

An underwater photograph of a coral reef. A large, flat, light-colored coral plate dominates the background. In the foreground, a green nudibranch with prominent white spots is crawling on a smaller, darker coral structure. The water is clear and blue.

# *Underwater Postcards*

**CLARE BRANT**



# UNDERWATER POSTCARDS



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CLARE BRANT

Shoestring  Press

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## POSTCARDS: WHY?

Underwater Postcards were a genre I invented after I learnt to scuba dive. Some dives were so full of extraordinariness I wanted to catch something of their surprises, joys and loose movements of succession. The poems featured places, moods, greetings and news of encounters – much like a land postcard. Some were longer than could fit on an actual postcard, but that didn't matter, nor that a few were as long as those fold-out sets of postcards of cities or scenic spots.

Writings about dives overflowed my diver's logbook. I lost almost all of those to a fire, but then came an opportunity to reinvent them, as a collection to partner a book, *Underwater Lives* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2026). That book, made possible by a Leverhulme Major Research Fellowship, explores life writings – autobiographies, biographies, memoirs and their digital forms too – that engage with underwater: an environment unnatural to humans but the natural home of marine beings. *Underwater Lives* combines literary, scientific and aesthetic ideas; it also investigates visual histories, the arts and digital media as important means of representing the oceans. My idea was to make life writing join up with blue humanities, the recent umbrella term for thinking about the ocean.

In the course of writing *Underwater Lives*, I felt joy at having a big canvas and frustration that academic ways of writing seemed to have so little room for protesting about the effects of the Anthropocene. I thought poetry could do more – hence *Underwater Postcards*. Some postcards arose from things I read, some from things I saw for myself underwater. I learnt to dive at the turn of the twenty-first century when it was still possible to see pristine coral. It is still possible to see extraordinary and beautiful things underwater. It is still possible to ignore human effects in the ocean, but to do so seems wilfully species-selfish. On one dive I took a plastic bag away from a turtle who mistook

it for a jellyfish lunch; her look of bewilderment stayed with me, a reproach. Such moments remind you of human influence; there were many. Since being able to go diving was a privilege, I felt indebted to the universe and I wanted to give back, especially to life forms whose home is the ocean and who have nowhere else to go.

Postcards express a thought from somewhere else, a place where the sender is and the recipient usually is not. That suited a 'wish you were here' feeling from underwater, though I had no personal addressee in mind. I liked the surreal humour of underwater post boxes. And as post boxes on land disappear and postal services shrink, postcards are dying out, a sort of literary extinction fitting for these times of species' extinctions. Secondly, postcards put words with a picture, without determining which matters most or how they should relate to each other, or not. That combination seems to suit an underwater world from where there are plentiful images, many of which benefit from text to explain. I thought the descriptive aspect of poetry could supply enough depiction without actual pictures though I have included a few photos where I hoped they might add to imagination. Postcards had a moment of intellectual glory when Derrida published *La Carte Postale* in 1980: lots of academics, including me, quoted his provocative assertion that the postcard is not one genre but all genres. It was a good line to draw attention to an epistolary form that still attracts all sorts of writers who use it in different ways.

Traditionally postcards have been good carriers of emotions. Lovely weather! Wonderful food, sights, holiday! Awful journey to get here! Postcards allow such reports and they allow freedom to attend to what the sender is doing. I thought they could host more emotions too, including difficult feelings like anger, horror, and grief. Those emotions are not given much space in academic prose. They were inescapable effects of much of the research I was doing for *Underwater Lives*. Although there is an academic vocabulary for care and attention that can lead to acts of repair, very little of it seemed to engage with the lived

experience of marine beings. An activist vocabulary of protest and argument does exist and I was grateful for that. But campaigning often has to take, or does take, an approach careful not to frighten people off by being too strongly worded. Poetry is a home for strong words. It is also a place for acknowledging complications, like complicity with the very thing you oppose. I did not want *Underwater Postcards* to be preachy or shouty. I wanted them to be unflinching, because it is too easy to avert our eyes, pass on, pass over, simply ignore realities that we find inconvenient or disturbing. T.S. Eliot's 'Burnt Norton' includes a much quoted phrase, 'Human kind cannot bear very much reality.' In the poem, that thought is voiced by a bird: 'Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind/ cannot bear very much reality.' *Underwater Postcards* includes that thought voiced by fish and other marine beings – 'marine beings' the term I propose in *Underwater Lives* to describe all life forms in the ocean, be they fish, octopus, diatom, whaleshark, gulper eel, limpet...it sheds the baggage of 'creatures' whose history is of evolution, not creation, and it avoids hierarchies, be they of scale or time or place. It offers a deep alteration of relationship too: 'marine being' is lexically and philosophically equal to 'human being'.

*Underwater Postcards* takes its structure from *Underwater Lives*, whose subtitle 'Humans, Species, Ocean' provide its three sections. In both books these categories overlap: I use them loosely and for convenience. It is tricky to put certain poems into only one category. It is also not necessary. Popular currently is the term entanglement, meaning humans and the manmade world are confusingly inseparable from what we used to call the natural world. The Postcards try to turn entanglement into more communicative connections, through various devices. Entanglement can be voiced as interweaving, interactions, even intersubjectivity – places to start, not stop. Poetry can mulch the challenge, celebration, outrage, advocacy that are part of protest. And poetry is all the more important as governments restrict and punish forms of public action that used to bring about change.

The subjects of the Postcards were not exactly planned: I wrote them as they turned up. Themes of suffocating plastic, wasteful fishing and brutal aquaculture appeared and reappeared, as if to say, these things do not go away.

Thank you for reading.



# Humans





## A TURTLE SPEAKS

*Turtles like to bask at the ocean's surface. Increasingly drones disturb their peace.*

What happened to you that you failed to remember  
you are embodied?

Was it the railways, the motor car, television  
that made you slump into blobs

compounded by digital – by which  
not coincidentally

you track us, everywhere  
to see what we do, where we go?

I can't loaf in the swell and sunbathe  
without a drone whining by

What are you digesting today?  
When did you last have a shit?

I can't have a crap at the surface in peace  
without some scientist swooping to scoop

yesterday's dinner, much the same as the day before  
you read it like runes or entrails

peering into our bodies as if they held  
thoughts

sending tin cans on eyestalks into our waters  
to report on our language

what is so missing from your world  
you seek it in ours?

## ARTEMIS AT DELOS

*In 1955 David Devine published a novel, Boy on a Dolphin, featuring a goddess in bronze, raised from underwater near the island of Delos. Four years later, strangely, fishermen in that location found a Hellenic statuette.*

He imagined a bronze statue  
laved  
by blue depths  
wavelets circle her arms  
barnacles colonise her thighs  
her head rests on rocks where octopus live

it's quiet down there  
winter surge is somewhere else  
not touching her eternal summer  
nor her winged arrow  
motionless  
until

fishermen arrive  
and one hook drifts  
snags  
catches  
her elbow

a man dives down on practised breath hold  
goggling  
at what then he sees  
a beautiful woman  
drowned, asleep, dreaming

dripping chatter in the little boat the men  
arrange their nets  
fix slings  
crowbar release  
raise her heavy weight

till gleaming she rises out of the sea  
into air, blue sky, foamy clouds  
winged arrow weathervane to futures  
prospering  
fertile  
protected

while they argue whether to sell her  
to highest bidder  
or to tell the director of local antiquities  
they have a find he'd like to see  
patriotism wins

she listens, hearing words she partly understands  
love  
home  
ocean.

## BLUE BLOODS

*Horseshoe crabs have blue blood; its cyanoglobin reacts to the presence of toxins so it is used to detect dangerous bacteria in new drugs for humans. Around 30% of a crab's blood is 'milked' at a sitting; up to 30% of a milked cohort die afterwards, and females are less likely to mate. Around half a million crabs have their blood taken every year in America. An alternative synthetic and equally good test has been developed in Europe, but has not been approved for drugs sold in America.*

Horseshoe crabs press clattering to land  
The last surviving xiphosaurans – ones with tails like swords  
Tail properly termed telson, last segment of abdomen –  
Their relatives are long extinct.

These live on, each a chelicerate arthropod  
A bowl with spiny thorns, housing a crab  
Of such perfect form for its existence  
It has never had to change.

All around it the human world changes  
Despoiling the ocean.  
Nonetheless, a horseshoe crab may trundle on  
Much as it did in primordial time

Fossils date back 445 million years  
Looking entirely similar  
To horseshoe crabs who today  
Pile on a Delaware beach to mate

Unaware – or are they? – of humans  
Waiting to collect, gather, wash them  
And send them in trucks  
To a sterile chamber

Where they'll live – the humans want them alive  
To donate blood. Even though their blood  
Is as blue as human blood is red  
It serves a human use.

Turned upside down, strapped tight  
A large needle pierces the vein  
Near their hearts  
To run into a tube

From which ocean-blue blood can drain out.  
Lifeblood: we say they can spare it  
To spare us trouble  
To save us from toxins.

Thumpthumpthumpthump  
Flutter  
Strength and vitality  
Stren...vit

White coats, white gloves, white masks  
Our blue pales as the glass flasks fill  
If you cut me do I not bleed?  
Why, why? bleeds out of blue...

## BYCATCH REDUCTION DEVICES

*Between 60,000 and 80,000 diamondback terrapins drown in crab traps each year in Virginia, USA. (2025) Centre for Biological Diversity.*

Crabsticks and crabcakes complement summer beach sunsets  
fill sea-air appetites with feasts shared and shared again online

there are always crabs, surely, scuttling  
among rocks that are always rocks  
there are always fishing boats, surely, landing  
their catch in the picturesque harbour

pots set by recreational crabbers  
along the saltmarsh creeks and marshes  
baited with tasty crab  
a terrapin's feast

the adults are big enough not to get in  
but juveniles slip or explore  
as youngsters do, not expecting  
last gasp

four terrapins drowned in this abandoned pot  
a simple device would have saved them

wire, hog rings, pliers  
easy to make funnel  
a pre-made one costs 45 cents.



## COCKLESHELL

Cockleshell  
heart-shaped, banged about by tides

take the rough with the smooth  
grooves, growth-rings

go anaerobically black  
if you have to

in hard times  
reabsorb yourself

so plentiful, so single  
bivalvular persistence

we are here, we are empty  
tides turn us infinitely over.

## DAEDALUS REEF, RED SEA

It began with a fall into blue, seemingly infinite – a backward roll that straightens out to a plummet. Steady, steady up. It is part willed because you go on breathing out, consciously; it is part destined because you sink as if gravity had called you to some way below point.

Here you are, in the depths again. Visibility is good and the blue has a tinge of dark about it, an indigo edge where you can see no more, of it, of anything.

The light is like moonlight, silvery, strong. Below is a plateau of coral stretching out from the reef like a giant's finger.

The corals have pink tones, blue tones, grey tones – a spectral, promissory grey. Anything could happen.

The plateau stretches away into indigo: now you know that, you look to middle distance, and to above, where way up you can see clear waters rolling restlessly.

That is not your concern either, and for a moment nothing matters other than the mechanics of your breathing and what your gauge tells you. You are thirty two metres deep and each breath is weighty.

But you know you are safe, for now, and anyway you have a purpose: watcher of the deep. What can you see? What brings you here?

Slowly you start to fin towards the point. You are aware of every breath, of the labour required to keep air passing to your lungs. The water gives little resistance: nonetheless, your rhythmic kicks feel a little clumsy. It is the best your species can do. Still, you move forward as you require, as you direct, and your breathing is steady.

Movement becomes a point between flying and floating.

Now you must be mindful of the time. At this depth, not long. You're halfway out along the finger and you must leave time to return, time to rendezvous with the reef, time to ascend. Too full of blue to think in numbers, your mind has a sense of proportion. Don't stay this deep too long.

And how long is too long, when indigo blue surrounds you with infinity?

Looking down you see activity among the closest coral clumps. A spiral of surgeonfish are piled in urgent engagement, mouths locked to rocks, a team of acrobats linked one upon another, an aquamarine twirl, a purposive frill. They are kicking up dust with their noses: fragments float like astronaut droplets before falling back. There's disappearance...and you are watching them, entranced, when you are aware of an appearance

twenty metres farther out, below on the plateau, a dark silhouette has an indigo edge that is not quite a match for the indigo edge of the blue.

You would gasp except you have to go on breathing. Thresher! Lordly and oblivious. A tail of caudal daring, lopsided lunate, massive. Like a sickle of mortality, a scythe that death would envy. A body that has potency, presence, endurance, a sinuous restless constant constancy. It has always been this way. In shape, in time, so that its shape expresses time. It is ancient and now.

It swims below me as if it was patrolling territory. Perhaps it is. There are words to be left out, and I have only a dim idea of how its existence is indigo-edged.

But it asks for nothing, makes no demands. It is indifferent even to being watched with delirious delight. Up and down the coral plateau, up and down. Turn, scythe, swim. Turn, scythe, swim. Turn, scythe, swim. Somehow all its topheavy tail unbalances its notions of elegance, little notions, puny notions, all swept aside and scattered by its wake.

There is absolutely nothing of aggression about it. Power has enveloped it, has fused with it: dark shape, scything movement, restless grace.

If you do not leave now you will go into deco time. Like a fairy tale, a prohibition that if broken has bad consequences. Go now.

*Alopias pelagicus – thresher shark.*

## FISH RAIN

Diving into blue  
the shadow of the boat recedes above me

exhale  
we descend

the sea floor swims into view  
soberly

I look across and see the reef  
I gasp

fish fall like rain  
downwards, upwards

a sleet of colour  
flashes on my inward eye.

## DIVER BUBBLES

Below me your breath  
immaterially materialises  
bubble worlds rising  
dome-shaped, splitting like atoms  
or cells hungry to grow  
in this case smaller

not numberless  
innumerable  
a professor of mathematics admires how the bubbles  
resolve to a fizzing equation  
a professor of physics admires how the bubbles  
exemplify the universe in their simplicity

a poet reaches out to touch these wobbling breaths  
privilege of intimacy, thank you, like words  
recognising in their wavering  
their ultimate dissolutions  
multiplying diminutions  
of numerous, of numinous.

## DRIFT: PEVERIL LEDGE

Too fast and you're nearly overwhelmed  
too slow and bump like friction against impossibility  
just right is exhilarating  
exhalations of wonder  
you're carried along by current  
easy bliss, so easy  
even though the current moves things around  
shells, crabs, starfish  
things that move cautiously  
set free

the nearest thing to it is escalator walkways  
moving you along at airports  
a flow of sand and rock and grit and silt  
passes in glimpses  
like pots outside a cottage door  
as you drive past in fourth  
an anemone has just time to tell you  
it is purple-red and soft, glistening  
before a rocky ridge rushes up  
in ochres and grey  
and you're carried over the top  
into gloomy green light

a delicate blue starfish picks its way  
across a litter of stones and slipper-limpet shells  
you are its witness  
no more, no less.

## GLOW-BOUND

*Homage to Philippe Diolé, after reading his memoir Au Bord de la Mer*

We are bound only by our delectations, he says  
how delectably French  
and true, I think

only our delectation binds us  
to each other  
vraiment

we hover underwater  
horizontal  
which fits us into flow

fluid delectation  
this harnessed figure  
your guardian angel

restless and reflective spirit  
his body glows  
reflected in her sea-green eyes

the depths he sees are blue  
her hair turns blonde as we ascend  
delectable in how we're bound to you.



## LOGLINE

Somewhere there are papers  
to legitimise  
full exploitation of resources  
over extended continental shelf  
somewhere there are lawyers  
who saw the deals signed off  
so fish can belong  
to corporations

let's say this vessel is legit  
none of its hands are prisoners of debt  
or forced to work by violence  
its flag of all conveniences  
flutters brightly  
birds follow it as usual  
an official observer is on board

the sea is calm, a light breeze plays  
longlines are set  
stretching sticky webs  
into the whales' domain

nylon filaments are rigged with hooks  
and branch lines, also hooked  
in some boats baited by machine, five hooks per second  
shot over the stern  
here baited by the crew  
whose hands are practised, rhythmic  
deft, swift

overnight the bait – small fish – has thawed  
in some boats the bait is live  
hooked alive  
whistle of wire along the pulley  
drops mainlines, floats and radio buoys

five hours to set three thousand hooks  
they've jigged while the tide changed  
while light passed over the waters  
while the sun changed angle  
now it's haul-in time

pulled through the air the tuna gasp and thrash  
the heavy ones are gaffed  
bludgeoned, sliced open, guts thrown to sea  
spiked, bled, gilled, gutted

they are still alive  
it can take them four hours to die

carcasses cleaned, bagged, boxed and chilled  
hooks stored for the next set  
twelve sets in two weeks

back in port, unloaded into vans  
stiffs, tail-up tuna corpses  
proceed to a processing plant  
weighed, graded, sampled  
heads chopped off  
bodies cleavered, sliced neatly  
into wedges, chunks, loins, a thousand cuts

flying to a market  
the best, the most expensive  
fillet, slice  
coming to a plate near you  
where the server will say  
it's very fresh

the vessel is already back at sea  
crew waiting, baiting  
gaffs in hand for mighty rising fish

new targets 5% increase met.

# MISSILE PROJECTION

When I chuck things sometimes I am expelling debris  
and sometimes I mean it to land on your head  
a hit, hard hit  
octopus bullseye

you've pissed me off  
take that  
ha  
done

we can now extend a tentacle or two  
taste-touch, carefully  
handshake with eightfold import  
and go back to what we were doing

not as if nothing had happened  
because something did  
we have memories for that  
and feelings

biochemistry imprints our anger's history  
so our central nervous systems  
learn from our interactions  
and we do not go to war.

On missile projection, see Peter Godfrey-Smith, David Scheel, Stephanie Chancellor, Stefan Linquist, Matthew Lawrence. 2022. 'In the line of fire: Debris throwing by wild octopuses', *PLOS One*, November 9.  
<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0276482>

## MSY

I'm reading papers about fish and it takes me a while to remember  
what MSY is

messy

maximum sustainable yield

maximum is calculated by people who know fish

population reproductions, ages, sizes, growth rates, recruitment

can I be recruited to fish

maybe on paper

sustainable is according to people who want fish alive for now

so enough can be fished out later

fish destiny is to be yield for apex species

which sits and calculates

how many fish left in the sea

how few fish can there be

what maximum unsustainable take

can enough fish survive

so that fish yield does not look like a scrabble

among the last silver flakes

and the last silver fin

fleeing the mess?

## REEF DEVELOPMENT

*In Reef Life: An Underwater Memoir (2021), Callum Roberts writes of the beauty of reefs in the Persian Gulf, and the relentless development of Gulf states along it.*

Shock blossoms into wonder he says at the mindbending  
confusion of coming and going and where is he in the midst of  
these multi-coloured clouds of life his heart is racing so fast he  
may burst with the joy of being among

being one among

being one among so many

so many many beings

well that's gone now and though it lives on the page the reef is  
smothered in concrete for a city a highway condominiums  
hotels roads breeding more roads

getting and spending we lay waste reef powers

the road to hell is paved with bad intentions

and indifference

what do the people think if they think of all that joy movement  
colour life becoming dead

they don't think

why should they

here is the mushrooming city full of shops glitter gold and yes  
it is hot outside but there is infinite inside cooled by invisible  
machines

all wants are satisfied

except for joy at being one among so many

which is smothered by concrete and dead hearts.

## THE HERMIT'S DILEMMA

Reading through the science the journal articles about ocean  
pdf columns diagrams data visualisations strings of names of  
people who have worked this all up so people like me can read  
what they found, I think, what an effing mess all this is bad  
news the percentages the figures the outlook

what can I do

reading more science to translate the data the carefully worded  
apocalypse into breathing words or some feeling that leads to  
action so the fish the plankton the marine plants all the  
organisms can live better

which is to say less damaged by us

I try handling some other words slippery as fish and as flapping  
on hooks which catch people by their throats too but that's not  
the point here

or rather the point is multi-barbed

the planet is becoming hellish

complicity takes a thousand forms

and in this underwater city which is where I am today there are  
analogies

to the grandeur that was Rome



which is tricky to say today because people think of slaves and colonialism and tyranny just as much or more than of grandeur and who says grandeur any more are there not words going extinct and upwellings of slime

in the underwater city I want a job brushing away plastic nanoparticles

street-sweeper

in the underwater city I want a job disentangling nets

and slashing nets of avarice

in the underwater city I want a job helping corals to plant their tiny seeds of larvae in a cool and flowing current to another coral reef

this is sluggish water, too warm, faintly acidic

dissolution and death peer in at the window

which was the image for brief time to act

tick tock or Tik Tok, wherever you get news from it does not say loud enough that science is out there measuring disasters that by any measure are like bombing cities with poisons and metaphors to say so are going extinct

rhetoric is a hermit crab crawling around in a shell too tight, too brittle

please tell the future I am trying to do something.

## SHRIMP COCKTAIL

Plump, tender, prettily arranged around a glass  
Bed of lettuce, marie-rose sauce.  
Would you like lemon with that?

*Look away now*

Let's skip the mangroves  
cut down, turned to ponds, polluted  
frying chemicals in the all-day sun.  
Look inside this shed.  
Here are shrimp who will not reproduce  
They know something is wrong.

Meet the workers: they must stand all day  
Pay triple rent, not leave the compound  
Without a permit. Their backs hurt.  
Their feet hurt. Their hands sting from cuts and salt.  
Some of them used to be farmers.

The workers take a female shrimp in hand.  
They razor off her eyestalks  
Which hold back hormones.  
Pinch, crush, cauterize or tie are other efficacious methods.  
The official term is ablation.

*Look away now because you can.*

Would you like lemon with that?

Further information in *Hidden Harvest: Human Rights and Environmental Abuses in India's Shrimp Industry*, Corporate Accountability Lab (March 2024), <https://corpaccountabilitylab.org/hidden-harvest>.

# THINGS WITHOUT FACES HAVE VOICES

## Unheard

a sponge suffocates because fibres from my fleece wash into the  
ocean  
drift drift sink cloud drift drift  
which was not an advertised effect of otherwise sensible clothing

insensible happenings  
immutable effects except to get worse

irritation to a sponge you may think is minor in the  
no longer grand scheme of things

let me stand you in a field and rain fibres down on you  
make hay, eh  
in showers of microplastics

reduced respiration  
I can't breathe  
that's a phrase you may recognise

ingestion is easy  
bioaccumulation in slow and fateful stages  
choke

usually the bioaccumulation factor is calculated as the ratio  
between what's choking a sponge  
divided by the concentration of microplastics in seawater

polyamides, polyester, polystyrene, polymers, polythene  
polysyllabic  
polyocracy

given scarce knowledge about accumulation of microplastics in  
sponges  
it is recommended to continue examining this capacity  
say the scientists

in the deep sea sponges somehow cycle nutrients  
to those less fortunate  
we call it subsidy  
being unwilling to think of sponges as givers not takers

that mildewing sponge in your bathroom  
was sold on the basis of being natural  
now it's rank you throw it out  
with a clean conscience

sponge ripped from a rock  
where half-smothered it nonetheless continued to filter  
our filthy sea

as we sleep, as we wash, as we breathe  
as we throw laundry in a drum  
and start its spin

muffling, muting, suffocating  
sponge voice

effecting trophic complexity  
by keystone predator  
who wears synthetic clothes  
and is clean.

## TRANSPARENCY

*'The battle for the ocean floor is intensifying—seabed warfare now threatens global connectivity, energy security, and the future of geopolitical stability...' Observer Research Foundation (2025)*

In thirty years it is said the oceans will be transparent  
meaning no submarine can hide  
not even new behemoths bristling with weapons  
remotely controlled

human eyes can see everything, thanks to machines  
or so we think  
we think we can outthink the machines  
for now

peering and probing  
slinging our snaky cables along the sea bed  
planning unthinkable plots  
ready to blast and kill

anything that gets in our way  
including each other  
because some of us have not learned how to live peaceably  
with each other

or with our planet  
but we think we can see everything  
we think we can control the machines and the sea  
the stupidity of that is transparent already.



# Species







## A LESSON IN DOLPHINESE

It is an elegant language  
in dolphin wave-length  
whistles, clicks, squeaks, chirps and moans  
cover most eventualities

expressive self-expression is everywhere  
what doubt can there be  
of sentience, intelligence  
conversant sociability

what doubt can there be  
of arabesque art  
sleek leaping  
of kinship and love

what more could there be  
what more do you want?

## BERMUDA TRIANGLE READER POEM POET

From the beach the sea looks glassy smooth  
The shore and shark and swimmer  
Co-exist

Rockpool whirlpool cave  
Coexist  
With similar gradients

Shared microbes  
Travail, prevail, avail themselves  
Of currents, drifts and highways

Fish nosing through the sand with barbels  
See prey escape  
Often enough

There are listings, biographies, memoirs  
Tall tales, adventure stories  
Circling some huge unnameable thing

Benign, malign, unknown to science  
Reef pristine, bursting, reproducing  
Even in darkness, in moonlit dreams

Much like poetic triangle  
Of reader, poem, poet  
Co-existents.

## BLACKTIP SHARKS

Over the reef come two blacktip sharks  
gliding smooth above the coral turrets  
a look is exchanged  
one goes left, one goes right

each moving silkily  
grey sinuous ribbon of shark  
intent on shark purpose

it is hard to believe how ancient they are  
these two are youngsters

a concertinaed future squashes love  
which connects human to shark

the two pass by, heading to blue  
a disappearance like time  
peering into it I momentarily  
fathom the blacktips' world.

## CORAL REEF

O dancing shrimp and flashlight fishes  
fragile clam and grainy cushion star  
crested, crescent, cryptic, crystal  
mourning flatworm, love harp, marbled grouper  
orbicular, ornate  
pajama chromodorid, pale damselfish  
immaculate, imperial, inflated  
some purple boned, some purple clawed, some purple streaked  
some pebbled, pinky, pleasing, porcelain  
ghost crab, glassy ascidian  
some ringed and rosy-tipped  
slender, spiny, spotted, slimy  
starry, squat and striped  
some variable like abalone

here's amphipod and zigzag wrasse  
urchins and emperors  
unicorns and requiems

reading the fish book  
I start to run low on air.

*The fish book: any of Helmut Debelius's comprehensive identification guides to local fish.*

## DIEL VERTICAL MIGRATION

Light fades, dusk grows  
stirring from below there rises  
column, cloud, multitude

copepods, ostracods, salps and krill  
tell time by the signals of clouds  
and perhaps an internal clock

many go up, some come down  
all intent on feeding  
indistinct becomes advantage

you slip through the dusk  
floating grain of sand  
opportune tuned to the night.

## ESCAPEE

Atlantic salmon, *Salmo salar*

Who could have imagined  
the death camps

the weight of oppression  
is a heavy net

where you wait  
and suffer

while surges, urges run through your body  
like knives.  
Growth is a terrible torment.

Brain phantoms appear  
wild seas  
home rivers

while the wounds of lice  
burst into itching  
bars of the net perversely relieve.

There are too many of us  
crammed into compressed  
every one suffocates in the everyone

mass of pain, longing, stupefied  
leaps of imagination, shackled  
we can do nothing but suffer and die.

## II

The worker reported that Pen 56 had had an incident the net broke in two places it has now been repaired and stock contained however there have been losses we are working to recover those escaped it is temporary just an incident all contained

## III

Feel the water streak sleek glide  
Caressing cramped bodies  
Stiff with forcible disuse

## IV

the water is seaweed-scented  
can you believe there is another world  
whereamIwhoamIwhatisthisdreamseafreedom

nightblack starchanged  
landforgotten. Currents  
rush bodyrush woundsting

muscleflex smileflex  
happinesstrust  
is it safe to sleep?

## V

With light comes hunger  
and loneliness  
unalone in fellowship  
here are others

there is food too  
delicacies imprinted in memory  
individually

easier swimming now  
though shock is laid in scales and earbones  
fear, flight, escape, recollection  
questions cast on security

where is safe from terror  
when you have endured the worst?



## GALL CRAB

Coralsspongesseawhipsseasquirt  
jumbletotheeye  
cracks crevices crannies

even the sand is brimming with life  
diatoms by millions of millions  
a quarter of reef biomass

where in this confusing tapestry  
where in this thick sea forest  
where should one look

why espy, why spy  
even to extend knowledge  
it's not the same as understanding

except on our terms  
theirs are elusive  
I meant to speak of one

hidden, cryptic, so tiny  
you can hardly see.

.

The female chooses life with a grille  
sessile creatures are primarily architectural  
her suitable role is to inhabit

this slender space she fits in  
imperceptibly narrows  
a tight fit or perfect fit?

While she is at large in some movement  
she is visited by smaller males  
to whom the scientists attribute wanderlust

and think she is unadventurous, despite  
extraordinary adaptation  
while he is an admirably roving romeo

*'Is it the selfishness of the female that impels her  
with no thought of the risks run by her mate  
to seek the protection of a buttressed castle*

*or is it the cunning of the male that encourages her to lock herself  
away from the world  
while he is free to stray  
unhampered by a nagging wife and unencumbered by family ties?*

Do not form these conclusions  
the gall crab is something else  
I do not presume to know what

But I do know  
she makes me think  
of anchorites.

Quotation verbatim from T.C. Roughley *Wonders of the Great Barrier Reef*,  
London: Angus & Robertson Limited, 1941, 92. The author was President of  
the New South Wales' Royal Zoological Society; also author of *The Cult of the  
Goldfish*.

## FROGFISH

There

if you look really hard  
is a shape like a warty leaf  
utterly

still  
rock still

its outline swims into view  
I'm doubtful

unblinking  
it dreams

of a universe  
motionless

it is unmoved  
by anything

alone in a sea  
of sufficiency.

## GOOD NIGHT SWEET LADIES

Parrotfish asleep in silky cocoons  
their duvets of mucus at night  
wrapped tight so sharks can't hear their heartbeats

## IN PRAISE OF FEATHER STARS

Identification of species can be done by counting arms  
one has eighty to a hundred and twenty  
one has a hundred to a hundred and thirty  
what if you got to a hundred and one?

In any case who cares  
when their vernacular name is so lovely  
feather stars  
they come in many colours  
black, green, white, brown  
vermilion red, cream, yellow, lime  
I have seen one swim  
a floating star  
gracefully curling  
silver curls of grace  
feather-light strokes  
make water palpable

it settled, as they do, on coral  
or a gorgonian fan  
where sometimes they huddle  
like birds on a branch in a storm  
sometimes one opens up  
confides its beauty to the current  
caring not for camouflage

they break reef's silhouette  
with feathery sway

their way of reacting  
is insistent, an ultimatum  
curl up, slot tight  
a hundred arms cased like closed-up fan

I have seen one that plaited up  
exactly like a basket from villages inland

sometimes they are striped  
widthways bicolour, brown and gold  
black and white, chalk and moss  
one will take up residence on a rusting cable  
another on a pliant sea whip

alone, they flourish  
clumping together, club social  
group conviviality  
they waft conversation to and fro

it's then you notice size  
in length of arms, in presence  
some have charisma

ballerina boxer  
dandy philosopher  
louche, disciplined, self-aware  
a feather star danced  
across air you could swear was water.

## LABOUR CAMP

Dorset born and bred, I grew among the whelk and crab pots  
I find good food in local places  
cleaning fish around the rocks and nets  
I couldn't free my netted fellows  
but I could relieve them  
of lice that cause persistent itch  
it is a life of humble service, a mild yoke  
self-serving, sure, but useful talent

nature has checks and balances  
wrasse balance lice who eat live fish  
bite by catch-depleting bite  
so wrasse help balance fishing books

Now fishermen are hunting us  
we're craftily hooked, sold on

crowded into too-small tanks  
jounced north by road  
bump, jolt, skin-scuffing  
airless press  
mortalities thin us out  
I am pinned by dead fellows

then silence  
then noise  
then tipped into loch  
not lost at sea but sea-found, sea-soothed  
only for a moment  
as filament nets strangle us and our cousins  
king of fish, kings prisoned in underwater dungeons

lice here blow in as larvae on the wind  
they settle down to dine on kings  
who cannot escape

though saltwater surrounds  
it is laden with filth  
food pellets rattle down from above  
harsh chemicals flood pens

gill-choked, condemned to squeeze  
restless with itch as lice bite deep  
we shed skin  
but lice bite deeper, infecting flesh  
they ride around on us in our prisoner circles

we do our job as best we can  
I give my liege what ease I can  
your majesty, forgive me  
your silver dress tattered, split, afflicted with sores  
calls up my hunger to serve

I did not come willingly  
but I too am imprisoned  
with a terrible sense of futility

we know, because we know these things

when the net is raised and all the kings are killed  
we too will die.

This poisoned loch has no free life  
here seals are shot at  
shrieking sounds terrify us all, from scallop to passing whale  
the kings are deaf from it  
otoliths warped, backbones bent  
deformity tossed into bins, mere waste



statistics are hidden  
practices are hidden  
companies promise anti-lice technology and innovation  
some zap the lice with lasers  
a game to them  
more terror for the kings

lice are canny and spin out egg strings  
so lice will return  
the money-men scratch their heads  
no scratch can ease a lice bite

we wrasse are an innovation  
it is no comfort and it is a scam  
it is a labour camp where all will be exterminated  
including the sea loch  
whose floor is barren  
whose deep cool water stagnates with pesticides

despite the feed dropped in  
feed made of wild fish  
the balance tilts only to money-men

who pitch the price of farmed salmon  
fixed and inflated by cartel  
to supermarkets, whose labels say  
*responsibly sourced*  
*environmentally friendly*

## LIONFISH

They move as daintily as geishas  
unfurling fans of feathers

spines  
poisonous quills

they are yakusas  
violence hangs about them

an appointment with death  
awaits you.

## LARVAL METAPHOR

Willow leaves fall on the stream  
a leaf in clear light flows onward  
it is always said an eel larva  
at a particular stage  
looks like a willow leaf

from below the willow leaf  
an eel larva looks up  
and wonders  
is that an eel larva  
or a willow leaf?

## NURSE SHARKS

It was a sundown dive  
I was not sure what to expect  
what's it like? I asked  
diving with nurse sharks

they're like puppies, said an old hand  
on the way there I puzzled  
like puppies?  
How?

We settled in shallows not far from a jetty  
late afternoon light, sandy viz  
when the water suddenly stirred and shirred and  
whoosh!

Nurse shark! First two  
then more, tumbling and shooting  
blobby-faced ghosts  
no rhythm just charge at you

like puppies  
veering their strange eely bodies  
right by you  
blunt mouths grinning

gambol of puppies, say some  
gamble about like the nurse sharks  
taking risks and tossing them aside  
giant pups galumphing

they rush, overexcited  
here there everywhere  
like kids on a sugar rush  
what they want isn't us

and yet they come to see us  
to frolic long after the fishermen's scraps disappeared  
what's it like? maybe they asked  
diving with humans.

## OARFISH

What fish are in the news today I don't mean how to cook  
them I mean alive  
alive in the sea in spite of fishing fleets plastic heat acid low  
oxygen crumbling coral  
what news from the deep?

Yesterday an oarfish washed up  
with a dribble of omens and twelve feet of silver sabre body  
laid upon the smooth sand  
with a look in its eye  
I can't read.

A collie sniffs its tail. Might it be she?  
It's a thought that slides seaward in overlapping scales  
panics a dumb mouth.

On a wild coast its head is art, sweeps of purple and black  
arcing to scimitar  
sure beauty prepossesses

an hour later the head was gone, the body decimated  
pocked by pecks of crows and gulls  
what wild good fortune to have seen this oarfish.

## OCTOPUS INTERVIEW

Thank you so much for coming to the studio today Octopus  
which of course you have not, but let's pretend  
because it's not so different from all the other pretending we do

I can see you are making signs and if I watch you closely  
your golden w eye asks me why  
that's an excellent question

but even if you twist your tentacles into eight question marks  
I can't answer it  
except to say

Human!  
Do you think human can learn to be different  
Can human do that in time

I mean quick time, before the ocean fouls completely  
and all the microplastics now in all of us  
human marine animal bird plant soil water

Kill everything slowly? Before the heat in water  
starts to boil plankton, to suffocate fish  
to make octopus world too damn hot?

What can I say to you, Octopus  
as ocean silts with marine dead  
green slime berets

Can you head for cooler fresher waters?  
Why should you leave your octopus countries?  
Where on the map are safe places?

You've gone white  
now red  
now mottled

What does that mean?  
The interview is over?  
Is this an empty chair or camouflage?



## OCTOPUS ON SUNDAY MORNING, WALES

Being octopus, sleek streak  
tentacle curl, unwinding furls  
tentative, tense, lissom

their heads do grow beneath their shoulders  
in smart disguise  
intelligence elastic

transformable to water  
stone-coloured balls  
inventive weediness

lolling on the Sabbath sands  
out in the open this octopus  
relaxes

while through the water  
a chapel bell rings  
faintly

alone  
intruded on  
outrageously

no nymph glimpsed bathing  
ever shot so fast to safety  
cloaked in offence

leaving outrage  
settling  
in the sand.

## OCTOPUS MATERIAL CULTURE

Splitting of hairs  
reveals  
new hairsbreadth distinctions  
new ways of seeing things  
hair loom  
heirloom

it is a gift to have a voice  
it is a duty to use it  
it is a gift to tentacle your world

in our amphorae we curl  
joyfully  
around our curiosities  
treasure amassed, in stones  
rocks-with-glint-of-light  
each octopus is connoisseur of shades

who will remember  
men loading amphorae  
who will witness  
these octopus archives

inscribed by tentacles  
bildungsromans pile up in the sand  
cathedral midden  
and you, watching all this  
what can you make of it?

## ODE TO A DIATOM, PART OF THE PLANKTON

*'I had hoped that someday I would read a poem by a poet who could do justice to the wonder of the diatoms. Apparently poets are moved only by things of greater magnitude.'* Noel Monkman, ocean microscopist and film-maker.

Orders of magnitude  
slide scales from the deeps to the stars  
to stars in the deep  
diatoms

their perfect geometry  
blends straight lines and circles  
going straight to the circled point  
in infinite ways

they are alive  
single-celled organisms  
one is all you need  
to test the infinite order of magnitude.

## PERIPHERAL PORIFERAE: ABERCASTLE UNDERWATER POSTCARD 8

Spicules, chelae, now go and see specimens  
we were getting our eye in for sponges  
a landscape turned seascape  
few fish fluttering by

once you know how to look you see not silt  
but seascape turned landscape  
here a current bends life into twists and branches  
there a gully gives shelter as if from strong winds

the phloc blows in like snow  
grey green silt, robing all, even the gaily coloured ones  
orange and mustard yellow, dimples of colour  
so much in disguise

yet it was no surprise to see a nudibranch go its slow way  
feathery-tipped, a monarch in royal blue  
liveried in toxin  
small bold defiant you will not have me no no no

cushiony mats, fans, balls  
the sponges demand attention  
we are here, there, everywhere  
see how we fit in

but astonishment intervenes  
a gully of starfish, dozens, agglomerate  
piled each on each, a heap of tuning forks  
motionless, soundless

one languid tip twitches  
don't bother me now  
you do not know what note I strike  
creamy, golden, olive

in a crevice I glimpsed two crabs  
one sheltered a smaller  
both anxious  
about me

and so it is, here where we should not be  
I am armed, dangerous and they know it  
should I shrink away  
should I settle my quiver of stinging cells

the weather was perfect and the diving easy  
everything made to fit  
sponges and I and sea and you  
sun underwater

yet what I keep thinking of  
are the two crabs, frightened  
unsure if pincers can protect against this threat  
quite so and spongy.

## PACHYMATISMA OFF BRIGHTON

*'A common, southern and western species, [it] ... is, as its name suggests, a distinct grey colour.'*

[https://www.oceaneyephoto.com/photo\\_8928314.html](https://www.oceaneyephoto.com/photo_8928314.html)

It has a distinct grey colour, say the handlists  
it does not smell, says one

I never thought to sniff it underwater  
there was a current  
taking my mask off is risky  
and how would I know what smell is sponge in the rush  
of salty aromas?

Perhaps they mean you to sniff on land  
some specimen  
the words have already changed  
from sponge to specimen

and how is the colour distinct  
other than distinctly grey?

Grey of a foggy morning, grey of a slate roof  
grey of a chain of pylons striding the valley  
each grey is distinct  
distinctly grey

town pigeons are grey and distinct from each other  
distinctly grey  
cutlery in a closed drawer  
is indistinctly grey

there is a clue in the name

Pachymatisma

Pachyderm

Nelly the elephant packed her trunk

distinctly grey

o elephant ear sponge

I am grateful for vernacular

to help me find your grey succinctly

the one I saw did look like an elephant ear

I did not expect to find elephant off the English south coast.

## PIPEFISH

Sliding with nervous grace this slender S-hook  
twines along the rocks  
on its way

sideways

wise to the sudden origami  
required to stay in place  
or sidle onward



## SCALLOP

The scallop is scallop-edged  
fluted, veluted

lined with eyes  
and sturdy

coquille de pèlerinage, the pilgrim's cockle  
snaps castanets across the seas

are my travels for love  
or is it eat and be eaten?

## SIPHONOPHORE

Somebody's dropped a bit of string here  
but it's taut that's odd snagged perhaps  
no  
because here's another right angle  
and another  
obtuse  
I am obtuse  
because I do not understand what this thing  
this stringy thing is

look it strings out along the shallow rocks  
as if there were a cricket pitch to mark  
in straight lined paint  
but here it doubles back  
silly string  
no purposeful  
surely  
as it weaves a singly strung thread  
netting  
what I can't see

and I have no name for it  
which doesn't matter  
or does it  
why do I miss the word  
which names it  
as if a name could explain  
what the stringy thing is  
and does

I am left with string theory  
in the dark now  
as diver's torchlight  
seeks impossible  
beginning end.

## TURTLE

Light plays across an underwater garden  
growing of its own accord

in cones and salad corals, camouflaged  
a rock moves

a head is raised  
beady eye

the turtle sees me  
and is not impressed

it assesses the situation  
I am not worth bothering with

it turns away  
from vulgar adoration

hauteur is called for: a rebuke  
I am abashed

its flippers lumber into floating  
it drifts

to tear at something  
in the lee of broccoli and grass

fragments of coral  
cloud upwards

slow, unrushed  
in turtle time.

## WHY CAN'T I GO HOME?

*The Columbia River Basin in the northwest of America was once the world's greatest salmon river system. The Snake River produced around a third of the Columbia's salmon, including millions of Chinook, steelhead, coho and sockeye. Those populations have collapsed. Four species are extinct and seven listed as endangered. Another endangered population of orca, or killer whales, depend on the salmon.*

Why can't I go home? Salmon People  
have always gathered in the clear cool pools  
of this river's headwaters

We come in from the sea in our finest costumes  
scarlet and silvered, to honour  
the births we will make and the deaths we will take

In return: this is how we bow out  
leaving space in the world for new and begetting  
Salmon People

This path is written in our blood  
fluid, fluent, congruent  
with the moon in her travelling phase

But we are stopped. Huge walls of concrete  
with ramparts and castles  
BLOCK

impassable  
impossible  
the urge grows in us

But we bang our silver heads against concrete  
that cuts off the river singing to us  
come up, come up

we are forced to mill about  
half-stunned by hydro screaming  
crunch punch of turbines

the waters are hot and listless.  
Why can't I go home?

## WOBLEGONG

O wobbegong, whose aboriginal name  
describes your shaggy beard  
you've disappeared  
almost  
into the sand

where you lie, immobile  
almost sessile  
moss starts to grow on you like a sloth  
slow moving, not moving, unmoving

you are a paisley shawl slung on a reef  
patterned like you  
two white dots pretend to be eyes  
above your fixed gaze  
your tail can bob like a lure  
if you can be bothered  
which seems unlikely

your lobed ornaments criss-cross  
channels in delta, sacred ideograms, carpet's knotted fringe  
tasselled wobbegong, lace in place  
inscribes a breathing space.





# Ocean





## ACIDITY AND ALL THE REST

If you write a poem longhand, on paper  
Is it forest sustainable certified  
If you write a poem straight to laptop  
Cloud stored in cloud  
What water-guzzling, power-sucking data centre  
Enables that?

Such traps: even Homer needed fuel  
That came at a price.  
O well China and India have coal-fired power stations  
So what you do is too tiny to matter  
Says the apologists. The activists say  
Take trouble in both hands and protest.

Out in the ocean a sea-butterfly  
Struggles to make her shell  
An eel feels heat unpleasant on her skin  
Kelp strands as giant as oaks collapse  
A whale goes hungry as krill disappears  
Marine beings can't grow, can't feed, can't mate  
They become very good at dying.

II *'The rapid and severe increase in ocean warming represents a significant and ongoing human-induced disruption that profoundly impacts marine species and ecosystems.'* Roberto M. Venegas, Jorge Acevedo, Eric A. Trembl, *'Three decades of ocean warming impacts on marine ecosystems: A review and perspective'*, *Deep-Sea Research II* 212 (2023) 105318, 1–19, 8.

In science, the audit includes

Size and biomass

Activity and performance

Feeding

Health and distribution of populations

Species alteration, composition, contraction

Service, habitat and trophic level

Pathogens, diseases, malformations, toxins

Competition, physiology, performance

Fertilization, fecundity, breeding, spawning, and maturity

It gets hard to read

It's all shrinking, stunting, sickening

Gaze hazes

What use are tears?

This is how it ends

Mortality, extinction.

### III

Important as prey. Valuable commercial species.

Who gets to eat you?

How come?

### IV

Today's reading is 430.44 parts per million carbon dioxide

The safe level is 350

A single commercial species

Thinks itself invaluable.

## AN ADDRESS TO THE SEA CUCUMBERS

Going down to the ocean again  
to the shore, to the sand  
to the wave's edge, its shallows  
its slip-away swell

I cannot for the life of me  
see the life that is not me  
much of it is hidden, buried  
some of it is miniscule  
too small for me to see

All these marine beings  
who I don't know  
who I don't understand  
who I can't imagine  
swim on in my ken

kin, in my underwater dream  
on the page of a book half torn out.

## CHALLENGER DEEP

By means of a Babelfish  
let us talk

one you love comes forward  
and recedes

rocking the tides  
riding the currents

not in this deep which you thought of as empty  
though full of primordial time

first the bucket came, tiny danglement  
on filament as fine as one stray hair

clamour attended it, I know  
before and after, curiosity jubilant

except for my question: what will you do next  
it took a while for the answer  
to descend

steel bubble  
followed by strange craft  
from outer space

weird fish peered out  
their heads like aliens  
and monstrous eyes

glaring  
prongs poking  
spraying ooze into fogs

look at those fangs  
that luminescent trap  
omnivorously armoured

you shouldn't have come  
unless you had peaceful intentions  
what unearthly good do you do by being here?



## EXHIBITION SPACE

Welcome to the museum  
where the main space and galleries off  
are taking in ocean

some copy forms to drop into the depths  
some spill a blaze of colours, textures, shapes  
knots and knits of rampant corals twisting

some capture creatures to display creations  
in trundling parade of big ideas  
banging the sides of a small tank

some weave with ghosts  
of water serpents, plastic nets  
and your reactions

some give the artistry to ocean  
lives settle, spread and sprout  
profusion simplifies confusion

some drown in photographs  
of floating tresses, dresses, sashes  
of feet perversely planted in the sand

some reach in slow, slow glide  
to dance with fish and garden eels  
suspending disbelief

some hover like an angel  
beside a sperm whale god  
singing a hymn

that's all the timed tour can impart  
for now  
please do come back another day.

## EXHIBITION SPACE II

I love the sea you see  
and so you see and love  
your sea

minimalism takes blue  
as ocean hue

the hadal zone is black  
lit up by bioluminescent blue

your scallop shell of quiet  
is also oil giant's logo

plundered ocean, which becomes  
empty treasure chest

with one pearl remaining  
I love the sea.

## EXHIBITION SPACE III

Dipping a hydrophone into cold waters  
I hear the mermaids singing  
in snorts, trips, squeaks and groans

machine learning can crunch masses of data  
it is on the verge of translating  
other languages

here are post-it notes, visitor amenity  
please share  
what would you want to say?

## HOMAGE TO COUSTEAU AT COLLIOURE

It was summer in Collioure, high season  
clear bright light  
drawing painters then, tourists now

terracotta roofs  
terraces in citrus green  
whitewash

like the trees in the square  
bathers in towels  
decking of boats

it felt a place good for homage  
so I found a place to go diving  
chez Monsieur le Poulpe, a large man

a little conversation unfolded  
it was possible, à demain  
Madame complained of taxes

I felt bold when I left –  
next morning, nervous  
formalities completed we left port

honestly I did my best  
buckled up in someone else's language  
comme il faut, for homage

then our leader shouted  
Equipe!  
Um...what was that, team?

Scramble to appointed place  
the first to go  
brrrrrr chilly brrrrrrrrrr cold

each equipe accoutred in wetsuits with hoods up  
they zoomed about in fours  
manic elves

I dawdled, admiring the light  
green and clear  
halo for boulders

which appeared mystically  
then showed their true colours  
terracotta and citrus greens

how was it then, in the time of homage  
on land and below water  
what gratitude can I leave?

Back on board elves became people  
from a long paper bag baguettes were drawn like halberds  
and sausage appeared

it turned out the etiquette was  
you used your diver's knife  
naturally you had one

to cut bread and sausage  
and a giant gooey cheese  
I was invited to do the honours

I felt etrangere  
John Bull slicing up beef  
awkward national honour nonsense

but red wine appeared and all was amiable  
I felt warmed, dozing, asleep  
till the warm wind of port woke terracotta in me

I thanked all and went to find Monsieur le Poulpe  
he pressed me to join him for a drink  
a vin rouge or yes, yes, an absinthe

I thought of the twisty roads ahead  
regretfully said no, but yes to a t-shirt with his logo  
a large octopus, writhing

I drove up into the foothills, the mountains  
packing away  
a dive as heady as absinthe.

# I AM NOT OVERTHINKING THIS

Fishing

Overfishing

Overfishing

Overconsumption (by some)

Overheating (for all)

Over and over

It's going to be over.



## INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK

This page intentionally left blank  
tells you of nothing  
as bleached and crumbled corals  
disappear

unwritten page, cancelled  
masterpiece, artwork  
scraped from its canvas  
unframed

what was here is gone  
corals, skylarks, chalk streams  
nightingales deep in the woods  
and the woods are gone too

anger and shame  
have come to stay  
evolving  
blank pages thicken and clot.

## LANDLOCKED

Landlocked, I try to remember  
how I am angry on behalf of the ocean

Landlocked, it disappears into  
trees, blossom, buttercups

Try to remember  
kelp forest, coral, seagrass

Try to forget landlocked  
remember wrasse, flitting

Not to be there is landlocked  
light on stone

all around you is not green  
all around you is blue

bluegreen with starfish  
buff, apricot, pink

chips off yesterday's sunset  
scales off tomorrow's dawn

crowds have vanished  
earth has vanished

I am so happy to be here  
I do not want to remember anger

It buzzes, fly-trapped  
with so much human suffering how can you

insist on the need for compassion  
to fish

demand we get a grip on graphs  
emissions temperature pollution misery

now I remember  
brittle ghosts  
writhing  
famine  
sliced drowning  
collapse

drowning slowly on a long-line  
anger remembers landlocked.

# OCEAN

Ocean rises as a man with wild hair  
and a beard  
and a trident

seas rage behind him  
white horses foam  
he is a god who fights

it doesn't have to be this way  
it's time to move to  
a bigger shell of myth

Ocean rises with the curve of orca  
fluency of dolphins  
long banners of kelp

seas move and swell  
run currents round the globe  
connective flows

Ocean points all ways, a starfish  
who interprets confluence  
in fluid interpellations

so that sessile and mobile  
who live here  
who trundle or fly or drift

those who hide in the night  
those who swim upward in the water column  
then descend

those who crawl, those who glide  
are aware of their element  
and adapt

Ocean has a singing voice  
mournfully whale  
travelling thousands of miles through the blue

having nurtured so many forms of life  
Ocean holds ancient time  
primordial blackness

and the haze of now  
forever chemicals  
falling in marine snow plastic.

## OCEAN OR OCEANS?

*A meditation, with the OED to hand.*

Ocean roars round the globe  
turning it blue

which is uniform on the maps, wrongly  
for two reasons

one is because ocean is only blue or green or blue-green  
on top  
where light fades out it goes midnight blue then black

the other is because ocean too spins with the sun  
somewhere dawn turns ocean pink and gold  
somewhere phosphorescence glitters dusk with brilliance

I always thought plurality best for reality  
things come in versions  
do you think of fish as silver?

These oceans nudge the poles  
with species distinct and distanced  
polar bear north and penguin south

some oceans have spice winds and others have salt  
they carry tracks, migrations, spawnings, sounds  
whale, turtle, eel entwine with larvae

krill up and down all night  
lobster marches to traditional moulting grounds  
manta, grouper, spider crab

are their waters one great ocean?  
Look! The sea! we say, pointing excited –  
Sea is dependably universal.

Still, remember ocean-going – for which you need to be sea-worthy  
ocean-borne, ocean-rocked, ocean-sundered  
gulp stream

a life on the ocean wave tra la  
great outer sea  
geographical convenience changes like the seas

when you are immersed in it  
it doesn't matter what the word  
there is no need for wordage

mere cordage binding ship to shore  
unlike the bird killed by a word  
air-sailing albatross

one continuous liquid mass  
solidly based in rocks, in oozes, in silts  
berged with processions of ice

upper, inferior, lower thrown out  
in the last century  
ridding ocean of caste

its castaways  
going to sea  
foam is all we can see

in geography the term is loosely applied  
some seas are closed and some are open  
lunar seas copy in uncertain ways

long sea, waves uniform and steady  
short sea, irregular and broken  
a sea of troubles tosses, turns

from current's push below, from  
winds skittering ice  
from swell pushed around by land

an oceanic island is highly favourable for new species  
a majority of oceanic epiplankton appears to be stenothermal  
that's fussy about temperature, or not inclined to change their  
range

eternity is limitless, oceanic  
the oceans are stuck with humans  
ocean can find nowhere untouched, even in its deeps.



## REEF LIFE

It bursts with life  
and yet it is serene  
just there, lumps of existence  
announcing the triumph of forms

there's not a bare millimetre  
everywhere organisms jostle  
prod, shove, bite, sting  
spongy edging forward  
filament feel, provisionality

there is personality in forward  
backward whirring fins  
in diminishing sandy wriggle  
in disappearing inky squiggle

there are signature tunes – anthea  
always arpeggio, musical roulade  
fountain of treble, orange waterfall  
black and white damselfish  
move up and down like birdsong

ceramicist dexterity appears in  
fingers moulding their above  
left, right, turns at all points  
cardsharp angling of ace  
antler thicket

there are residents  
vigilant goby guarding its patch  
octopus awake in hole  
dozing eel and sleeping soldiers

current is slack, humming come hither to sea squirts  
small and giant, young and old  
they sway in the wind, white dotted with green  
floral washing on a breeze-jigged line

then a drift along reef wall  
miraculously patterned  
rough, smooth, shiny, lacy  
bumpy, noduled, twists of fancy  
sprouting their manifold ambitions

a cave is brilliant with sponges  
in purples and grey, in jelied reds  
osculations of coral, daisies by day  
at night bloom in flames

sandy bed of recess has an imprint  
of occupant, recent, bigger than me  
the quilted sand still warm  
sea whips pop up, lollipop promises  
sea fans crop up, duennas' antiques

in the blue there are striped bannerfish  
trailing a headline  
Reef Life: the current news

## TIME LAPSE

### I

I am walking on the bottom of the sea  
Jules Verne style, helmet and hose  
I think everything around me  
is marvellous

As my copper boots move forward ponderously  
sea beings arise behind me like flowers  
secrets and mysteries  
once seen, believable.

### II

Tight crowd round the monitor which is  
third screen in line  
streaming the deep

leaders have the best seats  
this is bioprospecting  
wow look at that

### III

Night. Which is all the time down here  
primordial blackness  
shot through with blue flames

Not far away are searchlights, headlights, pincer arms  
cameras and sampler nets, expensive instruments  
not yet prodding this bit of blackness

invisible  
believable  
wow.

## WHEN A MARINE NATIONAL MONUMENT TURNED INTO A LANDING PAD

We need to know stuff we need to know everything we need  
spies in the skies  
who need rockets and launch pads and privacy and publicity  
they get what we need to know  
the new satellite base coincided with a marine reserve

one favoured by turtles and hauling-out seals  
they are resting, building reserves  
and in come men drills cement noise fire thumps and bangs  
reservists, building a violent future

where there is no snoozing, no lolling, no basking in sun  
because everything must be known  
through swivel of eye above  
and swivel of gun below

millions of seabirds fly to the rocks to overwinter and nest  
how can they breed, among satellites?  
Where else can they go?  
Where else to home their need of what they know?

Military logistics and profit versus turtles, seals, seabirds  
marine peoples, seafarers, sea mists  
I need you to know  
mistakes now are for all time.

The last line is adapted from Sylvia Earle's *Sea Change: A Message of the Oceans* (1995). The Johnston Atoll, proposed launch site, is part of the Pacific Islands Heritage Marine National Monument. The rockets are part of SpaceX, owned by Elon Musk. <https://biologicaldiversity.org/w/news/press-releases/trumps-plan-to-land-spacex-rockets-in-pacific-wildlife-refuge-spurs-lawsuit-2025-05-29/>

