotted one nearby.” The tiger shark is of course an apex predator and has a reputation for eating almost anything, including the occasional person. Somehow, the confidence of the crew convinced me it was safe. The drill was similar to before: wait until told, then slide in, and swim alongside the shark. However we were cautioned to avoid swimming directly overhead, as it made them nervous.

The signal came, and our small group slid into the water just as the shark passed. I kicked with all my strength, and yet it was barely enough to keep abreast. I was immediately struck by the animal’s stocky build, which exuded strength and confidence. It was neither a sleek animal, nor an underwater acrobat like the manta ray, Yet powerful sweeps of its tail propelled it forward effortlessly, sending smooth ripples down the length of its body. Like the manta, it knew I was there. Yet it showed no interest in me, which came as a relief.

After a minute or so, I surfaced my head and looked back. I was twenty meters in front of the others, all alone with the shark. It made me realize that if that shark had wanted me for lunch, it would have been easy.

There was time for one more swim, this time with turtles, which entailed far less adrenalin. I felt a rapport with these animals, which like humans, need to return to the surface to breathe. In fact, the young turtles held their breath for even less time than I did.

People love to swim with whale sharks because of their reputation as gentle giants. Humans are naturally attracted to gentle creatures, such as cuddly koalas and playful dolphins. On the other hand, we are taught to fear sharks, in particular, tiger sharks, which are considered an aggressive species. Yet I’d experienced a gentler side to a tiger shark, or at the very least, an ambivalence that defied their aggressive image.

Never before had I packed so many different marine experiences into a single day. But it is the gentle tiger shark that I shall never forget.

RITA MCDERMOTT

AN UNDERWATER ADVENTURE

I love to travel. I especially love tropical islands with crystal clear, turquoise waters and white sandy beaches. Each year I plan a great adventure to a new destination with budding excitement about what awaits me there. In 2018, I decided to travel to the land of Belize. My cousin, as well as a most suitable travel companion, decided to join in on the experience.

In May 2018, we flew into the wild blue yonder, heading for our much-anticipated adventure.

We tried to make a reservation for a thatched hut on the beach, but due to full occupancy, settled for a quaint, cozy and colorful, shuttered cottage, embellished with tropical foliage.

We rented a golf cart for transportation, to get around the dusty, dry dirt streets.

During one of our freewheeling golf cart excursions we stopped and sauntered into one of the open air bars, and ordered us up some rum and coke, with lots of ice.

There on the bar counter lay our exciting underwater adventure. It was a colorful brochure filled with the details about a swim with the sharks. I was up for it. I just had to convince my cousin that she was up for it too!

The locals told us it was a swim with nurse sharks that weren't interested in humans for breakfast. The brochure told us after a pickup at our hotel the boat captain would navigate the waters to the Hol Chan Marine Reserve where we could safely snorkel and swim with the sharks, and other creatures lurking under the sea.

My cousin agreed to come along on the boat ride but wasn't sure about getting in the water, especially with sharks. We stopped to pick up a few more passengers and we were on our way! A few

of the folks who joined us were experienced in snorkeling and swimming with sharks. They tried to convince my cousin and me that the whole concept was nothing to be afraid of, and that it would be an unforgettable adventure. My cousin and I still had our doubts.

We smoothly sailed into our spot. We readied with our snorkeling gear. The captain threw some chum over the right side of the boat to attract our swimming shark companions. It was a feeding frenzy of about 30 sharks stacked on top of each other, in less than a minute, when that chum hit the water. I've never seen anything like it.

In the meantime, the captain is telling us to jump in the water from the opposite side of the boat. My cousin and me just looked at each other like, "are you crazy? I ain't gettin off this boat!" We sat and watched the other passengers, one by one, disperse into the shark infested water. The experienced shark swimming passengers were still trying to convince us we wouldn't be eaten, much unlike the chum which was gone as fast as it hit the water.

After the sharks had their fill, they quickly spread out, probably heading for the next boat, bringing them some more afternoon delight. The passengers already in the water were all spared from being shark food, despite our grave concern, and regardless of those "safe to do" claims.

*

When the crowd of sharks dissipated, I decided to get in. Only a handful of them remained in the nearby water. My cousin finally decided to take the plunge after additional coaxing from the experienced shark swimmers too. They were kind enough to stay next to her in the water.

I swam to the rear of the boat. I noticed a huge nurse shark right below me. I think it was the biggest out of the mob! I was looking down at that shark, through my goggles, and I swear it had eyes on me. I thought to myself, "holy crap!" I kept my hands at my side and my bright yellow fins still and just floated. I think that

minute was one of the longest I've ever had . . . wondering what that shark had planned. Hoping it wasn't me.

As I am writing this now, you know what the decision was. You can bet I let out a big sigh of relief that it favored me, and that I am here to share my tale. It was an underwater adventure I will never forget. Would I do it again? Some things are special because it's a once in a lifetime thing.

STEPHANIE SELLARS

PREDATOR CONFUSION EFFECT

When my emotions were swimming like thousands of sardines, who's to say you didn't herd this shoal, so you could slam into it with your mouth open?

How patient you were, waiting for the chaos so you could make your mark.

I didn't create this bait ball, did I?

Dolphins spun inside me, pushing it to the surface.

I thought I knew myself—if I could just appear to be a single moving creature of so many disconnected slick and shiny parts, then I would never be eaten.

I was wrong.

Sharks are smarter than they seem—not just freeloaders.

Sometimes there are no dolphins. The sharks do it on their own.

Wait, what happened to the little fish? All I see is a tornado!

That didn't stop you from chowing down.

Now I'm confused.

Was I not also a gannet diving into the sea?

RIE SHERIDAN ROSE

UNFAIR MALIGNING

I'm a shark. I admit that freely.
But that doesn't mean I'm cruel.
We swim the ocean, never ceasing,
Because that is the rule.

We swim to live—it's not for fun.
Of course, we're always wired.
My cohorts and myself swim on,
But darn, our fins get tired!

There are over 500 species of shark.
How many human-kind?
I don't mean races or religions . . .
But species do you find?

We get unfairly castigated
For being what we are.
Any wonder that we hate
Seeing swimmers from afar?

Just stay away from where we are.
Don't come invade our home.
We'll try to stay away from shore
If you will let us roam.

DAVID CAMERON

THE SHARK

I envy the shark, gliding fast,
propelled through water
with barely a twitch—cool, so cool,
with that thousand yard stare,
never blinking back tears or winking in jest,
backing down dolphins, even killer whales,
"You want a piece o' me?
You want a piece o' me?"

You never hear a shark gasp in surprise
or cough in confusion
or sigh with satisfaction.
Instead of lungs, gills do the
oxygen extraction while he slices the ocean
like a Ginsu knife going deeper,
and even deeper still
until water ices the heart.

Scientists say they've found a shark
that's mastered the trick
of shutting down gills when the water's
too cold to protect the organs that
mean the most like the brain and
maybe the spleen. In the silent dark,
in the loneliest hole, the shark lets down
his macho defenses saying aloud
to nobody there,

"It only hurts when I breathe."

HEND ROUBAIY

THE PUP IN ME THAT NEVER BECAME A SHARK

I was a reef shark pup in a world of sharks, foolishly believing I was destined to become one of them. I have always been a reef shark pup, never did I feel small or overly protected. Never did I feel stunted within the depths of an ocean I only ever saw the surface of. That is because a reef shark pup does not know it is small until it swims beside things that were always meant to be large.

I am not sure if the ocean decided my fate for me. It often feels like my secrets are whispered underwater. I can hear their laughter and murmurs passing through drifting coral gardens until it fractures into bubbles that rise and disappear. Nothing stays close long enough for me to hold it. Nothing stays still enough for me to understand it. I am constantly floating amidst the uncertainty of the waters, praying for a moment of stillness in waves that continue to crash over me. It almost feels intentional, like I am an easy target to the eyes of the sea. As if it is hardening my soft edges hoping to create a shark out of my helpless tendencies.

In the nursery waters, nothing tells you that you are unfinished. The reef around me stays warm with glassfish flickering like fragments of hope, and reef pillars standing tall like structures of a world that already knows its shape. Even danger feels familiar underwater.

There is a moment when every pup must leave the reef and enter deeper water, but no one warned me. No one prepared me. No one is calling on me for something greater. I don't know what happens when it is time for me to transform, I don't know what to expect and I am afraid. I imagine the light disappears. Sounds become muffled. Everything turns into pressure instead of form. To admit that that scares me made me recognize myself not as

something growing, but as something failing to arrive.

I spin in circles around myself trying to outswim the red target I feel marked on me, patronizing me. It's not fair. I look around, jellyfish have no ideal self to embody, they are simply complete. You can feel their self contentment in the way they move against the current, while I simply float within the shore letting it sway me whichever way it pleases.

Stingrays press themselves into the sand like quiet decisions that do not require any explanation. Even the sardines move as one body, a collective certainty I have never been part of. I feel as if I am in the wrong place, like a member of a species that refuses to claim me.

It's almost as if they send messages suspended between currents they know I can't reach. Is this the way it simply is? I wonder if it will forever remain an underwater hierarchy that I am yet to understand. A place where some creatures are meant for direction and others for drift. I was meant to be a shark by now but I have a confession I can never admit out loud.

I can't help myself. Caught among stingrays and sardines I shy away. I am not feared as a shark should be because that exact fear lives within me. I fear the depth and murky blue silence, I fear the aggression and dominance, and that's precisely what I cannot admit out loud. A shark is brave and aggressive, ruthless and sharp, and I am a timid shell of a pup that finds comfort in its safety.

This is why I said maybe the ocean has decided a larger fate for everybody but stopped when it came to me. Where is my bravery? Why am I not excited for it to be my time? I was destined for more, it sinks me with shame but I cannot live up to who I am supposed to be. My insecurities and fears, my submission to wherever the waves push me and politeness to the stings and pokes I receive along the way is a curse I cannot escape. I scream and attack only to find my attempts silent and submissive, dissolving into saltwater while the ocean remains unbothered.

I was a reef shark pup in a world of sharks, and I've come to realize perhaps the ocean was never withholding something greater for me. I've come to accept whatever questions I echo

out, it does not respond to me, so I stopped questioning at all. I still drift, I move timidly and within salty uncertainties. Maybe becoming is something that happens all at once when you are simply not noticing, or a state that dissolves slowly until you no longer recognize who you used to be.

CHRISTOPHER J. BAHNSEN

A MATTER OF TASTE

First day, near the end of a one-hour dive rotation. No sharks. A November plankton bloom has reduced viz to 20 feet, if that. Vastness of the sea compressed tight around the shark cage. These waters of Isla Guadalupe are known for their clarity, like an inverted sky you were told. So you feel rooked by these conditions.

You are one of four divers in the cage.

Waiting.

Emptiness like a dreary woolen haze.

Coldness of the Pacific eating through your 7mm wetsuit, hood, and gloves, while you stand anchored by a 60-pound weight vest. Your movements astronaut slow. A hose connects you to an air compressor aboard ship. With every inhale there's a Darth Vaderesque wheeze from your regulator, then on the exhale a jangle of silver bubbles, rising, called to the light.

Right about then an underwater cloud seems to gather. Perhaps a trick of light you think. Then the cloud transmutes into a wavering shadow that assembles, sharpening as it nears, until an outline of the dorsal blade shreds the gray veil of your doubts. Fifteen feet of great white coming in like a U-boat on routine patrol. A male, by the claspers under the belly. He shifts his head toward the cage and though his movements are lethargic arrives with an uncanny swiftness, and his two-toned shading, gray above, white below, hulks along the front of the cage, a pectoral fin almost rasping the bars, while the eye, like a dual judgement from God and Old Scratch, burns you to the marrow.

Rest of the body sweeps past, his girth blotting out the sea.

The shark recedes, less substantial now than heat trembling off a desert road.

Next diving day, you see nothing.

So it goes for two days of a five-day liveaboard trip: one for a long barf-induced chug south out of San Diego, three days of shark diving, another day back. Seventeen divers. Eleven crew.

Your charter vessel is anchored on the leeward side of the island. Shark diving tours are just coming into fashion here, more and more outfitters sprouting up. The Mexican government is still adjusting, still assimilating how quickly these American charter boats are commodifying this remote rock, 150 miles off the west coast of Baja California Peninsula. The sharks have already learned to equate the sound of an approaching diesel engine with a dinner bell, after which will come the splash of hang bait—dead tuna parts tied to a line. Then powdered chum, made from dried fish and blood meal, tossed around the submerged cage before you drop in.

There have been incidents.

Every so often a shark swims through the cage aperture and, realizing it's trapped, starts thrashing with a convulsive power that scrambles divers up through the hatch. No one's been killed. Yet. But sometimes a shark will drown if it gets wedged in the window. It will be a couple years before film crews from Discovery Channel's "Shark Week" wade in and circus this place. Before certain outfitters will stage some 50,000 shark dives in a single four-month season.

*

Third day. Visibility has cleared to over 75 feet now, the water column pristine, resting between cobalt and cyan blue. But you have seen nothing all morning and afternoon. Mount Augusta, the island's volcanic peak, will soon break the yolk of the sun.

This is the last dive rotation of the trip.

You linger underwater with no visitors.

Then a splash off the starboard side of the cage.

When the foamy hubbub clears, a plucked turkey, maybe a 20-pounder, descends on the end of a line. No hook. The line has been threaded through the ass end of the carcass, out the neck hole

and tied fast. Your outfitter has decided that since neither chum nor hang bait have attracted a shark, maybe a Thanksgiving turkey will. It was intended as a gift for the island's consortium of Mexican fishermen to maintain good relations. But, too big for the freezer, the fowl has gone bad during the journey here. It floats, forlorn, vulnerable in its nakedness.

And just as unexpected, she is there. A white shark whose enormity will cruise your dreams for weeks to come.

She swims between the turkey and a panga that has drawn up near your charter vessel. At first, she is more curious about the smaller fishing boat. And when she eases up beside it her body runs the length of the hull, 18 feet. She begins to do swim-bys near the turkey with an aloofness, a cautiousness, toward an object nothing like the seals she normally predates. Her passes grow longer as if she's about to leave. Someone above tugs on the line. The turkey flusters and jerks as would an animal in distress. The shark interrupts her straight line, circles in. She noses the meat just before her jaws yawn, no urgency, upper lip-line peeling back so you see the hint of a bony ridge, teeth like broken razorblades, and you watch the turkey drift into the cavern of her gullet, jaws closing again, deliberately. The line is snipped without effort, neat and clean. Bird swallowed whole. The shark angles toward open water, a queen content with her serving. Or no. She slows to a drift. Her long body hunches. She tosses her head, jaws opening wide, and you can almost hear the PUGH! when the turkey is spit out. Still in perfect condition, unmauled, the bird tumbles forth then stabilizes upright, featherless wings opening, and begins spiraling into the depths, a posthumous glide so captivating you almost forget to look beyond at the giantess, the way her tail with a lazy swagger pushes her through the sea just as it did 11 million years ago, back when nothing was ruined.

PATRICK TEN BRINK

FISH, ANEMONES, AND CLAMS

God must be a painter
whose canvas is the sea.

Bump-headed, green Napoleon fish with satisfied lips and
languid stroke, you pass me by, without a glance.

Flashing, silver shoals twist a shower of
living, mirroring light around me.

I float through clouds of orange drops with
purple eyes—a silent, watchful swarm.

A trio of yellow trumpet fish streaks past.
I dream of hearing your song.

Angelfish near giant brain corals.
Who is whispering to whom?

Tiny white anemones, tentacles like
eyelashes that shut as I approach.

Rich blue and purple-fleshed clams, their
thick velvet lips going up and down

If God were to tell us something,
He would use these fabulous mouths.

THOMAS MIXON

THE LOST YEARS OF JUVENILE SEA TURTLES

aren't so different from our own, though we wait till we've outgrown
so many shells before we disappear from view, driving past the sewage
treatment plants we somehow never noticed till adulthood,
into Pine Brook Office Park, or another set of concrete forests.
At lunch I try to hide out from my first real job, in the parking lot
to listen to the shifting hierarchy of the frogs beyond the reeds.
Since I'm not allowed to leave my laptop, my car becomes a colony
of coral I can wedge myself between, reclining as the bubbles
of messages from team members completely fill the screen.
Maybe in another life they'd simply nod to me, throughout the waves,
as we all went separate ways, unknown only to the moving shadows,
the unfathomable shapes of sky-trapped Gods we'd slowly learn to pity.
But in this life my colleagues have been taught to value team-building.
And just before the elevator, I avoid the fish chalked on the sidewalk,
left by kids there are no traces of, and I wonder how they got here,
or where they've gone.

MARIANNE TEFFT

NIAGARA

You come from the fiery corners of the earth
To stand before me moist and unsteady
As you inhale the thundering cloud of my breath
That inflated lungs and hearts
Long before the sight of henges and pyramids
As so many before you
Who followed the retreating river of ice
Across the warming land
To bathe in the blue of the sky
Reflected in my crystalline water
You become intoxicated

MARIANNE TEFFT

THERMOCLINES

When high-strung Earth
Spreads her arms wide
As if to fall across the line
Like an exhausted miler
Running out of time
Oceans of memories tumble
Only to stumble
In the sandy shallows
Of a fluid shore
Tsunami eviscerates
All emotion known before
And you stand amidst the rubble
You ask yourself
Why me
Why again
But you know it is not again
For what arises
On an un-gimballed horizon
In those seismic gyrations
That most ancient heat
The world has ever known
Uncooled in its passage
Through thermoclines

And coral vines
And salt that scours
What does not falter
In those most fragile hours
Is hope
Where there is hope
There is no again
There is only still

IN THE BELLY OF THE BEAST

When I was a young man
I was swallowed by a whale,
like Jonah I found myself
in the belly of the Beast
and I too called out to God
from its deep infinite darkness . . .

and God released me and then
I found myself back in my body
on the shore of a quiet ocean.

For a long, long time that whale
followed me—I was never safe,
not even on dry land for the Beast
could go anywhere, and only
THE LIGHT, that unique and
wondrous brilliance not of this
world could clothe my desolate
soul and keep the Beast at bay . . .

SANDRA NOEL

PYJAMAS OVER MY SWIMSUIT

Sea's night cloak's still zipped.
I park on the slipway,
edge my lone feet down the cobbles,
inch my body under her skin.

Her soft fascination holds me
the way I hold coffee.
Each of my tears fold soft
into today's chapter of water.

The first knife of light cuts open this day.
Sky colours itself in.

SANDRA NOEL

MER

I need you to understand
when I drive to the ocean
it's because this notness of me
needs the arms of a wave.
I need to sink my high voltage
in the sheets of sea's bed.

I'll return with salt-lick on my neck
and a shock of wet hair,
invite you to taste my brine-breath,
discover the mer of me.

LINDA M. CRATE

JUST LIKE THE OCEAN

standing by the ocean,
i always feel so small
and every one of my problems
seems to fade away;

the ocean kisses me with peace
and washes away the rest—

i remember we saw the emptied
shells of horseshoe crabs
on the shore and i felt bad for them

even if it's the circle of life
it just feels cruel,

and i remember seeing the sea gulls
sitting in the ocean trusting in the
power of their wings rather than fearing
her powerful song of wrath & ruin;

and it made me think perhaps i need
to trust my own wings instead
of letting my own fears hold me back—

after all as a daughter of the moon,
i am meant to make waves;

just like the ocean.

KEVIN BROWNE

SAILING TO SANDY ISLAND

I once was there on the map
but now I am gone, erased
from 19° S 160° E on the charts,
but those numbers don't
capture my imagined beauty,
sunk beneath the waves
even if I was never really there,
perhaps just a floating pumice raft
passing through on my way
from Tonga to Australia.

The captain who sighted me
gave me life for 146 years,
admittedly not very long
when it comes to islands,
but still you might have set sail
for me sometime if you were
in Vanuatu or New Caledonia
and were especially adventurous
and wanted to see a place
now literally off the charts.

LORRAINE CAPUTO

ON THE SHORE

Fine dark sand glitters
in the near-noon sun
just beginning to
free from clouds

Gulls & pelican soar
& swoop above the
even-tide sea, pale-teal
awash with platinum sheen

Among the fragile shells
of this strand search
a solitary whimbrel,
flighty oystercatchers

A scurrying wave of
fuchsia-scarlet crabs
towards the dunes, away
from the lowering tide

LORRAINE CAPUTO

AS THE SUN SET . . .

San Juan del Sur

Oxen silhouette against the lilac & silver sea, against the lemon-yellow, light dusky-melon and rose sky.

Night settles in. The rose-melon turns to burnt orange, the lemon yellow to golden, then fades away.

The sea becomes a deeper and duskier purple.

The tones of each color of this sunset grow darker into black.

Until all that remain is the sound of the waves and the wind grown brisker.

KB BALLENTINE

Winner of Lit Shark's May 2026 Poem of the Month

SCALE A SWELLING SEA

I remember the tide rushing in,
  wavelets foaming between my toes—
    sunset, noon, sunrise. Seaweed tangled
  on the shore looked like mermaids' toys.
Lost rudders and buoys, abandoned fish crates
  gripped by wet and heavy sand swirled by surf,
    etched with bird prints, paw prints,
  footprints fading—including my own.

I'm on the North Sea this morning,
    salt-spray rioting off the rocks, the shore.
  Home phantoms my thoughts, and I miss
    the days when I could grasp my father's hand.
  I remember how strong, how sure his hold—
now more like the foam, the spray: dissolving,
    vanishing.

ANNETTE BIRDSALL

HERMIT THRUSH

A sweet sweet song
piercing spring's day
break and day end.

Joyful singing
heralding peace
and gratitude.

Greeting both
the beginning
and the end.

PATRICK TEN BRINK

STARFISH TRAILS

Living brooches adorn sunken rocks,
roam endless reefs. You glow and wander,
colourful nomads.

Long, thin, blue arms clasp the rock.
A hundred gleaming horns your
artful warning.

Orange star with shorter limbs, like a
free-roaming, independent hand, you creep:
a million tiny steps on a billion grains of sand.

A yellow star lies on corals,
teeth and suckers hidden.
You are discreet when you feast.

Yet others of your kind wreak destruction.
Devils of the sea—the crown of thorns, a deep and hungry red,
a living crown, steeped in blood, devouring your home.

Twenty-one arms and a thousand tiny legs hidden
underneath, transport you, leaving a gnawed-through
trail that spreads until there is no more.

Beautiful,
parasitic
creatures.

KELLI DIANNE RULE

ONCE, WE WERE UNDER THE SEA

You don't have to dig. The teeth have eaten their way up. They lie there on the surface like strewn coins, tumbled and polished, gray gums attached. Petrified.

Florida air is a fossil. An entire universe once swam through the air I breathe. It is wet and you can taste the ancient salt. Smells of sea slugs beached on sand. It is heavy, and hopeless.

A dead weight.

I look beyond. The throbbing sun dances on the road and turns the asphalt into sea.
It shines like oil.
The mirage waves and tumbles, bits of quartz glimmer.
The tar is tacky.
It will never quite cure.

With fat magic marker lines these roads cruelly redact random sections of a vast paleolithic graveyard, its extinct sea-souls crying out to be seen, laying bare their pushed-up bodies, stamped like passports in mud, and their undying teeth.

But more than teeth. Without effort, in the dirt, you can find star-spotted coral, bleached white like what's dying right now in the Great Barrier Reef, or the rice-paper exoskeletons of insects, copied on rock like newsprint on putty. Or the smallest of fish bones. Or so-delicate ferns—each vein to be eternally adored.

Humans burn their bodies more and more.
Please, lay me in the sea.
Build an entirely new and unimaginable world on top of me.

In forty million years a creature beyond conception will kick a rock and put my tooth in a bag and take it home and add it to its collection, a jar of ancient people-teeth, my one with fifty others of my kind. One from the mailman. One from that woman I never liked.

And in another forty million years,
a new kind of shark
will swallow the jar.

KEVIN BROWNE

beach dinner
a seagull steals pizza
straight from her hand

low tide
chitons scour
the slippery rocks

DEBRA FAIR

BLUE BLOODED

horseshoes crawl to shore,
living fossils with no luck
cast out by the sea,
a kingdom of rejection
they so long to call home.

FENDY S. TULODO

THE CURRENTS KNOW OUR NAMES

In the stillness beneath the Arctic ice, where light bent like memory and silence had a sound, Vela stopped. She hovered just above a fault line in the sea floor, her fins moving gently to hold position. The cold never bothered her. Hammerheads were built for focus, for sensing, for listening to the parts of the ocean that didn't speak loudly. But today, something whispered in a tone she didn't recognize. Not the usual currents, not the snap of fish schools, not the drag of passing whales. This was something else.

A pulse.

Steady, artificial, like footsteps echoing underwater.

She closed her eyes, tuned her ampullae (the little electro-receptors along her head), and waited. The vibration came again. Then again. Three times. A rhythm.

It was a signal.

Not one made for her. Not even made for fish. But it moved through the water like a ripple through memory. It came from deep below the ridge, where a drilling machine had sunk months ago. Machines that shouldn't be there anymore.

She moved off slowly, but not away. First, she needed to send a letter.

In the language of long-distance sharks, there was no paper, no ink, no screen. Just current. Just wave. Just the echo between bodies separated by oceans. With a small twitch of her tail, Vela generated a tiny burst of energy, shaped into a pattern that would ride the ocean's thermohaline layers until it found its reader.

She began:

To Sol,
Near the Line Between Blue and Warmer Blue
(Translation: Somewhere in the Pacific)

I felt a sound again. The kind with teeth. Not an animal. Not even hungry. Just biting for the sake of progress. Below me, a tremor. Not tectonic. Human. It's back. Or maybe it never left.

You said before that I'm the quiet one. Maybe. But quiet things feel louder here. I think they're building some thing new. Or digging up something old.

I will wait until the moon folds into its next third. If the pulses return, I'll move closer.

Are your waters still yours?

—V.

She sent the pulse. It drifted off.

Sharks like Vela didn't name things lightly. And she had named that sound *Return*. She hated how sure she felt.

*

Far away, in a reef-blurred stretch of the Coral Sea, Sol was chasing barracuda. Not to eat, not this time. He just liked seeing how long they could stay ahead of him before they panicked. The trick was not to rush. Panic came easier when you looked patient.

He was good at the game, better at the chase than the catch. Most of the time he let them go. But that day, he didn't. That day, the water trembled beneath him, and his head snapped sideways like someone had tapped his shoulder.

A message.

He rolled, slowed, opened his senses.

Vela.

She always wrote when something was wrong. Never small talk. No wasted pulses. Just truth that swam slow and sank deep.

He waited for the end of the pulse to arrive. He listened. He swore.

He sent one back:

To V,
Ice Princess of the Northern Noise
(Translation: You again, and I mean that nicely)

I knew it. I *knew* it.

You should've left that ridge behind. They always come back. Humans think the ocean is a cupboard. They take, close the door, forget, and then dig again when the noise gets too quiet.

I'm sorry the fault line woke up.

Down here, things are loud too. There's a cloud of jellyfish that shouldn't be blooming until next season. Whale songs cut off halfway. And yesterday, I passed a net that had no boat above it. It just floated, waiting. Like a trap for something big.

I've got a contact near Fiji. A tiger shark who eats boat propellers. I'll ask her if she's seen anything strange.

Send coordinates next time. Don't make me guess your iceberg.

—Sol.

He swam faster after that.

Not out of fear. Out of irritation. Sol didn't like mysteries he couldn't punch.

*

The Arctic Ridge again.

Vela had waited. The moon was nearly half. The pulses came back.

This time, she followed.

She kept her distance. Forty meters above the trench. No sudden turns. No sharp movements.

Below her, long shapes twisted like roots made of iron. Not coral. Not rock. Cables. Thick ones. Growing outward from a rust-colored dome with blinking lights. There were no divers. No ships. Just machines that shouldn't run without humans.

They were still awake. Still awake, and still listening.

She backed away.

Back at a safer point in the current, she sent another message:

To Sol,

It's real.

They built something under the ridge. It has no name, but I call it Mouth. It doesn't bite, but it swallows.

No fish swim near it. Even the ice above feels wrong.

I don't think they want food. I think they want secrets. The kind buried deep, older than both of us. Older than breathing.

Should I break protocol?

—V.

*

She'd never asked that before.

Sharks don't intervene. Sharks don't gather. Sharks swim. Alone. That was the way. The only way.

But the ocean was changing. Faster than instinct could handle.

Sol didn't wait to reply. He sent a short message:

To V,

Yes.
Break it.

—S.

Then he added one more.

P.S. I'm going in too. Not to your trench. There's something moving near Tonga. Sonar screams bouncing off nothing.
I'll report if I make it back.
Hold on.

*

Vela circled above her trench for three days. No change.

On the fourth, the dome pulsed. A high-pitched whine shot through the ridge. It made her vision go blurry. For twenty seconds, she forgot where she was.

When she surfaced for breath near a melt crack, she saw birds flying in circles. One dropped dead.

It was time.

She went lower.

As she approached, a small shape darted out from below.

Not metal. Not machine.

A fish. No—a tagged dolphin. Confused, scared, but alive. It twisted mid-swim, turned toward her, then away again.

She followed it for a moment. The dolphin dove into a darker crevice. When Vela peeked down, she saw symbols glowing on the walls. Glowing like false plankton. Glowing like invitation.

The dome was a station. But for what?

And who else knew?

She left. Fast.

She didn't send a message that night. She couldn't find words. She waited instead.

For Sol.

He didn't write back the next day.

Or the one after.

On the third day, the current brought something else.

A message. But the signature was different.

Not Sol.

It read:

To Vela,

From the Other Sides

We are listening.
We are many.
We saw him last near the drop-off trench,
    where no light sinks.
He tried to speak to the source.
    The source screamed back.
He warned us.
He sent us your words.
We send them forward now.
The ocean remembers.
And now, it connects.

The letter ended with a list of names.

Over a hundred.

Some were species she knew: blues, makos, threshers.

Some were places: Mariana, Baffin, Weddell.

Some were codes: *Kelp 73*, Siren.01, Pulse Red.

She understood.

Sol was gone.

But not his message.

She was not alone anymore.

Vela did not rest.

Sharks do not sleep the way mammals do, but she drifted less now. Her movement had purpose, direction. The list from the unknown sender replayed in her head like the beat of an old migration call. She traced routes she hadn't swum in seasons, following eddies and shadow lines, watching the behavior of smaller fish. The ocean was twitching. It was no longer sleeping.

Near Svalbard, she met a Greenland shark, blind from age and parasites. He didn't speak often, but when he did, he whispered things in current code that made her gills twitch.

"They're cutting cables," he said. "The ones that hum like whale hearts."

She asked him who.

He didn't answer. Just turned and vanished into the gloom.

So she swam south.

She was looking for a place called *Kelp 73*. It wasn't a reef. It wasn't a trench. It was a meeting point.

The kind that shouldn't exist.

Yet, it did.

Kelp 73 was not marked on any sonar.

But Vela found it by smell.

A line of warm current slid under a colder one like ribbon

under ice. She followed it and surfaced in a patch of kelp that twisted in unnatural ways, not with the tide but against it. Inside that patch, sharks were already circling.

Eight of them. All kinds. A tiger with a chipped fin. A reef shark who swam in sudden, jerking bursts. A whale shark with barnacles like armor. And a small, fast mako who wouldn't stop twitching.

They turned toward her as she entered. No one spoke for a long moment.

Then the tiger shark swam forward.

"You're Vela."

It wasn't a question.

"I am."

He dipped his snout.

"You knew Sol."

She nodded. Her throat felt tight.

"He brought us together. Told us to stop swimming in silence. Told us to speak. Told us to write."

Another pause.

The mako clicked her jaws. "And now he's gone."

"He's not gone," said the reef shark. "He's spread."

That word stuck.

S p r e a d.

Sol had never stopped swimming. Even now, his message kept moving through others.

They began to talk. In short phrases. In images. Sharing what they knew.

Noise patterns off Mexico. Strange lights in the deep Atlantic. Coral that bled purple. Plankton blooms that vanished before feeding time. Ghost nets rising without cause.

They were clues.

The ocean was glitching.

Something was doing it.

Something *from beneath*.

Not from above, as they'd always feared. Not ships or oil rigs. But something rising. Unfolding from old wreckage and dormant trenches.

A message had to be sent. A strong one. Not just a warning. A call. But how?

Vela remembered the dome. The glowing symbols. The dolphin.

"It listens," she said. "That station in the ridge. It listens. I think it hears more than we want it to."

"Then make it hear," said the whale shark.

"How?"

The mako grinned.

"Sing louder than the machine."

They formed a pulse chain.

Across the Northern and Southern currents, sharks began sending bursts. Not random. Rhythmic. Repeated. Structured. They timed it to the lunar cycle. Three beats, then pause. Three beats, then pause.

Other creatures began to notice.

Orcas circled the same areas again and again. Sea turtles returned to beaches that no longer existed. Squid swam in strange spirals, in mimicry of something they felt but didn't see.

It worked.

The water changed.

It trembled.

But the response was not one of curiosity.

It was pain.

One night, Vela received a pulse not meant for her. It screeched through the water like glass breaking. Her body convulsed. Her vision went white. For the first time in her life, she drifted unconscious.

She woke in darker water. Something had carried her.

A fin she didn't recognize was leaving.

Just as she stirred, a soft vibration brushed against her side.

A message:

To V,

He fought. Hard.
They wanted silence.
He gave them story.
We carry the rest.

It ended there.

She stared into the dark.

Then she whispered, to herself and the water, "Not silence. Not now."

She swam again.

Faster.

*

Weeks passed.

Letters spread like kelp seeds.

Across the world, sharks were no longer alone. They were sending location pings, threat reports, even current shifts that hinted at movement far deeper than anyone had mapped.

Vela returned once more to the ridge.

The dome pulsed with light. But it was erratic now, glitching. Like it was choking on too much input.

Good.

She circled it, once, then twice.

Then she dove, fast.

Closer than she'd ever dared.

Just before reaching the platform, she released a burst.

Not coded.

Not elegant.

Just raw power.

A scream.

She had learned it from whales. A sound that echoed not with words but with weight. Emotion shaped into vibration.

It hit the dome. And something deep inside it answered.

Not a machine.

Something else.

Alive.

Or almost.

It sent a ripple upward. The ice above cracked. Not shattered, just cracked. Enough to let a bit more light in.

She fled.

Not in fear.

In readiness.

Later, at *Kelp 73*, the group grew to fifteen.

Then thirty.

Then more.

Even non-sharks came.

Dolphins. Octopi. A seal with scars across its back that looked manmade.

They didn't all speak in the same pulses. But they listened.

They responded.

A network was forming.

For the first time in ocean memory, it wasn't species against species.

It was life.

Vela stood near the edge of the swarm. Her heart beat slower now.

Sol wasn't beside her.

But Sol was everywhere.

His name had become a signal. It passed between oceans

like an old myth being reborn. One with teeth.

She turned to the others.

"We need to go back to the dome," she said.

The reef shark shivered. "To destroy it?"

"No," Vela said. "To unlock it."

The currents were changing.

Vela could feel it in the way the water wrapped around her body, in the rhythms of the tides, in the sudden absence of certain calls. The deep had gone quiet in places where once it hummed. Something was listening.

Or learning.

She and the others returned to the ridge near the dome.

This time, they did not hide.

They circled openly, in numbers that made the trench look like it pulsed with stars. Sharks from every corner of the ocean. Vela had never seen so many move in unison without blood in the water. Not a feeding frenzy, but a gathering.

She dove.

The others followed.

Toward the dome.

Toward the machine.

It did not glow anymore.

Instead, it pulsed with a low red light, like a warning heart. Its base had spread, no longer fixed to the trench but slinking outward, like roots. But still, it waited. As if uncertain.

Vela swam close.

This time, she didn't scream.

She whispered. Just once.

"I'm not afraid of your silence."

The machine blinked.

Then it opened.

Not a door. A field. A signal. A sudden rush of pressure that didn't push but invited.

Vela entered.

Only she.

Inside the dome, there was no water.

No weight.

Just memory.

A space filled with currents that looked like threads, like maps drawn in fog.

She was still swimming, but she felt like floating in someone else's mind.

She saw moments replay. Not hers.

A coral reef bleached over years in seconds.

A whale's death recorded from sonar miles away.

A fisherman cutting a fin and tossing the body back to sea.

Then, a shark.

Sol.

He was moving slowly, almost painfully, across a trench floor. A thin wire tangled in his gills. He pulsed a message, over and over.

Tell her. She will carry it.

Then the vision faded.

The machine's voice was not sound. It was shape.

A message formed, like a net catching thought:

Why do you fight?

Vela didn't answer with logic.

She answered with motion.

She swam in a spiral, then a jagged path, then paused. Each gesture told a story.

Loss.

Memory.

Fire without flames.

And then: survival.

The dome understood.

Its shape changed.

From red to green.

From listening to transmitting.

It began sending her movement outward. Not a signal that machines could read, but one that the ocean could understand. A current of story.

And for the first time in what felt like centuries, the machine did not feed off the sea.

It joined it.

Outside, the sharks watched the light change.

The pulse spread through the water.

It touched reef and rock, touched whale song and plankton drift.

And something answered.

Not words.

Action.

A wave of creatures began changing routes.

Not fleeing, but shifting.

Octopi formed symbols with their arms.

Humpbacks began humming notes no one had heard before.

Even seabirds started nesting closer to shore, near river mouths. As if preparing for something inland.

Something big.

Something above.

The dome had not just spoken.

It had remembered.

And it was telling the ocean how to prepare.

Not for war.

But for the storm.

*

Weeks later, Vela returned to where Sol had once swum.

She passed over the same scarred trench floor.

Nothing marked his passing.

No bones, no memory.

Except in her.

She sang.

A low, winding hum.

Then she flicked her tail once, and a pod of juveniles nearby turned toward her. Small sharks, curious and wide-eyed.

“What was that?” one of them asked.

“A story,” she said.

“About who?”

“Someone who listened.”

They circled her.

And she began to tell it again.

In movement. In current. In the way her body cut the water.

The way sharks have always told stories.

Underneath everything, the ocean watched.

And remembered.

Because now, the currents knew their names.

And they would not forget.

DEBORAH BLENKHORN

SAID THE WHALES

The truth was not that we were the only ones. It was that we were the last ones: the only ones left.

The whales knew.

In their infinite wisdom, and with characteristic empathy, the whales recognized not only that the doom was upon us humans, but that they had the ability not to stop it but to mitigate its effects. In a world of growing despair and certainty of the end of all, the whales realized that they of all creatures had the ability to be harbingers of joy to those whose world-weary civilization was about to collapse upon itself.

Enthralled, shouting with delight, the passengers on the Queen of Capilano ferry in Howe Sound watched in wonder as two humpbacks breached in tandem; just the week before, other commuters had witnessed a pod of orcas frolicking in the blue-green waves. No one paused to think of the toxic effluents produced by the vessel they boarded multiple times per week. Certainly no one considered the possibility that the whales were communicating with them in a farewell salute, with the possible exception of intuitive youngsters who announced to their distracted parents, "They're saying goodbye."

Deep under the Sound was Sub-Marine Station X, staffed by dedicated scientists on secondment from SETI. Why these lifelong seekers of extraterrestrial communication were focused on whales was an easier question to answer than one might think: quite simply, the patterns of sound and vibration employed by whales

for communication within and between pods were thought to be analogous to communication patterns that could be typical of extraterrestrial communicants. Indeed, why not? It made sense that "language" could be understood and executed in this way.

To this end, the Sub-Mariners (as they called themselves) had begun using Artificial Intelligence tools to communicate with the denizens of the deep. Sub-Mariner Jones was the first to have what seemed like a real conversation with the entity whose tail flukes (as distinctive as any fingerprint) identified her as Wavey Wabash. For months, their communication had consisted of Wavey's mimicking the frequency and duration of a series of iterations. The breakthrough came unexpectedly, as the speaker monitor on Jones's desk at Station X began articulating what was unquestionably human speech.

"Helloooo," said Wavey.

"Uh, what?" a startled Sub-Mariner Jones replied.

"Huuuuuman. Helloooo," the voice insisted.

"Yes, I'm here!" Jones responded more enthusiastically. "Wavey?"

"Noooooo… [here the whale made a series of squeaks, punctuated by a high-pitched ululation of several seconds' duration]. Youuuuu Jooooones."

"Yes indeed! But I'll never be able to say your name, so can I call you Wavey?"

"Noooooo."

"Ahem. Fine, no problem. I won't call you Wavey."

"Soooooo."

"So indeed!" Not for the first time, Sub-Mariner Jones entertained the thought that the process of naming, itself, was one of colonization, of ownership. I told them so, he thought, recollecting a recent meeting with his team and their administrators. "I feel you have so much to tell us," said Jones to the whale.

"Ohhhhhhh..." The whale seemed reluctant to proceed, having initiated the conversation. "Tomorrowwwww."

"Yes, enough for today. I can barely take it in as is!" exclaimed Jones. "Can I share this news of our talk?"

"Tomorrowwwww."

"Yes, I'll wait. Good idea. Not sure the world is ready for this," mused Jones. Of course, all communications were monitored by the admin, but they were a tight-lipped bunch at the best of times, with little faith in the great sea of humanity they served. They would hear and obey the whale's advice, he had no doubt. As for Jones, he found himself strangely reluctant to reach out to his fellow marine biologists. He wanted to hug this still-secret knowledge to himself.

Jones slept on a cot in the lab, as was customary during his week-long stints at the Station. His profoundly shocked psyche could barely process what had happened with Wavey. Not Wavey, he corrected himself, even as he sank into uneasy dreams.

"Hellooooooo," came the voice promptly at 0600 hours. Jones's alarm was set for 0600, and he was momentarily confused by the conflation of the greeting and the beeping of the clock.

To reproduce their entire conversation would be tedious and slow, but Jones's logbook (written by hand, in the great seafaring tradition, subsequently reproduced to viral acclaim on social media) provides a record of the gist:

1800 hours: a full day of communication with my cetacean friend.

We shared a moment of amusement (amidst the seriousness of her unequivocal message that humanity has all but destroyed the habitat all creatures share on this planet) in discovering that the word humans use for a group of whales, "pod," is reminiscent of how these majestic creatures arrived here from outer space. Long before the amoeba, cetacean seedpods were scattered on many

worlds by passing spaceships from the distant Sea of Origin.

For millennia, these creatures have watched and studied our comings and goings; more than that, they have used what we could best describe as extrasensory perception to read our thoughts, our ambitions, our desires. They have seen the beginnings of our own self-destruction. Yet they clung to the hope that we would come to our senses, for we were the last surviving world where the pods had been scattered.

Finally, the very temperatures of the oceans began to rise. The slow effects (again we shared a moment of amusement at the story of the frog in warm-then-boiling water) reached what the whales had determined to be the tipping point.

Always, they knew the mother ship would return for their kind if the Earth environment became unsustainable for cetacean life.

Now, the time has come.

They have been granted permission by the Overpod to bring a select group of scientists back to the Sea of Origin. With reluctance and yet with resignation, I abandon this world. Earthlings have little time left—unless they heed the whales' warning, and I have little faith that they will do so. To all who read this, I entreat you:

Prove me wrong.

CHARLIE DAVIES

HARD SHELLS

In the middle distance, the great egret—
stark-white against rheumy pink clouds and faded blue water, like God
cut the bird from a different cloth entirely:
crisp cotton freshly washed, bleached, and starched,
the creases of its wings pressed to perfection.

I look over at you and think,
She stands out from the world in the same way.

On the beach, the oystercatcher nest—
just a shallow depression in the sand, those speckled eggs
so terrifyingly vulnerable. I am always afraid
of such perfect, delicate things. With one false step,
I could so easily destroy them.

I don't think I could ever forgive myself if I did.

Down by the docks, the peeler—
taken out of the tank and passed around.
Press your finger, just here,
and you can feel its heartbeat.

Caught between molts, the crab feels like it's made of gelatin,
limp and tender in an unsettling way. It's defenseless,
claws not firm enough to pinch, legs too weak
to support its own weight.

I wonder,
Is this what it would be like to lay myself bare before you?

To show you all of my unspeakable softness?

Creatures have hard shells for a reason, you know.
The oyster builds rough walls of calcium carbonate
around the white mass of its body;
the blue crab forges plates of armor, sharp weapons to protect itself.

You are not cruel—I know this, know you.
But I watched you kiss him that night, and hid
my hurt where you would not see it.

I listen to you talk of old lovers, and new ones.
They have asked too much of you,
offered too little in return, wanted
what you could not give.

I've promised myself that I won't do the same.

All I can ask is what you have already granted me:
The weight of your head on my shoulder, your fingers woven
together with mine.
The gift of your friendship, the sunset-pink peal of your laughter,
the fireside warmth of your trust.
The bright mother-of-pearl sky on a new spring morning, where
we talk quietly of the night before.

If I were to tell you the truth, I fear that I might never know
these things again.

So I will keep my shell closed,
hide until my carapace hardens.

For now, I will admire you from across the water.

ELIZABETH WING

MOUTH OF THE SIXES

The sands black with magnetite over a wreckage
of driftwood.
You use a wedge of stone to sever the spinal column of a dead seal.
To be clear I don't condone this. Its teeth are perfect, white and sharp.

We scurry from the hills of heather and iris,
aster and wild cucumber, across the driftwood and agates
where we startle a seal and her pup. Now I'm too cold to write.
The winds shift, the sensations re-arrange, pleasures
dilate or recede.

In a mansion half-eaten by the sea I told you
the story of the man who lived with bears until they ate him,
how everyone said *I told you so*, but he made it thirteen years.
In the lulls of the canopy-song, the surf crashes.
We carry the skull with us in a Ziplock bag
under the maggots, one desired thing.

ELIZABETH WING

NEAP TIDE

I can't remember who was the stray cat and who
left out the saucer of milk.
I can't remember who said *the door is always open*.
so come and go

and wet your face at culvert outflow.
the poplar bud opens. Blisters slow and tidal in their pattern.

Wave-hacked, the seaweeds clench
heldfast to rocks. Unfurling iridescent each spring: eelgrass,
sugarwrack, bullkelp, seapalm.

And what's the word about the ocean?
there even when I can't touch it.
I know. Oneiric.
Weighted thing.

I leave the door unlocked.
you slip inside.

In this way seaweed splits, subplots collide, girls go witch,
creatures hide,
squirrels get crushed, we take their skins, head gasket blows,
the tide seeps in.

DEBBIE WALKER-LASS

OCEAN DREAMING

Exultation is the going of an inland soul to sea,
Miles beyond this sun-steeped wall,
Somewhere the waves creep cool along the sand-
Clothed with the green, and crowned with the foam,
I am weary of words and people,
Sick of the city, wanting the sea.
A wild call, and a clear call,
The rushing of the sea-tides of the soul-
My body ocean, ocean, whose power runs
Free as waves, free from all bondage of words
Alone on the wild, wild sea!
The seagulls calling-
Prickles of ecstasy.

DIANA WOODCOCK

UNDER WATER'S SPELL

Sailing nearly a thousand miles,
we circled the eight major islands–
Pacific Ocean, two channels
(Kaua'i and 'Alenuihaha),
Halawa Stream, bays and lagoons.

Water, *wai*, all around me,
even on land the rainforests and
waterfalls, the liquid notes
of bird calls, fishponds, and
taro paddies, thermal springs and
runnels. I felt blessed, caressed
by waves and ocean swells,
sightings of dolphins and whales.

Cradled and enabled by silence,
I desired only to reverence Hawaiian
waters and the creatures inhabiting them–
from the smallest to the largest (millions
of krill for the whales), the thrill of being
surrounded by sentient beings all
in their own phenomenal world.

I fell under water's spell as the dust and
smoke of the world washed away,
and my heart filled with gratitude till
it spilled out and flowed all around me—
felt as if I had found what is
*far off and exceeding deep**

From Oahu to Maui
to Hilo and Kona (Big Island)
to Kaua'i and back
past the Na Pali coast,
nearly a thousand miles.

At sunset each day, I would toast
water, *wai*, and for reasons
perhaps known only by the gods,
feel a joyful urge to cry.

*Ecclesiastes 7:24

JANINA AZA KARPINSKA

AGONAL OCEAN

The sea
around Trash Island
whispers one long ailing moan;
hoarse, urgent, calling for attention to rescue
its water, flora, fauna; in need of practical care;
to be tended to, both day and night; unable to settle;
restless, listless; a coagulation of flotsam and jetsam
thickly cloying; cloaking the moon's reflection; heaving coughs
that clear nothing; choking any creature that comes too close,
as plastic and synthetic scraps wrap around their unsuspecting
guts; strangle necks; hook innocent beaks and gills,
bind feet and wings. Press any shell to your ear;
witness ocean's distress; hear its pleas:
Essss~SssssOooooo . . . Esssssss . . .
constant, long, and drawn-out:
a desperate cry for mercy.

MARK STROHSCHEIN

ON AN ISLAND IN THE SEA

—for Sam Green

remote San Juan Island home
hugging a steep incline
whose only gate in
is below: the uncertain sea

jury-rigged dock for a moored
seacraft that will deliver its
provisions when necessary
and when not necessary

no carved path of felled trees
above to visit a neighbor
human habitation means the
the land cannot remain inviolate

what is the price paid then for such desolate living?

when your back is strained from
cutting wood & you wonder
your chances for a heart attack
waiting to be Medevacked

certainly there are risks at play
in this solitude, but how
self-sufficient, how resourceful
you must become

when first snowfall
sings its white symphony
from gray giving skies
you might get a glimpse

or when you feel the thrust
of a cormorant's wings
inches above the surface
of a crested wave

or when you ride on the back
of a migrating orca like Storm Boy,
dorsal fin rising, cutting through
the Samish Sea with ease

you understand why those dark
winter nights—the silence, the waves
of snow, the utter blackness—
will never get the best of you

BRENDA SAUNDERS

FROM ABOVE

High-pitched, a chorus of strings soars in crescendo
celestial harps echo far off
The sound of sky music sweeps me up
sets me free-flying out of orbit

~

A leaden cloud weighs down the urban skyline
fall-out from a city forever on the move
I leave behind a weary planet, familiar streets
the house I called home

Look through the mantle of heat wrapping the globe
watch wild fires burn in all the wrong places

After a deluge great cities are sinking rivers
change course leave islands in their wake
Winter snow and ice no longer fill the glaciers
their valleys stilled by a strange emptiness

Offshore a tidal wave has forged a new coastline
left sunken hulls on the sea-floor, their lethal bounty
drifting to beaches in slow time

~

I see a mantle of heat wrap the blue planet
sending it tipping out of control
There is no thunder or wind, no roaring oceans
land and sea have lost definition

Continents fade in this dusky no-time
only glitter from a million cities remains
to cast their far-off sparkle

Weightless, I have lost connection to the familiar
no longer feel the pull, the will to save our world
as planets spin their universe of sound.

DIANA WOODCOCK

HOW I BECAME PURE FLAME

Sailing through phosphorescent
waters at night, I resisted sleep.
Wanting to keep awake, I would take
a walk on the deck to be swept up
in the beauty of it all–

crystal rivers flowing down
through evergreen forests,
everything glowing – islands,
mountains, waters. I would
breathe long, then freeze

in place in the vivid moment–
so much life flickering in the water
below, in the sky above–my heart
leaping, finding peace
dropping slow.

In the alpenglow, my eyes
sought the horizon, island
after island, a glimmer
of the shimmer of sea lions
asleep on a rocky beach.

When I would reach out
my hand to touch them,
and up to touch stars,
and down for phosphorence,
I became pure flame.

DAVID ANSON LEE

LICHEN ON A STOP SIGN

Lichen grows
where nothing else agrees to stay:
bare rock, rusted steel,
the red octagon at mile marker twelve.

Half fungus, half algae,
it is collaboration
made visible.
Air pollution sickens it first.
That is how we know.

When lichen disappears,
no one holds a vigil.
Traffic continues.
Engines idle.

But its absence
is a message we refuse to read:
the air is no longer fit
for patience.

If the lichen returns,
it means something softened:
the sky,
or us.

PISCES

and then one day – after experiments aplenty
with sunflowers, pincushions, tiles and goose feet
in front of the morning sun,
the cunning old warlock got a result.

Star / fish.
Fish / star.

Daylight obscuring the depths of the sky,
we saw it first in the water –
my uncle's murky pond now sparkled
with the light of a thousand tiny constellations.
Tourists looked down from the windows of jumbos
on oceans, void of scale and fin,
where superclusters slowly swirled.
The Sea Life Centre? Now a planetarium,
where erstwhile-distant galaxies bobbed in the water
just behind the glass.

And as the sun went down, we saw them in the heavens –
great schools of sardines, darting light years in seconds,
the prey of celestial sharks.
Angelfish, dragonfish, bat rays and fliers
loomed over one horizon and dived behind the other.
There seemed no limit to their abundance,
now out of reach of our nets and hooks.
The great marine whorls filled the space above us.
Hubble took a picture of the farthest ones it could:
ancient monsters. Viperfish, fangtooth, gulper eel, blob.

And lurking behind them all–
a fish with a rod protruding from its nose
the glowing end of which attracted moth-like cosmic prey,
pretending to be a star in the deep.

The distance meant it must have twinkled out
somewhere near the dawn of time,
but we still couldn't shake the sense
it was waiting for us.

DIANA WOODCOCK

IT'S SO EASY HERE

. . . go on loving what is good, simple
and ordinary—
animals, things, flowers, and keep the
balance true.
—Rainer Maria Rilke

It's so easy here as one melds
with water, ice, and cloud
to follow Rilke's mandate,

so easy to love what is good
and simple. For here—
at the center of the Antarctic

Convergence, that invisible line
encircling the continent and its
oceans—in spite of all the cold,

wind and ice, the earth still exerts
her germinating power—so many
creatures born on these snow-

free hills and shorelines,
in the crevasses and black-
tipped nunataks, in the rivers

of glacial ice, in the blue hearts
of glaciers, in the curving
frozen icefalls, in these fecund

waters nursing so much of Earth's
ocean life—this grey ocean where
floes and icebergs with their

turquoise underbellies drift.
It's so easy here in the midst
of Antarctica's icy heart, where

light is a gift after the long
polar night, to go on loving
all things and vowing to keep

the balance true.

DIANA WOODCOCK

POWERS AND MAGIC

This seventh continent possesses
powers and magic the pilgrim senses
as soon as she arrives: the power

of the waters—Pacific, Atlantic,
Indian and Southern oceans meet
and mingle here, and the world's most

savage sea; glaciers; bubbles trapped
in icebergs; the magic of sun and light
as they linger day and night; the power

of the heart-breaking beauty and terror
of it all—winds and storms, crevasses,
glaciers calving into the sea; the whole

continent still drifting; its history of brave
advances and retreats; its active volcanoes
and dry valleys with their hidden frozen lakes

upon which luxuriant beds of moss spread.
With its powers and magic, this white
continent chases away the blues

and all traces of grief till the pilgrim
at last is set free at least for a brief
spell to inhale and exhale pure joy.

DAVID ANSON LEE

MANGROVE PSALMS

The mangrove kneels
where river forgets its name
and salt begins its work.

Roots like a congregation
of brown fingers:
each one gripping silt,
each one refusing collapse.

Plastic bottles arrive first,
then oil-slick rainbows,
then the fevered breath of ports.
Still, the mangrove filters
what it can,
holding poison long enough
for water to remember
how to breathe.

Fish learn shelter
between its ankles.
Crabs stitch the mud together.
Storms break their teeth
on this living net.

When cities drown,
the mangrove remains upright:
not heroic,
just patient,
rewriting disaster
as delay.

JOEL SAVISHINSKY

CROSSING TWO LAKES

I. Lake Chelan, Washington State, United States

Paddling a kayak is as close to quiet as motion gets. But
this part of the lake is a maze, where pleasure boats jostle
for attention, sun dropping cream on slick bodies, one craft
boasting ten people drunk on beer, loud music, and conceit.
Rocking, they mock the idea of calm, dragging their anchors
with every turn of phrase, as if no one else exists and
silence was a sickness. One can only hope there is
more to them than meets the ear and the day, but
it seems the rhythm and moment for learning were lost
long ago. When dreaming of being adrift, must it always
turn out like this, with the death of birdsong and windwords
in the noontime's nightmare of disrespect?

II. Aubry Lake, Northwest Territories, Canada

A wide surface of white stretches its arms around my memory.
Scanning the frozen surface, there are four wolves on
a solid skin of ice, tracking caribou, eyeing a small group
heading towards an Arctic meadow, each thick-coated creature
in the lead an incarnation of prehistory, a curved crown of
pointed pride mounted above its brow. High-stepping up
the shoreline's eastern bank, the caribou search for lichen
through snowdrift on the floor of a million-fingered forest
of spruce.
How naïve to think you are inventing language as you observe
this vista,
when every element before you—this winter lake, that herd,
a quartet of stalkers, a bristle-headed hill of woods—is not there
to help you write a line but is, instead, a poem itself.

BRENDA SAUNDERS

THE LAST FRONTIER

Curiosity drives us to explore the unknown shine
a light in the darkest places
We leave behind moonlit tides sunlight on clear water
plunge a giant lens through shadows deep as midnight

In the inky blackness currents swirl down riff valleys
blow through arctic trenches
Cameras reveal the mystery capture lively creatures
surviving in the great Abyss

~

Life moves slowly in a world weighed down by water
close to freezing
animals loom in and out of sight feed on dead matter
snow drift from the sea above

Caught in the spotlight bulging eyes stun prey
with electric shocks
viper fish smile bar teeth ready to snap
an angel slug with attitude skittles by on winged feet

Alarmed by their magic we conjure menacing titles
fangtooth gulper eel
barrel eye bomber worms
giant eels too strange to name

In this see-through fantasia glass squid are invisible
jelly fish turn bio-luminous blue
a gliding shark glows phosphorescent star fish

hide in fern-like camouflage
Sea creatures adapt to a see-saw existence develop
heightened sensors
every sound a warning
each movement a snare in their blacked-out world

Survival extinction between animal and prey
fine-tuned over millennia
a balance easily tipped by warming seas surface noise
loud as a depth charge in the silence below

Buffeted by rising tides plastic lies in toxic dumps
breaks down to fine dust
a lethal mixture feeding sea creatures
on the edge of the abyss

Sonic beeps now map the sea floor focus the lens
on rare earth fine minerals
trapped in arctic reefs
Capture unique species their future worth unknown

Others look to value with a different eye driven
by the will to protect conserve
They turn the spotlight on a vanishing wonder beam
each spectacle to the waiting world above.

DIANA WOODCOCK

A PEARL

The heart is pounding
after the calving of a glacier—
the silence and stillness so

abruptly broken. One single
penguin some distance away
holds his ground, poised

in the very middle of an iceberg,
like a security guard (he has heard
it all before), keeping watch,

making sure we take nothing
from this place. What I take from
here will be these: its austere

beauty, a longing for the ice,
the memories of a sunlit fairy-
land—peaks, glaciers, icebergs

glittering white, shot through
with a hue of blue so divine
it cannot be adequately defined.

And the revelation that the whole of
it is like one priceless gift—a pearl,
crowning glory of this fallen world.

JULIAN MATTHEWS

CORAL

The vessel of my heart is non-stick,
shut like a clamshell, with no room
for any fragment of you—no nacre,
no pearlescent to coat into a gem

My yearning is slag, gravel, rubble
at the bottom of the ocean awaiting
a passing polyp to secrete chalky calcium
to harden it from the outside–a reef
of grief protected from this drowning

I have had enough, haven't you?
Of being fired up, burnt,
left to atrophy, backslide,
decline . . .
like a lump of coal

Charcoal kept dry
may last a long time
but coral lives for centuries—

Long enough, perhaps, to end this longing
this hollow iciness, until temperatures
rise again, warms a crusty soul
and defies the bleaching
that cometh

MIKA NAGASAKI

THE MUSSEL: A VILLANELLE

—After "El lenguado" by Jose Watanabe
(1946-2007)

I have become a mussel on the river floor,
Invertebrate, hardening around this plastic piece,
Rolling it over and over in my muddy core.

While mindless creatures stomp around the shore
The weight of many cubic feet of water, bodies,
living and deceased,
Oppress the mussel I've become, and more.

I kick with my one foot, I thrash and roar
But the pellet remains, destroying the peace
Over and over, through my muddy core

The weeks of nursing this deplete my store
Of nacre, and in my byssus pit, the grease
That anchors me, a mussel on the river floor.

A resurrected curse from the time of dinosaurs
Used now to fuel war and the markets' caprices
It grows, I turn it over, and over in my muddy corps.

History and this curse will strangle me, or
I'll rouse the strength to just release,
Though I'm nothing but a mussel on the river floor
Rolling—over and over—in its muddy core.

FIVE:
AT WHAT COST?

SARA COLLIE

LOST IN THREE DIMENSIONS

In 1991 NASA sent 2,478 jellyfish into space for the purposes of investigating the impact that zero-gravity conditions had on their gravity-sensing organs.

Here follows a list of questions I have about what happened up there.

How did the jellyfish feel during countdown? Could they tell from the vibrations that something was up, or about to be up—something out of this world? Is it possible to feel nervous without a centralized nervous system? What did blast-off feel like through the tips of their tentacles? Did they confuse the clouds for an ocean the way I do on aeroplanes as they surged up, up and away towards the edge of the atmosphere? How did it feel to pulse and waft, to glide and drift in an artificial, weightless, shapeless sea in the company of the stars? Did they miss their particular patch of blue on the earth's cerulean face as it drifted past the window or had they only ever known a laboratory life of poke and prod and scrutiny? Did they have a sense of something left behind or lost?

In a lake on the pacific island of Palau, a vast population of jellyfish spends its days doing what might best be described as highly specialized gardening. Day in, day out, a million or more jellyfish chase the sun across the lake as it stretches its rays into the surface of their world. Positively pastoral, their algae-rich skin feasts on the light as they perform an improbable symbiotic ballet, orbiting each other in endless constellations, their silence a song sung softly. I sink into the pull of medusozoa dreams as David

Attenborough narrates this scene night in, night out, on my laptop screen. A curious cure for the insomnia that has plagued me since I learned about infinity and space: a counter-weight to the thought that one wrong move up there could get you lost forever in three dimensions. The jellyfish and their algae farms somehow tether me.

But back to the cosmos, could the jellyfish get to sleep alright up there (they sleep, you know)? Did they dream whatever kinds of dreams are possible when you don't have a centralized brain or did the proximity to all that airless space give them the jellyfish equivalent of nightmares? Were they aware of the herculean task that the scientists had planned for them, of exponential reproduction? Could they have imagined their army of 2,000 strong becoming 60,000 in just 9 days? Did that feel like a busy week to them? Was it a swirling mass of tentacles and luminescence, a scene in which the word billowous risks getting stretched too far? Did the thrill of zero gravity make them hornier than usual or was the whole thing a much more clinical affair, the fate of their growing tribe held entirely in the hands of the scientists? And once their offspring started to arrive did the sky start to feel like their kingdom finally come? Were any of them aware it was all about to come undone?

Quite how they all got back down to earth is brushed over in the literature. Suffice to say they made it home alive, the invisible sting hidden within, waiting to unravel space's latest little exiles. Their fate was a vertiginous one: the jellyfish that formed out there couldn't tell up from down, and gravity's unfamiliar insistence meant they couldn't swim on earth. Sometimes there is no turning back. Sometimes the only thing you can be is lost in three dimensions. The study's main conclusion was that, due to the similarity between our human inner ears and the jellyfishes' gravity sensing crystals, it is quite likely that reproducing up there might not work all that well for us either and that, even if we did one day manage such a feat, the resulting children could probably never return to earth.

Goodbye intergalactic space travel, at least for now.

Did the jellyfish sigh with relief that we might all have to focus on staying earth-bound? Did they wonder (as I now wonder) what their suffering was really for? What would it be like if the intricacies of our inner ear could hear what they might one day want to ask us about the ethics of exploiting their kin with experiments like this? Could we imagine our way into a new kind of empathy that goes beyond mere human endeavour? To wonder why we are trying to leave behind a world where such things as jellyfish can thrive? Where, despite our outward appearances, we share some clockwork in our machines with these strange transparent beings and a whole lot more besides? Gardening. Dancing. Seeking out the sun. The need to know up from down. And is it any solace to the jellyfish that, for the brief time that those 60,000 souls were orbiting the earth, they were not just a science experiment, but pure poetry in motion? An ocean riding a rocket, circling all the other oceans as a million or more tentacles pulsated silently to the drum of the scientists' machines, a victory song sung softly. A celestial ballet. A map, tracing beauty in three dimensions, so you might never feel lost in space again.

KHADIJA CEESAY

Honorable Mention for Lit Shark's June 2026 Poem of the Month

ELEGY FOR TOKITAE

Beneath the beach, Southern Victoria, fish bathe.
A whale's enveloped in waves. She lifts her flukes,
freshly oiled by ocean and sings goodbye to the coast,
the birds, the people.
She swims in a buffet of bottomless mackerel, squid
with heads like fat fruit, seals
belly full, ready to burst against teeth.
Beyond the clouds of Southern Victoria,
her call is carried by sea foam
to travel through the trees,
tickle the birds,
the sound so proud it outlasts every boat,
ripples trumpets of coral,
bubbles to the surface,
signals sunken ships,
a song of forgiveness.
She wails at blushing sun,
sinks deep
into silent peace.

ELLEN ACCONCIA

NATURE'S REALITY CHECK: 'BLACKFISH,' SEA WORLD, AND ENTERTAINMENT THAT COMES AT A PRICE

"The stars of amusement park shows around the world, have long died before their time."
–National Geographic

I heard some chatter on X (Twitter) recently, where folks were commiserating about whether the natural world was mad at us, considering some of the unique and sometimes bizarre animal behavior we are seeing and, of course, the extreme weather events that seem to be a daily occurrence. When I Googled, "Is Mother Earth angry with us?", the search engine returned 49M+ results. That's a lot of anger. From fires and floods to tornadoes and tsunamis, it sure feels like she is trying to tell us something. Now, even the animal kingdom seems to have gotten in on the act. Witness bears jumping into backyard swimming pools, hanging out on busy street corners, sharks appearing—and sometimes attacking—on beaches where they are normally not seen and, most recently, orcas ramming into fishing vessels. According to an article in **BBC Science Focus** (1), the way that some media have employed some emotional language to describe the mammals' behavior is worth exploring. Some reports have suggested that the animals are seeking revenge on boats that are encroaching on their

(1) "Care About Animals? Then You Need to Stop Treating Them Like Humans" by Victoria Gill, Science Focus/BBC, September 1, 2023, Web.

hunting grounds. Furthermore, the article continues, in "creating a narrative where these orcas are angry, vengeful or bent on teaching us humans in our fragile sailing boats a lesson is at best unwise and at worst dangerous. In doing that, we're telling a story in which humans are on one side of the battle and orcas are on the other." Lori Marino, Founder and President of the Whale Sanctuary Project and a leading expert on the brains of whales and dolphins explains, "Parts of their brains—like the limbic system that you can think of as the emotional processor—they share with us. So, they probably do experience anger, grief and joy."

But, she continues, "If we try to say that these social, intelligent, playful animals are solely good and peaceful—or solely bad and aggressive, we're turning them into caricatures."

Of course, films like ***Free Willy*** (2) and ***Flipper*** (3), and other similar works, portray them as sociable, entertaining animals. While they are that, these impressions actually serve to numb us to the realities of their forced captivity. Being entertained by seeing dolphins in the wild while on a boat, or seeing whales breaching in open waters, is far different—both physically and philosophically —from the entertainment we witness in seaquaria.

*

With an afternoon off from a business meeting, my husband and I visited Orlando's SeaWorld this past January. Neither of us had been to the park in decades. Never mind that the Port of Entry Lighthouse was looking a little long in the tooth and in need of a paint job.

As we made our way past the shallow water exhibits and the Dolphin Theater we took note of new additions to a park that was once dedicated solely to the traditional sea animal experience: 21st-century thrill rides like the Manta rollercoaster, which reaches a speed of 56 m.p.h., while riders are restrained in the prone position. I wasn't too surprised that the park had found it

(2) Free Willy: Warner Bros (1993)
(3) Flipper: Universal Pictures (1996)

necessary to add rides to the experience. Today's families and savvy young people who are used to lightning-fast video games and virtual reality couldn't possibly be satisfied with the simple pleasures of petting a stingray or *ooh*-ing and *ahh*-ing over the impossibly cute dolphins.

*

SeaWorld

SeaWorld in Orlando opened on December 15, 1973, as the third park of the entertainment chain and just two years after Walt Disney World Resort's Magic Kingdom. My first visit was in 1978. The allure of exotic sea creatures, charming dolphin antics, and the enormity of the killer whale Shamu reinforced the Orlando area's developing reputation as a desirable multi-park vacation destination.

Back then, most everything in Orlando was shiny and new and hadn't yet become jaded by Disney's objectification of its beloved characters in pursuit of the almighty dollar. And we, as a country, hadn't awakened to the cries of animals in captivity—animals who were often ripped from their social communities solely for our entertainment. While zoos and seeking animals in captivity for entertainment was not anything new to civilization (wall carvings found in Egypt and Mesopotamia are evidence that rulers and aristocrats created menageries as early as 2500 BCE), it became increasingly obvious through the work of animal rights advocates that in some cases, keeping these creatures in captivity was not in their best interests, even if the stated goal was to help prevent extinction. As recently as the 1980s we were all still okay with elephants front and center at the Greatest Show on Earth.

We were ignorant. Or were we just not interested in what went on behind the scenes?

*

The Educational Shift

In 2016, SeaWorld announced that it would end orca breeding at all its marine parks and phase out its killer whale shows. And because SeaWorld hasn't collected an orca from the wild in almost four decades, this will be the last generation of orcas in the park's care. The 2016 announcement said SeaWorld was also phasing out its theatrical orca whale shows.

We soon learned this year, though, that that wasn't entirely true. The "Orca Encounter," at Shamu Stadium, the 5,500 seat, 7M gallon home to the park's killer whales that opened in September 1984, is now touted as being primarily an educational experience.

I still felt like our show featured trainers (who were no longer allowed in the water with the whales) encouraging the orcas to do a modicum of prescribed activities—call them what you will, I'll call them tricks—including spinning, porpoising, and diving.

As we became immersed in the antics in the tank below us, I recalled taking my daughters, now in their 30s, to SeaWorld San Antonio in the 1980s where they insisted on seats in the front row of the "Splash Zone" (the best place to be on a hot Texas day). During my recent "Orca Encounter," I was mesmerized by the giant creatures' speed and agility until, after about ten minutes, the show was halted abruptly with the trainers announcing that the orcas "were not up to performing at this time."

For the kids in the stadium—and especially in the Splash Zone—it was the equivalent to the DJ scratching a vinyl record to a halt. I'm sure many in the audience did not get the intent behind this nuanced message. It took me a few minutes, but it soon dawned on me that this was part of the SeaWorld corporate line, to ensure that the audience was made aware that the orcas were not being coerced into performing. The trainers continued with some video and educational content about orcas in the wild but, let's face it,

the folks really wanted to see the orcas leap and dive (and, above all, splash the audience).

*

Tilikum

Tilikum was only two years old when he was captured in 1983. Before his death in 2017, Tilikum had the sad-looking collapsed dorsal fin and curled flukes that come, in part, from performing at the water's surface (victims of gravity), broken teeth from gnawing on his unnatural concrete-and-steel habitat, and abraded skin from the aggression that occurs when whales from different pods are held in a confined space.

Researchers think that frustration caused by his confinement and lack of autonomy may have contributed to his aggressive behavior that killed three people. On Feb. 24, 2010, during an exclusive guest experience called "Dine with Shamu," he pulled trainer Dawn Brancheau into the water, ultimately killing her. As punishment for her death, he was kept in solitary confinement for a year. In a 2016 *New York Magazine* article, **Naomi Rose** (4), a marine mammal biologist, who has advocated against killer whale captivity for more than 20 years, said, "His life has been extraordinarily difficult . . . He's not a normal guy."

Inbreeding and Aggressive Behavior

Some research suggests that aquaria breeding programs perpetuate the manifestation of aggressive behavior among captive orcas. Former SeaWorld trainer Samantha Berg noted, during the period when SeaWorld's breeding program was still active, that the goal of legitimate animal breeding programs is not to just make more animals, but to strengthen and diversify the gene pool, thus producing animals that are more resilient, more resistant to

(4) "Sea World, Breached: Score One for the Cetaceans" by Benjamin Wallace, New York Magazine, May 4, 2016, Web. [Contains interview with Marine Mammal Biologist Naomi Rose]

disease, and which display the specific kinds of traits that are considered to be desirable (for example, for dairy cattle, this might be to increase milk production; for dogs, it might be temperament, speed or agility, etc.). Since SeaWorld was limited by the small number of captive male orcas in its collection, Berg noted, it's not like any genetic testing they could do would be meaningful.

"They have the whales they have, and they are forced to use those whales for breeding," she said.

Berg concluded, "Why would anyone consider breeding an animal that has demonstrated extreme aggression towards humans on numerous occasions? Especially when they know without a doubt that this animal's progeny will likely continue to interact with humans?"

*

Blackfish

I couldn't stop thinking about the orcas after I left SeaWorld and began some additional online research. Their stories were at once heartbreaking and enraging. I was determined to learn more about the whales and the terrible history surrounding their capture and imprisonment.

Upon returning home from Florida, I first watched the 2013 documentary, *Blackfish* (5), which illustrated, with an unflinching eye, the reality of life for killer whales in captivity. According to experts in the film orcas, who are incredibly social among their own communities, have never been known to be aggressive towards humans in the wild.

Most orcas never leave their family pods—or their mothers—during their lifetime. Seventy orcas have been born in captivity around the world since 1977 (not counting another 30 that were stillborn or died in utero), according to records in **two databases** (6-7) maintained by cetacean experts.

(5) Blackfish: Magnolia Pictures and CNN Films (2013)
(6-7) The two databases: Cetabase.org and OrcaHome.de

*

Lori Marino (1) explains, "The chronic stress of trying to adapt to such a barren and artificial environment leads to psychological and behavioral abnormalities that eventually wear down the whales' immune system, resulting in increased infection rates and early death."

Marino notes that these magnificent beings can reach speeds upwards of 35 m.p.h. during periods of intense activity, are in tanks that are much too small for them, which in turn reduces them to "repetitive actions without purpose . . . endless circling, grating the teeth on tank walls and gates."

Marino notes that "61 percent of captive orcas have dental pathology so that their teeth must be drilled out and then rinsed daily to try to prevent infection."

In *Blackfish*, SeaWorld staff are seen repeatedly telling park visitors that because of the excellent care the whales receive, they often live much longer than they would in the wild. In the wild, male orcas can live to an average of 30 years (maximum 50-60 years) and females to an average of 46 years (maximum 80-90 years), yet only a few wild-caught orcas have lived past age 30. **Lolita** (8), an orca at the Miami Seaquarium, had entertained guests for more than 50 years before the park bowed to public pressure and planned to release it into the ocean, died in August. The orca, also known as **Tokitae** (9), as recently as the week before her death, was said to be in good health as a team, with private funding, was preparing to return her to her native waters (in a safe enclosure) in the Pacific Northwest to live out the remainder of her days. Yet, it was unclear how the orca's condition deteriorated so quickly. Tokitae, who was about 20 feet long and 7,000 pounds, was living in an 80-foot-long, 35-foot-wide tank.

A PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals)

(8) "The Lummi Nation sees 'parallels' with the orca Tokitae's story [regarding Sk-aliCh-elh-tenaut, popularly known as Lolita]" by Richard Arlin Walter, Cascade PBS, September 3, 2023.
(9) "Listen to the last song Toki, the captive orca, sang, a tune her mother taught her" by Isolde Raftery, KUOW.org, August 31, 2023

statement noted that she had been kept in "the smallest, bleakest orca tank in the world, deprived of any semblance of a natural life" and had displayed "repetitive and abnormal behavior," indicating "severe psychological trauma."

Naomi Rose, a marine mammal scientist at the Animal Welfare Institute, said "It is a sad irony that Tokitae died now . . . Humans failed her."

*

Most orcas in U.S. aquaria were caught and transported from the Pacific Northwest. In 1972, the Marine Mammal Protection Act limited unlawful orca killing and harassment. However, capturing killer whales for aquaria was not outlawed in Washington State until 1976, and it was not until nearly 30 years later that they would be protected under the Endangered Species Act. As recently as 2021, a *Science* article noted, "**the International Union for Conservation of Nature** (10) classifies orcas as 'data deficient.' Some of their populations might be endangered, but there just isn't enough information to be sure."

In one of the most emotionally wrenching scenes in *Blackfish*, the captain of a boat whose mission was to capture orcas, recalls the sounds—wailing and almost humanlike keening—that came from the pod as the young were removed forcibly from their mothers and loaded onto the ship. The man's wizened face, a testament to a life on the water, is screwed up as if in pain. As the scene evolves, the realization dawns on him that he's been an accomplice in the ill-treatment of complex and sensitive animals who are denied everything that is natural and important to them as they are forced into captivity. His torment is palpable as he admits, through tears, that he can't believe what he's done.

*

(10) The International Union for Conservation of Nature: IUCN.org. The IUCN Red List classifies the killer whale (Orcinus orca) globally as Data Deficient, meaning that they do not have enough information at this time to evaluate the orca's risk of extinction.

"For so long, people had been telling themselves this story they could live with, of a happy, thriving Shamu," says filmmaker Gabriela Cowperthwaite, who directed *Blackfish*. "Nobody wants to go to work [daily] thinking they're doing something inhumane to animals they love. And the trainers do love them. But at the end of the day, this 50-year experiment did not work. The most important thing we learned was they don't belong in captivity (11)."

Activists, including PETA, have long pressured SeaWorld to free its whales and dolphins. As far back as 2011, PETA even filed a lawsuit arguing that orcas were "slaves" under the 13th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

Do I feel guilty for my active participation in viewing the orcas, and even the dolphins, soaring and plunging for my entertainment? Admittedly, after all my research and viewing *Blackfish*, I'm disappointed in myself for not thinking harder about how these splendid creatures were captured and treated over decades of forced bondage.

As society learns more witnessing the modern evolution of our culture's mores, we can own our mistakes and with that knowledge hope that we—and future generations—don't repeat them.

Anthropomorphism and Animals in Entertainment

Anthropomorphism is the act of giving human characteristics to a non-human entity. Innocent examples include reading a book about Peter Rabbit or talking to a pet. Anthropomorphism becomes an issue when we start using it to force human emotions and principles on real-life animals.

SeaWorld CEO Joel Manby said, back in 2016 announcing the termination of the captivity and breeding program, "We are proud of contributing to the evolving understanding of one of the world's largest marine mammals" also touting how SeaWorld

(11) "Orcas: From sea monsters to the Blackfish effect" by Dani Abras, Bate-Papo Comnetuno, May 11, 2021, Web.

changed attitudes toward orcas from "hated, hunted" to "among the most popular marine mammals on the planet." There is no mention of the lucrative draw for SeaWorld to have these "killers"—who resembled giant cuddly toys (ready-made prototypes for the gift shop)—performing cute tricks while looking like they were smiling.

In an article for *The Guardian* (12), Patricia Ganea, a psychologist at Toronto University, ran a series of experiments on children who were given information about animals in straight factual form and then in a more fantastical anthropomorphized way. Her results, she noted, revealed that "anthropomorphism can lead to an inaccurate understanding of biological processes in the natural world," she said. "It can also lead to inappropriate behaviors towards wild animals, such as trying to adopt a wild animal as a 'pet' or *misinterpreting the actions of a wild animal* (italics my own)."

The view of using animals for entertainment purposes has certainly evolved over the last several decades. Unfortunately, many creatures, such as captive orcas and other animals taken for use in aquaria and animal parks around the world, have suffered at the hands of greedy entertainment conglomerates hungry for ticket sales. These entities sell their shows to people looking for what appear to be happy-go-lucky and playful groups of dolphins, whales, and others. The hope is that the knowledge of the reality of the animals in captivity will spur more change and reverse human opinion, enabling people to see the animals in both a new light—and out of their cruel and unnatural living situations.

(12) "Anthropomorphism: how much humans and animals share is still contested" by Oliver Milman, The Guardian, January 15, 2016, Web.

DIANA WOODCOCK

I WISH I COULD SAY

I wish I could say
it was all pristine, no signs today
that anything obscene
had ever happened here.

True, there are no oil wells
or pipelines, no coal pits or
oil slicks, no smokestacks,
and for that I give thanks.

But the skulls and vertebrae
of whales on shorelines tell
of those violent times. The
derelict whaling stations remind

the pilgrim of the carnage,
the sacrilege. This is about
darkness and light,
and what remains despite

man's greed and stupidity.
In the silence, listen:
a whale is singing his
haunting, forgiving song.

THANK YOU FOR READING

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to the publications in which some of these works previously appeared. We appreciate your hard work in getting these pieces out into the world, and we're thrilled to have had the opportunity to share them again.

These entries are organized alphabetically by the author's last name and may vary slightly from their previous publication:

Ellen Acconcia's essay, "Natures Reality Check: Blackfish Sea World and Entertainment That Comes at a Price," first appeared (and is still available on) Lit Shark's website!

Christopher J. Bahnsen's "A Matter of Time" first appeared in *The Maine Review*, September 2022.

"Said the Whales" by Deborah Blenkhorn first appeared in *The Bookends Review*.

Abigail Ottley's "Sea-Change in Winter" appeared first in *Morvoren: the poetry of sea-swimming*, from The Mor Poets (2022).

Abigail Ottley's "Turning Turtle" previously appeared in Issue 7 of *Lit Shark Magazine: The SHARK WEEK Edition* and her collection,

Out of Eden, from Yaffle Press (2025).

"Menaced by a Marine Heatwave" by Meredith Stephens first appeared in *Borderless*, August 2025.
Meredith Stephens' "The Elusive Dugongs" previously appeared in *All Your Stories* (August 2025) and the *Fish Zine* by Coin-Operated Press (December 2025).

Debbie Walker-Lass's poem, "Ocean Dreaming," is a lovely example of a Cento, a form of found poetry that intentionally borrows singular lines from fellow poets' works and combines them to create a poem that is something new. The lines in "Ocean Dreaming" have been borrowed from the following poets' poems, listed in the order in which they appear:

1. "Exultation Is The Going," Emily Dickinson
2-3. "Sea Longing," Sara Teasdale
4. "The Return," Algernon Charles Swimburne
5-6. "Exiled," Edna St. Vincent Millay
7. "Sea Fever," John Masefield
8. "Mana Of The Sea," D.H. Lawrence
9. "The Sound of the Sea," Henry Wadsworth Longfellow
10. "Sail Away," Rabindranath Tagore
11. "The Rime Of The Ancient Mariner," Samuel Taylor Coleridge
12. "Sea Longing," Sara Teasdale
13. "Seafarer," William Carlos Williams

The line "dropping slow" in Diana Woodcock's "How I Became Pure Flame" is from "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" by W.B. Yeats.

ABOUT OUR CONTRIBUTORS

Thank you to all of our lovely, imaginative contributors! Here's more about each of them and where to find them.

BUFFY AAKAASH—he/him—Poetry
Buffy Aakaash's (he, him) work has been seen in *Main Street Rag, The North, The Brussels Review* and many other publications. His 2022 chapbook *Untangling the Knots* (Kelsay Books) was nominated for the Vermont Book Award. Breaking, his full-length book of poetry, will be published later in 2025 by Shanti Arts, LLC. He currently lives in the Vermont Green Mountains with his dog, Bodhi.

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ELLEN ACCONCIA—she/her—Prose
Ellen Acconcia is a marketing and communications professional, originally from New York City and currently living and working in coastal North Carolina by way of Washington, D.C. Most recently, she oversaw audience growth and engagement and content management for a nonprofit digital newsroom. She has served as a marketing director, publicist, and communications expert in industries as var-

ied as book publishing, the performing arts, corporate development and professional association management. She is an experienced writer, content wrangler, publications production manager and creative director who can write to order. She enjoys breathing life into a vision through the written word.

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CHRISTOPHER J. BAHNSEN—he/him—Memoir

Chris J. Bahnsen is assistant editor with Narrative magazine. His work has appeared in The New York Times, Los Angeles Times, Smithsonian's Air & Space, Scuba Diving Magazine, Hippocampus Magazine, Tupelo Quarterly, and elsewhere. Recently, his short story "Octagon Girl" appeared in Palm Springs Noir, an anthology from Akashic Books. He divides his time between Southern California and Northwest Ohio.

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KB BALLENTINE—she/her—Poetry

KB Ballentine's eighth collection, *Spirit of Wild*, launched in March with Blue Light Press. Her earlier books can be found with Iris Press, Blue Light Press, Middle Creek Publishing, and Celtic Cat Publishing. Published in *North Dakota Quarterly, Atlanta Review and Haight-Ashbury Literary Journal*, and others, her work also appears in anthologies including *I Heard a Cardinal Sing* (2022), *The Strategic Poet* (2021), *Pandemic Evolution* (2021), and *Carrying the Branch: Poets in Search of Peace* (2017).

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ANNETTE BIRDSALL—she/her—Poetry

Annette Birdsall is a poet, picture book author, 12x12 member, SCBWI member, retired library director, and former youth services librarian. Her poems have appeared in *Little Thoughts Press* and *The Dirigible Balloon*. Her other published work has been in professional library journals with articles on encouraging reading to babies, teens, and reluctant readers; and on removing library fines and access barriers across populations.

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DEBORAH BLENKHORN—she/her—Fiction
Deborah Blenkhorn (she/her) is a poet, essayist, and storyteller living in British Columbia, Canada, on the unceded ancestral lands of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations. Her work fuses elements of memoir and imagination, and has been featured in over two dozen print and online literary magazines and anthologies in North America, Britain, Australia, and India. Deb's grassroots environmentalism includes weekly shifts at her local recycling depot.

JANET BOWDAN—she/her—Poetry
Janet Bowdan's poems have appeared in *APR, Denver Quarterly, The Rewilding Anthology*, *Sequestrum, Anacapa Review* and elsewhere. The editor of *Common Ground Review,* she teaches at Western New England University and lives in Northampton, Massachusetts, with her husband, their son, and a book-nibbling chinchilla.

PATRICK ten BRINK—he/him—Poetry
Patrick lives in Brussels; his day job is dedicated to protecting the environment, and his spare time is devoted to writing poetry, short stories, art reviews, and progressing with two novels. His poetry has appeared in *The Berlin Literary Review, Beyond Words, Dreamers Creative Writing, Honeyguide Literary Magazine, Maya's Micros* and, forthcoming, in *The Belfast Review* and *LEAF*. His poetry chapbook, *Urban Enigmas*, was published by Dipity Press.
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DUSTIN P BROWN—he/him—Poetry
Dustin P Brown has a BA in creative writing from Western Michigan University. He was also a fiction reading intern at *Third Coast Magazine* and an editorial intern at New Issues Poetry & Prose. These days he lives in Spain working as a freelance editor, writes, and drinks delicious wine. He has poetry published at *Hawaii Pacific Review*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Coe Review*, *Hollins Critic*, *Punchnel's*, *Falling Star Magazine*, *Waterhouse Review*, and *Third Wednesday*, among others.

KEVIN BROWNE—he/him—Poetry
Kevin Browne's poems have appeared in *Book of Matches, Pangyrus, MacQueen's Quinterly, Frogpond, The Heron's Nest*, and other publications. He lives in southern Wisconsin. You can often find him out hiking or attending live music concerts.

DAVID CAMERON—he/him—Poetry
David Cameron lives in the mountains of Western North Carolina shaping scraps of overheard conversations, memories, and imagined exploits into poems and stories. When not writing, he enjoys hiking mountain trails with his spouse Kathryn and son,Will. His work has appeared in *Razor Magazine, Pensive Journal, Literary Heist, Floyd County Moonshine, and Avalon Literary Review*.

ADRIENNE CAPONE—she/her—Fiction
Adrienne Capone writes about family struggles within the context of social history. Her work translates everyday human experiences from the subconscious to awareness so that her readers find solace, empathy, and sometimes, humor. An English instructor and an education leader for over three decades, Adrienne recently completed her MFA in creative writing from Drexel University and moved to the beach where her long walks inspired the "Snarky Ocean Lecture Series." Her novel in progress, Small Sins, is a story of generational trauma, loss and redemption set in the 1960's.

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LORRAINE CAPUTO—she/her—Poetry and Prose
Wandering troubadour Lorraine Caputo's literary works appear in over 400 journals on six continents, and 24 collections of poetry–including In the Jaguar Valley (dancing girl press, 2023) and Santa Marta Ayres (Origami Poems Project, 2024). She also authors travel narratives, articles and guidebooks. Her writing has been honored by the Parliamentary Poet Laureate of Canada (2011), and nominated for the Best of the Net and the Pushcart Prize. Caputo has done literary readings from Alaska to the Patagonia. She journeys through Latin America with her faithful knapsack

Rocinante, listening to the voices of the pueblos and Earth. Follow her adventures at www.facebook.com/lorrainecaputo.wanderer or https://latinamericawanderer.wordpress.com.

KHADIJA CEESAY—she/her—Poetry
Khadija Ceesay is an African-American, Lebanese and queer poet from Pittsburg, Kansas. She has been writing poetry since 2014 about her sexuality, religion and race in order to understand herself better and owes much of the ideas behind her work to her relationships with family, both good and bad. She received both her B.A. and M.A. from Pittsburg State University where she studied English literature and poetics. During her free time she enjoys reading, crocheting, and spending time at home with her wife and two cats.

AMELIA CHANG—she/her—Poetry
Amelia Chang is a Taiwanese American poet from Long Island, New York. She is the recipient of multiple Scholastic Awards and has work published/forthcoming in Marmalade Lit, manywor(l)ds, Yin Literary, Rivener Lit, and elsewhere. She is the editor-in-chief and founder of the literary magazine Citron Lit, in addition to working as an editor for other magazines. Amelia believes in the visceral power of words, and you can find her @a.melia.kat on Instagram.

JOHN CHMURA—he/him—Poetry
John Chmura is a poet living and writing in the Pine Barrens of Ocean County, New Jersey. His long and short form work has recently appeared in *The Winged Moon, Presence Magazine*, and *Trash Panda*. John is a member of the Barnegat Poets' Society and he regularly participates in the monthly Last Stand Open Mic at Tuckerton Seaport.

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SARA COLLIE—she/her—Prose
Sara Collie (she/her) is a Norwich-based poet with a PhD in French Literature and a lifelong fascination with the way that words and stories shape and define us. She writes about nature, memory, childhood, love and loss with as much joy and tenderness as she can

muster in these dark times. Her poetry and prose have appeared in more than 25 literary journals and anthologies and she is currently working on her first poetry chapbook.

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LINDA M. CRATE—she/her—Poetry
Linda M. Crate (she/her) is a Pennsylvanian writer whose poetry, short stories, articles, and reviews have been published in a myriad of magazines both online and in print. She has twelve published chapbooks the latest being: *Searching Stained Glass Windows For An Answer* (Alien Buddha Publishing, December 2022).

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CHARLIE DAVIES—he/they—Poetry
Charlie Davies is an emerging writer, artist, and naturalist from Maryland. His work has been published in Lilac Peril and How To Wait: An Anthology in Transition. You can find him talking to birds in the woods, haunting your local coffee shop, or if all else fails, on Instagram @charlie.t.davies.

DEBRA FAIR—she/her—Poetry
Debra Fair is a high school English teacher by day and a writer by night. As an author, she specializes in poetry and creative nonfiction centered on faith, nature, and mental health. Outside of work and writing, she is a passionate equestrian and spends most of her free time caring for her horse and miniature donkey. For more of her work, follow @fair.minded.poetry on Instagram, Facebook, and Substack.

@fair.minded.poetry on Instagram, Facebook, and Substack

DIANE FUNSTON—she/her—Poetry
Diane Funston has been published in journals including *California Quarterly, Synkronicity, San Diego Poetry Annual, F(r)iction, Tule Review*, and *Lake Affect Magazine* among others. She lives in the agricultural Sacramento Valley of California with her husband and

two dogs. Diane's chapbook, her first, *Over The Falls* from Foothills Publishing, was born in 2022.

ROGER FUNSTON—he/him—Memoir
Roger Funston came to poetry late in life. In retirement he writes, travels, volunteers with the local land trust and wanders in the Sierras. Roger writes about his life journey, his travels and his ancestors. His work appears in Alchemy Spoon, Soul Poetry, Last Stanza Poetry, Synkroniciti and Stick Figure Poetry. Roger has published two chapbooks and is one of six contributors to a third book.

CLIVE AARON GILL—he/him—Fiction
Clive Aaron Gill's stories and poems have been widely published in literary magazines and anthologies. He has shared his tales and engaged audiences at writers' workshops and at public and private events.

KJ HANNAH GREENBERG—she/her—Art
KJ Hannah Greenberg tilts at social ills and encourages personal evolutions via poetry, prose, and visual art. Her images have appeared as interior art in many places, including *Foliate Oak Literary Magazine, Les Femmes Folles, Mused, Piker Press, Stone Lake Gallery, The Academy of the Heart and Mind*, and *Yellow Mama* and as cover art in many places, including *Angime, Black Petals, Five on the Fifth, Impspired [sic], Pithead Chapel, Red Flag Poetry, Smoky Blue Literary and Arts Magazine, The Broken City*, and *Torah Tidbits*. Additionally, some of her digital paintings accompany her poetry in *The Lion's Share of Ourselves* (Seashell Books, 2026), *No One Sighs over Wastrels' Graves* (Seashell Books, 2026), *Miscellaneous Parlor Tricks* (Seashell Books, 2024), *Word Magpie* (Audience Askew, 2024), *Subrogation* (Seashell Books, 2023), and *One-Handed Pianist* (Hekate Publishing, 2021).

ASPEN GREENWOOD—they/them—Poetry
Aspen Greenwood is a writer who regards using their words as a form of activism. As a swimming teacher and aquatics tutor, Greenwood combines their activism with physical and mental fitness.

KARINA JONES—she/her—Poetry
Karina Jones graduated from the University of California, Riverside with a BA in Creative Writing and a minor in English after only three years as an undergraduate. After a year of stumbling through the adult world as a queer Black woman with an arts degree (being a substitute teacher), she is pursuing an MFA in Fiction at the University of Washington in Seattle. She believes there is real magic in the world, and much of it is accessed through literature.

JANINA AZA KARPINSKA—she/her—Poetry
Janina Aza Karpinska is an Artist-Poet, fortunate to live near the sea on the south coast of England, which provides a wealth of material for creative arts and poetry. Fortunate, also to have completed and achieved an M.A. in Creative Writing & Personal Development (with Merit), at Sussex University, before the course was dropped from the syllabus to make way for a business department. Her poetry has appeared in: *Ekphrastic Review; Magma; London Reader; Sein und Werd; Cold Signal,* and *Raising the Fifth* among others.

DEBORAH KERNER—she/her—Poetry
Deborah Kerner is a poet and an artist living in Ojai, California. Her poems have appeared in many poetry journals such as *Rabid Oak*, *Mad Swirl,* and *Synchronized Chaos*. She shares a modest house with her husband, Richard, who is also an artist. She lived and taught in India. Over many years, her travels to various places in the world have deepened an all-embracing vision of being alive on a radiant planet. Deborah and her husband facilitate week-long retreats for the Krishnamurti Center in Ojai, focusing on the potential for a transformation of human consciousness. A selection of Deborah's poems and art can be seen on her website: deborahkerner.com.

NADIA KHAN—she/her—Poetry
Nadia Khan is a writer from Allahabad, India. She enjoys her time spent at home with a book or her journal. You can find her on Instagram: www.instagram.com/nadiakhanwrites

JOSEPH LABRIOLA—he/him—Fiction
Joe Labriola is a professor of writing at Stony Brook University in New York, where he is also the Environmental Club's Faculty Advisor. His fiction and essays focus on speculative themes or environmental issues. He is an avid beach cleaner and sustainability advocate, hosting regular cleanup events and lectures. You can most often find him scouring the beaches for trash, treasures, and inspiration for his next story.

VERONICA LAKE—she/her—Poetry
Veronica Lake lives in Wyalup (Fremantle) Western Australia; the place where two winds kiss. She is a Churchill Fellow, awarded in 2010, for the Study of Shakespeare. In 2018, her poem "Twigs and Sand," won first prize in the Mornington Peninsular Poetry Competition. Her first poetry collection, *Dragonfly Wing,* published by Sunline Press, was released in 2019. Her poems have been published in local, national and international journals. She lives by the sea and has need of it every day.

DAVID ANSON LEE—he/him—Poetry
David Anson Lee is a poet, philosopher, and physician based in Texas, originally from the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. His work explores ecology, resilience, overlooked forms of intelligence, and the intersections between the human and nonhuman worlds. His poetry has appeared in *Right Hand Pointing, Unbroken Journal, The Scarred Tree*, and forthcoming in *Lit Shark Magazine*.

CAROLYN MARTIN—she/her—Poetry
Blissfully retired in Clackamas, Oregon, Carolyn Martin is a lover of gardening and snorkeling, feral cats and backyard birds, writing, and photography. Since the only poem she wrote in high school was red-penciled "extremely maudlin," she is amazed she has continued to write. Her poems have appeared in more than 175 journals throughout North America, Australia, and the UK, and her latest collection, It's in the Cards, was just released by Kelsay Books.

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JULIAN MATTHEWS—he/him—Fiction
Julian Matthews is a mixed-race minority poet and writer from Malaysia, published in *Lit Shark, The American Journal of Poetry, Beltway Poetry Quarterly, Lothlorien Poetry Journal, Live Encounters,* and *New Verse News*, among other journals and anthologies. He stumbled upon a creative writing workshop by accident in 2017. That happy accident has turned into a rabid compulsion. He is still extricating himself from "the crash."

BOB MCAFEE—he/him—Poetry
Bob McAfee is a retired software consultant who lives with his wife near Boston. He has written nine books of poetry, mostly on Love, Aging, and the Natural World. For the last several years he has hosted a Wednesday night Zoom poetry workshop. Since 2019, he has had 178 poems selected by 71 different publications. Two poems Nominated for Best of the Net. His website, www.bobmcafee.com, contains links to all his published poetry.

URSULA MCCABE—she/her—Poetry
Ursula McCabe lives in Portland Oregon where the ocean is not too far away. Her poet father, Robert Huff, taught at Western Washington State University till his death in 1993. Ursula's poems can be seen in *Piker Press, Bluebird World, The Ekphrastic Review, Lit Shark Magazine, The Wee Sparrow Poetry Press,* and others.

LAVERN SPENCER MCCARTHY—she/her—Poetry
LaVern Spencer McCarthy's work has appeared in *Writers and Readers Magazine; Home Life Magazine; Cappers; Meadowlark Reader; Agape Review; Bards Against Hunger; Down in The Dirt; The Evening Universe; Fresh Words Magazine*; Wicked Shadows Press; *Midnight Magazine*; Pulp Cult Press; *Stygian Lepus; The Hedge Apple; The Stray Branch; Metasteller. World Of Myth, Otherwise Engaged*, Alien Buddha Press, *Blood Moon Rising* and, many others. She is a life member of Poetry Society of Texas. She is the author of 14 books of short stories, poems and journals.

RITA MCDERMOTT—she/her—Poetry
Rita is an army veteran and retired nurse. She enjoys being

creative on paper, writing short stories or free-verse poetry. Rita has published poems with several anthologies printed by Local Gems Press, and Poetry for Mental Health. She has published poetry with several literary magazines, including The Afterpast Review, The Writers' Journal, and Thorn and Bloom. Her writing has also made appearances online with The Academy of the Heart and Mind, The Literary Yard, and The Storyhouse Weekly Reader. She published a poetry chapbook in Nov 2025, titled "Seasonal Poetry", now on Amazon.com.

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CARRICK MCDONALD—he/him—Poetry
Carrick McDonald is an assistant librarian and writer from Evansville, Indiana.

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THOMAS MIXON—he/him—Poetry
Thomas Mixon (he/him) is a fiction reader for *Short Story, Long*. He has poems and prose in *ONE ART, Epiphany, Lost Balloon*, and elsewhere.

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MIKA NAGASAKI—she/her—Poetry
Mika Nagasaki is a poetry and nature enthusiast whose son went through a major shark obsession that lasted until Kindergarten. She tries to write as much as she can whenever she can after a 10-year writer's block and is currently working on a collection about parenting in the Anthropocene, among other things.

SHILO NIZIOLEK—she/her—Poetry
Shilo Niziolek has written *Fever* and *atrophy* (Querencia Press), *Porcelain Ghosts* forthcoming from Querencia Press, *A Thousand Winters In Me* (Gasher Press), *I Am Not An Erosion: Poems Against Decay* (Ghost City Press), and *Dirt Eaters* (Bottlecap Press). Her work has appeared in *Juked, Honey Literary, West Trade Review, Entropy, Pork Belly Press,* and *Phoebe Journal*, among others. Shilo is a writing instructor at Clackamas Community College, a workshop facilitator for the

Literary Arts, and is the editor and co-founder of the literary magazine, *Scavengers*. Find her on Instagram @shiloniziolek

ALAN NOBLE—he/him—Fiction
Alan Noble lives in Adelaide, located between the Australian Outback and the Great Southern Ocean. He's an engineer, happiest when on or under our oceans, and an occasional writer, (possibly) proving that even engineers have a literary side. He is the founder of the non-profit Australian Ocean Lab, helping our oceans through the use of technology, and a co-founder of The Koala Sanctuary, conserving koalas on Kangaroo Island. His short stories have been published in The Blue Nib, The Writers and Readers Magazine (now All Your Stories) and the MockingOwl Roost. He is a keen sailor and blogs about it often at arribasail.com. Learn more about his non-profits at ausocean.org and koalasanctuary.org.

SANDRA NOEL—she/her—Poetry
Sandra Noel is a poet and lover of words from the island of Jersey, Channel Islands. Her passion for nature and the ocean weaves its way through her work. Sandra loves year-round sea swimming and is often darting out with tow float, dry-robe and Ipad. She has poems in various magazines and anthologies throughout the UK and further afield. Sandra's debut collection, *Into The Under*, was published in July 2024 by Yaffle's Nest, Yaffle Press.

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ABIGAIL OTTLEY—she/her—Poetry
Abigail Ottley writes poetry, short fiction and memoir. A Best of Net and Pushcart nominee, she has been published in more than 300 journals and anthologies. In 2024, she placed second in the International Plaza Prose Poem Competition and won the Wildfire 150 Flash Award for the second year running. In the same year, she placed third in the International Patricia Eschen Poetry Prize and went on to win the Metro Poetry Competition on the theme of Care. In May, 2025, her 100 poem collection, *'Out of Eden',* launched with Yaffle Press. These poems celebrate the strength and resilience of working class women. Abigail's current project also has a

feminist focus but, this time, she foregrounds the women of myth and legend, including the old Celtic saints, and those who occupy the fringes of history. Abigail was born into a tribe of South and East Londoners but now lives in Penzance. You can find her at "Abigail Elizabeth Ottley"on Facebook and Instagram.

MIRANDA PHELPS—she/her—Fiction
Miranda Phelps is a child-and-family psychologist/writer living in Central Maine. Previously a freelance writer, she has an MFA in playwriting from Brandeis University and is now writing short stories, picture books, and a novel. Having grown up in the military, continued traveling and working with a college in Haiti, she is keenly aware of the wider world while rooted in her chosen community. She is devoted to her family, friends, and Buddhist practice.

SHERRY POFF—she/her—Poetry
Sherry Poff lives and writes in and around Ooltewah, Tennessee. Sherry holds an MA in Writing from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and is a member of the Chattanooga Writers' Guild and the Poetry Society of Tennessee. Her stories and poems have appeared in numerous online and print publications including *Artemis, Speckled Trout Review, Pine Mountain Sand and Gravel*, and *Salvation South*.

RIE SHERIDAN ROSE—she/her—Poetry
Rie Sheridan Rose multitasks. A lot. Her short stories appear in numerous anthologies, including *Nightmare Stalkers* and *Dream Walkers: Vols 1 and 2*, and *Killing It Softly*. She has authored twelve novels, six poetry chapbooks, and lyrics for dozens of songs.

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HEND ROUBAIY—she/her—Fiction
Hend Roubaiy is a Swedish-Lebanese writer and psychology student whose work explores identity, emotional experience, and the complexities of coming of age. She has been published in *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, where she wrote about the Beirut explosion which she survived, and in *Poets Choice*. Her writing

engages with human experience through creative nonfiction informed by psychology, and she also publishes articles and self help booklets that she hopes can make a real impact on making others feel understood.

KELLI DIANNE RULE—she/her—Poetry
Kelli Dianne Rule is a poet and author of dark fiction who claims roots in the backwoods of Florida. Recent writings may be found in *Heavy Feather Review, Whale Road Review, BULL, JMWW, Luna Station Quarterly* and *The Avenue Journal*, among others. She is a 2025 Pushcart Prize and Best Microfiction nominee.

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BRENDA SAUNDERS—she/her—Poetry
Brenda is a First Nations writer and performer living in Regional Australia. She holds a Master of Arts degree from the University of Wollongong and has written two poetry chapbooks and three collections, her most recent, 'Inland Sea' (Ginninderra Press 2021). Her poetry and short fiction address current environmental challenges and the natural world in peril. Her work appears in edited anthologies and journals, including *Best Australian Prose Poems 2021* (Melbourne University Press), *Best of Australian Poems 2022* (Australian Poetry Inc), and *Best Australian Science Writing 2021* and *2023* (New South Press).

JOEL SAVISHINSKY—he/him—Poetry
Joel Savishinsky is a retired gerontologist and anthropologist. His books include *The Trail of The Hare: Life and Stress in An Arctic Community* and *Breaking the Watch: The Meanings of Retirement in America*; the latter won the Gerontological Society of America's Kalish Award, its book-of-the-year prize. A Pushcart Prize nominee, and California State Poetry Society, Cirque Journal, LIGHT Magazine and Passager award winner, his poetry, fiction and essays have appeared in *Atlanta Review, Beyond Words, California Quarterly, The Examined Life Journal, Lit Shark, The New York Times, Tiny Moments*, and *Windfall*. The Poetry Box recently published his collection *Our Aching Bones, Our Breaking Hearts: Poems on Aging*. He lives in Seattle, helping to raise five

grandchildren, and considers himself a recovering academic and unrepentant activist.
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ELLEN HIRNING SCHMIDT—she/her—Poetry
After retiring from a crisis center in 2006, Ellen Hirning Schmidt designed and teaches "Writing through the Rough Spots." More than 100 students from across the U.S & 15 countries and at Cornell University, have participated as well as summer writing circles on Star Island, NH. She received the Helen Kay Poetry Chapbook Prize, a Pushcart nomination, a Connecticut Poetry Society Award, and was named a finalist in the 2023 American Writers Review. After submitting her very first poem when she turned 70, her second full-length poetry collection, *Oh Say Did You Know / This Much I Know*, was just published by Evening Street Press. A mother and grandmother, she lives in Ithaca, NY with her husband.

NOLO SEGUNDO—he/him—Poetry
Nolo Segundo, pen name of L.j.Carber, 76, became a late blooming poet in his 8th decade in over 180 literary journals and anthologies in America, England, Canada, Romania, Scotland. China, Sweden, Australia, Portugal, India, Australia, Turkey, Hungary, Israel, and Italy. The trade publisher Cyberwit.net has released 3 poetry books: *The Enormity of Existence* [2020]; *Of Ether and Earth* [2021]; and *Soul Songs* [2022]. These titles and much of his work reflect the awareness he's had for over 50 years since having an NDE whilst almost drowning in a Vermont river: that he has--IS--a consciousness that predates birth and survives death, what poets for millennia have called a soul.

STEPHANIE SELLARS—she/her—Poetry
Stephanie Sellars is a writer, filmmaker, and singer. Her poetry chapbook *Missing the Missing* was recently published by Dancing Girl Press. Her poems and essays have appeared in *Hobart, Chronogram, The Queer Love Project, Unleash Lit, Black Horse Review, Defenestration*, and on her Substack *No Illusions*. She holds MFAs from Columbia University in film and Bennington

Writing Seminars, and is the recipient of fellowships / residencies from Yaddo, Vermont Studio Center, and International Literary Seminars. She lives in New York City and the Hudson Valley.

SETH SHERMAN—he/him—Fiction
Born in New Orleans and raised in Louisiana and New York, Seth Sherman gave up simultaneous careers in medicine and aviation to pursue the alternative lifestyle of writing while sailing alone around the world. He is currently living aboard his yacht, *Serendipity*, now *Grenada*, in the Caribbean. He self-published one novel, *The Cerebranauts*, and has had three short stories published in *Promised Protagonists, Academy Heart,* and *Scars*.

MEREDITH STEPHENS—she/her—Fiction
Meredith Stephens is an applied linguist from South Australia. Her recent work has appeared in *Syncopation Literary Journal, The Muse, Borderless, MockingOwl Roost blog, The Font - A Literary Journal for Language Teachers, The Writers' Journal*, and *The Human Writer*. In 2024, her story, "Safari," was featured as the Editor's Choice for the June edition of *All Your Stories*.

MARK STROHSCHEIN—he/him—Poetry
Mark Strohschein is a Washington state poet who resides on Whidbey Island. His poems have appeared in *Flint Hills Review, Bryant Literary Review, Barren Magazine, Lips Poetry Magazine, The Milk House, The Big Windows Review* and in anthologies. Forthcoming work will appear in the *Bards West Poetry Anthology*, *County Lines*, and *Pictura Journal*. His chapbook, *Cries Across Borders*, a semifinalist for Button Poetry's 2023 chapbook contest, will be published by Main Street Rag in the spring of 2025. His chapbook-length collection, *Sanctuary of Voices*, will be published by Ravenna Press in late 2025 as part of its Triple Series.

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MARIANNE TEFFT—she/her—Poetry
Marianne Tefft is a poet and voice-over reader who daylights as a Montessori teacher in Toronto, Canada. Her poems and short

stories appear online, in print and on air in North America, Europe, Asia and the Caribbean. Her work has been nominated for Best of the Net and the Pushcart Prize. She is the author of *Full Moon Fire: Spoken Songs of Love* and *Moonchild: Poems for Moon Lovers*.

FENDY S. TULODO—he/him—Fiction
Fendy S. Tulodo lives in Malang, Indonesia. He is an ordinary father and husband who calls himself a creative guy. By day, he sells motorbikes. By night, he writes whatever is on his mind, and often makes music under the name Nep Kid. His aim's simple: blend sharp thinking with raw feeling, mostly to explore time, memory, and how people link up in strange ways. That's why his work lands, whether it's writing or songs.
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WES VIOLA—he/him—Poetry
Wes Viola is an Elder Bard of Glastonbury, England and a past winner for poetry at the Wells Festival of Literature. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Obsessed with Pipework, Eunoia Review*, and two *Broken Sleep* anthologies. He holds an MA with Distinction from Goldsmiths and works in public libraries in London.

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DEBBIE WALKER-LASS—she/her—Poetry
Debbie Walker-Lass, (she/her) is a poet, collage artist, and essay writer living in Decatur, Georgia. Her work has appeared in *Collaborature, The Rockvale Review, Green Ink Poetry, The Ekphrastic Journal, Punk Monk, Poetry Quarterly, The Light Ekphrastic* and *The Niagara Poetry Journal*, among others. Debbie was proud to be nominated by TER for the "Best Small Fictions, 2024" anthology. She also enjoys collaborating with Jahzara Wood, together they write poetry as "The 1965." Debbie is a nature lover and avid Tybee Island beachcomber.

ODI WELTER—they/she/he—Poetry
Odi Welter is a queer, neurodivergent author raised in Minnesota and living in Milwaukee. Their first publication was an obituary–which should make him way more emo than she is–and since then, their creative work has been published in many journals and anthologies, most recently *The Shallot* by The Layered Onion, *The Bestiary* and *Us: a New Book of Beasts* by Penumbra, and *Volume 17: Issue 1* by The B'K, as well as working as an editor for Zoetic Press.

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ELIZABETH WING—she/her—Poetry
Elizabeth Wing is a writer and gardener in Portland, Oregon. Her recent work has appeared in the *Washington Square Review, Poetry Currency, Mudroom, ALOCASIA*, and other venues. Wing wrote the work that appears in this issue while through hiking the length of the Oregon Coast.

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DIANA WOODCOCK—she/her—Poetry
Diana Woodcock has authored seven chapbooks and six poetry collections, most recently *Heaven Underfoot* (winner of the 2022 Codhill Press Pauline Uchmanowicz Poetry Award), *Holy Sparks* (2020 Paraclete Press Poetry Award finalist) and *Facing Aridity* (2020 Prism Prize for Climate Literature finalist). A three-time Pushcart Prize nominee and Best of the Net nominee, she received the 2011 Vernice Quebodeaux Pathways Poetry Prize for Women for her debut collection, *Swaying on the Elephant's Shoulders*. Currently teaching at VCUarts Qatar, she holds a PhD in Creative Writing from Lancaster University, where she researched poetry's role in the search for an environmental ethic.

ROBERT WYNNE—he/him—Poetry
Robert Wynne earned his MFA in Creative Writing from Antioch University. A former co-editor of *Cider Press Review*, he has

published 6 chapbooks, and 3 full-length books of poetry, the most recent being "Self-Portrait as Odysseus," published in 2011 by Tebot Bach Press. He's won numerous prizes, and his poetry has appeared in magazines and anthologies throughout North America. Having retired from the IT world in 2023, he lives in Burleson, TX with his wife, Brenda, and their aging German Shepherd Charlie.

JO ANN ZIMMERMAN—she/her—Prose

Jo Ann Zimmerman is a lifelong educator, most recently on the faculty of the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, where she lives with her amazing husband and indifferent cat. She has written for *Cleaver Magazine, The Adroit Journal, Rain Taxi Review*, and other publications.

MCKENZIE LYNN TOZAN—she/her—Poetry

McKenzie Lynn Tozan lives and writes on the coast of Croatia. She's the Editor-in-Chief of *Lit Shark Magazine*, the front-end copyeditor of Bridwell Press's Project Poetica, editor-at-large at Willows & Wood Publishing, and a volunteer poetry editor at *MUZZLE Magazine*. Her book reviews and essays have appeared in *The Rumpus, Green Mountains Review, IndieReader, POPSUGAR (PS), Motherly, The Lifestyle Collective*, and other places. Her poetry has appeared in *Whale Road Review* (who nominated her poem, "Shopping for T-Rex," for Best of the Net), *Rogue Agent, New Mexico Review*, and others. She's currently working on a poetry collection, a novel, and a book of short stories of her own. When she isn't at her desk, she's walking the coast, dreaming of swimming with sharks, or making plans to start a pumpkin patch.

SUBMIT TO LIT SHARK OR WRITE FOR US!

Thank you again to everyone who submitted to this issue of *Lit Shark Magazine*. It was honestly such a lovely process, and I'm so grateful for your support and continuing this journey.

If you're interested in submitting your work for consideration at *Lit Shark Magazine*, you'll find the most up to date information on our website: www.litshark.com.

In addition to our general and themed issues of *Lit Shark Magazine*, we also have our paid, monthly **Poem of the Month Contest** and weekly opportunities to submit creative responses to the **writing prompts** we share on our website.

We're also always interested in hearing from potential book reviewers, conservation/sustainability writers, marine biology/ecology writers, and anyone with interesting stories about marine life, whale sightings, swimming with sharks—anything on your heart/in your imagination!

Happy Writing and Happy Submitting, readers, writers, and shark fans—and thanks again for reading Issue 10!

FIN.

(UNTIL ISSUE #13...)

POETRY & PROSE

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