



## Poems for Tube-Snouts and other Secrets of the Sea

Atrium Art Gallery  
University of Southern Maine  
Lewiston-Auburn College

This collection of poetry accompanies the exhibition  
*Secrets of the Sea*, September 18–November 22, 2014.

Selected by  
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Lewiston-Auburn College

cover: Adam P. Summers, *Tube-snout* Aulorynchus flavidus,  
photograph, 24" x 36"



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**Tube-snout**

*Aulorhynchus flavidus*

Why not call me Flute-snout—  
with my tapered head  
and tiny toothed mouth,  
a more elegant equation?

Or True-snout?  
Our fathers guard eggs  
that cling to kelp nests,  
placed there by mothers  
with tender secretion.

Related to the Stickleback—  
now there's a lively name!

Tube-snout!  
Am I just some nose  
on a garden hose to you?

What if I called you  
Rude-snout?

—Sierra Nelson

## **Sermon on the Colossal Squid**

Because the colossal squid is too large to see  
We must not imagine it.  
This is not the age of spontaneous generation.  
We must focus on the clat of worms  
Suckling at the hydrothermal vent.  
We must attend to the soft-bodied creatures.

We shall not tell larger-than-life stories.  
Instead let us hold fast to the hawser  
Of the regression line, and it shall bring  
Word to us exactly of life size.  
Let us measure the eye in grams.

We must not be distracted by the one  
Central heart, nor tested by the twin  
Gill hearts that render the blood azure.  
Nor may we be chastened by the beak,  
The sharp hook wearing the hood  
Of a heretic monk, that comes to dwell  
In the stomachs of whales. In the end

We need not know  
What it is that our skin becomes.  
Each day we must pass ourselves through  
The mouth of improbability,  
Like the octopus escaping through a knothole  
From the deck of our vessel,  
And be born again and again and again.

-Sarah DeWeerd

## **The Tether**

Miles-deep rents in the floor's  
gritty fabric where water  
spews into water—a primal  
violence at the earth's core—

attract the alien, light-  
leaking fistulae and pods  
that ascend and fall, ascend  
and fall, misshapen aspirants

assuming endless pilgrimage.  
The bubbling faults beckon them  
forth. And the marine  
biologist hunkered in metal,

the uterine bathysphere,  
gazes open-mouthed  
when the surface generator  
triggers the lamps to reveal

such impossible yearning:  
God's disinherited, the nameless  
flaws who have so much farther  
to climb, their mute kingdom

allowing its immense blackness  
to conceal His cold  
fumblings, furious gestures,  
as if we might begin again

among these divine zeroes,  
these creaturely scraps  
mimicking grace, these  
nightmarish drafts of flesh,

these never-to-be-called.  
Some almost-shape drifts by.  
Awe. A distant knocking.  
—Then the long haul.

—Michael Waters

## **When I Think of Elvers**

I think of the self,  
of the eel in me,  
the glass eels in all of us,

and I think of Presley  
at Graceland, his hips  
wriggling into the hearts

women opened to him, fragile,  
like the fyke nets that lead  
tiny elvers into ice boxes

marked “Japan” where raw fish  
slips down eager throats,  
salty stuff from the Maine Gulf,

forty bucks a pound for eels  
that otherwise would end up  
in Somes Pond’s muddy bottom,

food for something bigger, ‘cause  
there’s a chain, at the top of which  
we stand, skin shiny with sweat,

the effort of the harvest,  
making our elver living,  
our lives tied to muslin nets

drying in the spring sun  
along the banks by the library  
where books are free for the taking,

like those transparencies called elvers,  
“a variant of eelfare, ‘the passage  
of young eels up a river,’ ”

or a stream as silver as this one,  
filling pockets on the tides,  
in the moonlight, slipping

through my fingers in the bad dream  
I sometimes have of eels,  
of Elvis and selfish, selfish me.

-Carl Little

## **Biology**

Is this happiness or oyster-life?  
This flexing of muscular torso-foot  
joy's wonder? This sifting of silt  
from food in the shifting chill-dark?  
If, in my mind, there is a life of flight  
in the light beyond the over-swirl,  
must I unfix my lips from this rock  
to be right? Or is my apex to worry  
quartz against my shell

-Stephen O'Connor

**Spiny Lumpsucker**  
*Eumicrotremus orbis*

I'm cuter than you think:  
the size of one blink,  
an armored little waggler  
covered in conical plates.

Two bulging eyes,  
one tiny mouth,  
pectoral fins I wobble—  
to give chase is comical—  
little worms and mollusks  
to swallow.

But behold! Upon  
my ping-pong breast  
is a giant disk  
that sticks  
to rocks and kelp  
and crevices.  
A slimy suction cup  
holding 200 times me up!

I like where it's cold and shallow:  
an intrepid little fellow.

–Sierra Nelson

## Whalefall

I hadn't really thought about it, to tell you  
the truth, those bodies sinking  
to the ocean floor. The term

sounds like nightfall,  
and I picture them coming down  
like a huge and lazy rain,  
like hot air balloons landing in an open field—that  
silence and fascination as  
anything meant to be suspended  
touches earth.

It's frightening—the arrival,  
the dust, the realization that this  
is not graceful after all.

There must be an archipelago of whalefall  
along some lines in the ocean—greys  
beside California, humpbacks along  
the Carolinas. Swimming  
and then falling, their bones silent and then landing  
and then settled.

The ocean floor is more vast  
than the myth of Wyoming—endless  
plains, plentiful herds, sky  
uncharted still. Cattle  
skulls glinting white between the grasses  
picked up, decorated with turquoise, hung  
on a barroom wall. Not death then, but watchfulness, memory  
in its white and hollow-socketed form.

I've been trying to decide  
which I love more, the dark bodies  
falling or the pale and teeming scatter of bones  
in the unlit sea. Or maybe it's just good to know  
about landings. The awkward,  
gorgeous reconciliation  
with the ground.  
Honestly? I need to believe  
in the beauty of falling.  
The stunning ache of descent and then  
its unexpected practicality—  
new habitat. Decorated and watching.

-Elizabeth Bradfield

## **The Facts on Migration**

Why do you migrate? I asked the whale,  
He shrugged and replied I don't.  
Don't go telling me such a tale,  
For I know for a fact you do.

You come down from the Arctic cold  
To the coast of dusty Mexico,  
A pack of lies I won't be sold  
For I know for a fact you do.

The whale did look me straight in the eye,  
Care to place a bet, for your opinion is not true.  
Of course I'll bet, said I  
For I know for a fact you do.

You do, do you? You think you're sure?  
He chuckled to himself.  
I'm sure I'm sure and that's for sure,  
For I know for a fact you do.

For how can you explain your annual trip,  
North then South then North again?  
You migrate on schedule like a steamer ship,  
For I know for a fact you do.

The whale's wise eye did look me over,  
He smiled slyly like a fox,  
Don't look at me like I'm not sober,  
For I know for a fact you do.

Then explain to me what it's all about,  
This bi-annual coastal swim-a-thon?  
Do you take me for an ignorant lout?  
For I know for a fact you do.

The whale said, you do assume much, it's true  
But things are not always as they seem,  
I see you migrate, I said, do you think I haven't got a clue?  
For I know for a fact you do.

Well my so so certain man,  
It is time to set you straight,  
See these little guys that upon my flippers stand?  
For I know for a fact you do

You mean the barnacles on your skin?  
I said with amused surprise.  
Yes the ones also upon my fin,  
For I know for a fact you do.

You see, said the very large and friendly whale.  
These little guys they are my friends,  
And my friendship I will not fail.  
Please know that as a fact will you.

It's the barnacles that migrate you see  
Not I, and as their friend I go along,  
For I love to travel on the sea,  
So please know that as a fact will you.

A likely story, said I with doubting emotion,  
They are such insignificant things,  
And you are the lord and king of the ocean  
For I know for a fact you are.

To waste your time on such small fry,  
To ferry them to and fro,  
Is simply a cover for a lie,  
You migrate, I know for a fact you do.

They are my friends, he said with a sigh  
And wiser beyond their size  
My respect for them is real, I tell you I do not lie  
Please know that as a fact will you.

It is not they who cling to me,  
It is I who holds on to them,  
They give me music under the sea  
Please know that as a fact you see.

For things are not always what they seem to be  
And size is not the important thing,  
I am wise but they are wiser than me  
They are indeed wiser than you and that's a fact you see.

Wisdom is not based on brain or size,  
But upon adapting and surviving.  
These hard shelled ones are sages wise,  
For I know for a fact they are.

You've been here for a million years  
And I for thirty two,  
They have been here for half a billion years  
That is a fact for you.

And they will be here when we will be no more  
When my bones will rest upon the ocean floor  
And you lie in dust upon the shore,  
I know for a fact it's true.

So out of respect I give them a ride,  
And hope to learn a thing or two,  
With their help we may abide  
For that I hope will also be a fact it's true.

It is the tiny, tiny creatures  
Who lead life in this race  
Their wisdom is their greatest feature,  
I know for a fact it's true.

They ride your ships and my tail,  
It's the least for them we can do,  
You are a man and I am a whale,  
So do you now doubt my facts are true,

No says I, you are right,  
Your nature lends them kindness,  
We should learn that right is not might  
In my heart I know that as a fact I do.

So gentle whale, sweet travels I wish for you.  
My apologies to your guests please,  
I know your words are true,  
I know that now for a fact I do.

The whale is big and grand and wise  
The barnacle is a little guy but wiser still,  
Man so sure of himself has wisdom based on lies,  
Self-deception unfortunately is also a fact it's true.

-Captain Paul Watson

## The Oarfish

It took three people to carry its length, sagging  
between their hands, from the wrackline  
where they found it, down to the water's edge.  
From a distance just a pale smear along the beach, probably garbage,  
probably a ride of sand, driftwood, but something  
in its snaked lie made them walk up  
and look. And then lift it. I wasn't there,

but have stared so often at the snapshot  
I'm convinced I could have been, and that's  
good enough, isn't it? To look at a picture and feel the sun  
on your shoulders, the dead weight  
of the fish, the shifting rocks underfoot, hot  
through the thin soles of canvas shoes, the smell  
of insect repellent and decay.

This strange long weight that they picked up—  
serpent, discovery, trophy, documentation—a thing  
no one else they'll ever know  
will have seen. Yes, they'll nod  
to the guidebooks, it's like that, but  
not quite.

The red was more subtle. The belly  
not so sleek. We held it. Scales glimmered on our skin  
after. I wish I had been there.

It's curled and ghostly on the wall.  
They picked it up and smiled, they  
sighted down the long fin of its dorsal. The two  
plumes trailing from its head, flaring  
like oars, rested on the inside of their upturned arms.

—Elizabeth Bradfield

## Sea Urchins

The destruction of Byzantium is a daily practice among herring gulls seizing unsuspecting spiney urchins off barnacled stones at low tide. Crisp-

winged strokes, red tipped beaks crush and gorge on delicacies of Japanese sashimi. Gulls hurtle skyward to litter soft needled paths with shattered

porcelain temples. Fragile spines bleach to lavender, fade to luminous white. Inside, pointillist lacework etches a curving architecture built by a soft bellied

hunger. Dawn finds me crouched ankle deep, rubber sandaled, gazing into a choreography of living spines, purple filaments swaying in my rippling reflection.

-Elizabeth Garber

## How Coral Is Made

A traffic cone up in a tree, a sure sign of spring.  
At any moment I expect blossoms will extend through it,  
like the feet of a barnacle  
fluttering like eyelashes  
beyond their carapace,  
tasting the world beyond.

What's wrong with me?  
I, too, have stuck my head in a dark hole  
I've built of my responsibilities,  
refusing the bright spring light  
to finish just one more thing  
all day long,  
though my feelings furious fleet  
like barnacle feet.  
Love was once a larval-state sailor, his youthful swim.

The sea is complicated,  
building a colony of calcified families  
from the carefree polyp states.  
A world our grandchildren may never see  
as ocean acidic dissolves:  
those were pearls that were his eyes  
of his bones coral made.

-Sierra Nelson

Note: last two lines a variation on Ariel's Song from  
Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

## Scalyhead Sculpin

The diver knows a rock.  
This fish is an essay,  
a logical argument  
descending a staircase.

Sculpin, you knew exactly what you were doing  
and she did too, loving you with her flashlight's beam.  
You are here dressed as sand.  
Fissures crack your rock-hide—  
she can read the orange lines run through your eyes.

Oh you master of disguise—pale, darken,  
lay flat on the floor to hide.  
Shifting patterns you become  
coral, sponge; algae, even.  
Pretend to be  
some tough thing, inanimate, object.

She, too, contains multitudes.  
She has been a stone, a furniture-sized boulder, even;  
a hard place, almost invisible in utility.  
When she executes her escape dive,  
when she lays along the bottom  
of her fishbowl life, what gives  
her away? What orange line or light?

—Rachel Kessler

## **At the Touch Tank**

(Mount Desert Island Biological Laboratory)

Jake, age six, plunges his arms  
into pumped seawater  
up to his elbows to wrestle a dogfish,  
small shark whose eyes bulge.

On the bottom, tankmates,  
skates skim like magic carpets.  
Suddenly one of them pops up,  
its odd mouth

working in a way  
to suggest a talkative thing,  
anxious to communicate  
yet voiceless.

Pushing through the kids  
I lean to touch the skate's skin,  
feel a shock, withdraw  
my hand as fast

as the fish wings away—  
like the first time  
I went further than necking  
and backed off, not slapped,

but in awe of the sensation  
of something encountered  
in the dark of a parked car,  
nothing I'd ever seen

except in pictures  
found at the town dump.  
"The skate and the dogfish  
do not mate," replies

the biologist on duty  
to a little girl's inquiry.  
I blush, turn away to study  
other sea creatures,

urchins, alewives, fingerlings.

-Carl Little

## **Siphonophore**

Three thousand feet down where  
an unmanned vehicle probes  
the ocean like an endoscope,  
a sudden carnival float ripples  
into view: Siphonophore!  
The scientists all rotate toward  
the monitor, open-mouthed  
as shepherds at the hush of wings  
not grown for any air we know.  
Siphonophore. Free of all  
hard parts, including that nugget  
the self. Corporate being  
whose members are truly members—  
co-dependent, specialized  
as organs in a body, most  
made of clear gelatinous tissue  
through which, lurid as a sunrise,  
the digestive apparatus winds.  
Some species can reach  
130 feet in length. They glow  
blue or green when disturbed—  
or fly to pieces, some so delicate  
a cone of light alone can shatter them.  
They're almost impossible to collect.  
What do they tell us, these prodigies  
whose motion is a music,  
weightless & translucent as  
the dreams of birds?  
That life is a conversation  
matter is having with itself?  
That cooperation at the highest level  
is indistinguishable from genius?  
All are predators.  
Their apparitional tentilla wave  
or glow to lure prey—those  
so foolish as to possess central  
nervous systems—into the range  
of poisonous harpoons.

—Dave Bonta

### **Being the Cuttlefish**

Not from an act of central will  
    directed by a vision  
    but from the skin itself  
    all those chromatophores  
    yellow over blue and red  
then brown and black beneath  
    but lower still iridophores  
reflect metallic blue and green  
    and gold and silver—Ah!  
Complexity of adaptation  
    layer upon layer  
    like a life of secrets  
only gradually revealed  
    to one's Self

—Jane Nelson

## **The Sea Shell**

is even more remarkable  
when we learn the sound  
we hear, shell to ear, is no  
more real than whispering  
molecules of air repeating  
Avogadro's number over  
and over, endlessly, in a  
timeless chaotic song older  
than this temporary ocean  
where life evolved, lives  
and dies, its bodies, shells,  
cast up on some ephemeral  
beach like the one we stroll  
along trying to prolong  
a September afternoon.

-Robert Chute

## **The Barnacle and the Gray Whale**

Said the Barnacle,

You enchant me, with your carnival  
of force.

Yours is a system of slow.

There is you, the pulley  
and there is you, the weight.

Your eyes wide on a hymn.

Your deep song like the turn  
of that first,

that earliest of wheels.

Said the Whale,

I have seen you, little encruster,  
in that business of fouling the ships.

Known, little drum machine, you  
to tease out food from the drink.

Little thimble of chalk and hard water.

You could be a callus of whiter skin.

You could be a knucklebone. You  
who hang on me,

like a conscience.

–Cecilia Llompart

## The Aquarium

My ticket paid and ripped, I wander under  
water, through spines, speckles, snouts, suction cups.  
Around one corner, I swallow abalones  
whole. Around another, freed of my blood,  
my bones, and brains, I find myself now blessed  
with tentacles and toxins. Here, my left eye  
migrates toward my right and I swim sideways.  
There, because I fight when caught, I'm sought  
for sport. Voyeur, I watch writ large two seahorses  
making, if not love, at least new seahorses.  
The video loops and loops and loops before  
I let them go. Creatures like tumors, creatures  
like sunspots, pulsing and drifting, I come  
to at the lip of the "touch pool,"  
an invitation to recall my hands.  
Such pleasure to pry starfish painted by nature  
to summon sunset from Plexiglas habitat  
and imagine invasion renders a galaxy  
for a moment urgent. I stand with others  
poking snails now, nursing fantasies  
of science and agency, moving creatures  
from one corner of a glorified dish to another.  
An older woman with an official lapel pin  
shows a family the crab that decorates itself,  
adorns its shell "like a lady might, or"—  
playing to the crowd—"some gentlemen might  
too." What in the wild would be wound of  
other organisms—sponges, algae,  
anemones—a crown to hide beneath,  
a beauty born as byproduct of need,  
here's a tangle of string, aesthetic accident  
of instinct. Adjacent this pliable seascape  
that merits the docent's discussion, other tanks.  
In one, a baby shark, or shark writ small,  
a shape I know to know as danger and  
here what wonder right within my grasp,  
form I feel I've come to touch, but when I lift

the lid and reach into the water there  
erupts such a uniformed reprimand  
I drop the lid, and not quite run, but “exit,”  
the voice explaining in my wake “we had  
an incident.” This anecdote does not  
surface into story, sure, no great scarring  
to me nor shark nor tank nor institution,  
my friends merely amused to find me hiding  
by the otters, face pressed so close to my  
reflection as to fog their seamless play.  
But why so much to touch and the don’t touch  
right beside and signless? And why the rules  
of the “touch pool” clear to everyone but me?  
Wishing and wishing and never well enough  
alone, outside, my eyes adjust, light left  
upon an ocean too deep to fathom, light  
right to shine a shallow fountain’s change.

-Dora Malech

## The Poets

**Dave Bonta** is a blogger and web publisher living in the wilds of Central Pennsylvania.

**Elizabeth Bradfield** is the author of the poetry collections *Approaching Ice*, *Interpretive Work*, and the forthcoming *Once Removed*. Editor-in-chief of Broadsided Press, she lives on Cape Cod, works as a marine naturalist, and is Poet-in-Residence at Brandeis University as well as an instructor in the low-residency MFA program at University of Alaska Anchorage.

**Robert M. Chute**, retired biologist, was born in Naples, Maine, and lives on the shore of a pond in Poland Spring, Maine. His most recent book is *Excuse For Being Here*, a mix of Thoreau inspired poems and comments on Thoreau's life and works, and autobiography.

**Sarah DeWeerd** is a freelance science writer based in Seattle, Washington. She has written about gut-dwelling microbes and naked mole rats for *Nature*, living seawalls and ecological art for *Conservation*, zebra finches and language and autism for SFARI.org, and glass sponges for *Nautilus*, as well as many other publications. She loves invertebrates, marine and terrestrial, so much that she once embroidered a 6-foot glow-in-the-dark portrait of a slug.

**Elizabeth W. Garber's** newest book, *Maine (Island Time, 2013)*, is a collaboration of her poetry, interviews, and essays with paintings and photographs by Michael Weymouth. She is the author of three books of poetry, *True Affections: Poems from a Small Town* (2012), *Listening Inside the Dance* (2005) and *Pierced by the Seasons* (2004). Three of her poems have been read by Garrison Keillor on The Writer's Almanac. Her website is [www.elizabethgarberpoetry.com](http://www.elizabethgarberpoetry.com).

**Rachel Kessler** sneaks poetry into non-traditional venues: she has performed interactive poetry in parks, on buses, disguised as a tree, aboard water taxis, in phone booths, hair salons, and public restrooms. Her art and writing are published in the anthology *The Open Daybook*, and she is co-author of books *Who Are We?* (with vinyl 7-inch record) and *TYPO*, made as co-founder of collaborative poetry performance teams Vis-à-Vis Society and Typing Explosion, respectively. Her work has appeared in *Tin*

*House, USA Today, The Stranger, Poetry Northwest, Alaska Quarterly Review, Narrative, and elsewhere. She works as a teaching artist with Writers in the Schools, Path With Art, and Centrum. She is currently writing a book about the intersection of puberty and religion.*

A native New Yorker, **Carl Little** has lived in Somerville since 1989. He has published two collections of poetry: *10,000 Dreams Explained* and *Ocean Drinker: New & Selected Poems*. His poems have appeared in a number of journals ranging from the *Black Fly Review* to *Words & Images*, and three anthologies edited by Wesley McNair. His art books include *Nature & Culture: The Art of Joel Babb* and *Irene Hardwicke Olivieri: Closer to Wildness*. He also edited his brother David Little's *Art of Katahdin*; helped produce the film *Jon Imber's Left Hand*; and served as jury for the Atrium Art Gallery's biennial *The Inspired Hand VI*.

**Cecilia Llompert** was born in Puerto Rico and raised in Florida. She received her BA from Florida State University, and her MFA from the University of Virginia. Her first collection of poetry, *The Wingless*, was published in 2014 by Carnegie Mellon University Press.

**Dora Malech** is the author of two books of poems, *Say So* (Cleveland State University Poetry Center, 2011) and *Shore Ordered Ocean* (Waywiser Press, 2009). Her poems have appeared in *The New Yorker, Poetry*, and *Tin House*, among other publications. She lives in Baltimore, Maryland, where she is an Assistant Professor of Poetry in The Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins University.

**Jane Wandel Nelson** lives in Seattle and on the salt water shore of Hood Canal in Washington state. She is a retired public school teacher and attorney, and is the mother of poet Sierra Nelson.

**Sierra Nelson's** commissioned poems accompanying scientist Adam Summers' fish skeleton photographs debuted at the Seattle Aquarium in Spring 2014. She teaches poetry in Seattle and Friday Harbor, WA and in Rome, Italy. She is also president of Seattle's Cephalopod Appreciation Society. *Spiny Lump sucker* first appeared in the journal *Poetry Northwest*. [www.songsforsquid.tumblr.com](http://www.songsforsquid.tumblr.com)

**Stephen O'Connor** is the author of two collections of short fiction, *Here Comes Another Lesson* and *Rescue*, and two works of nonfiction, *Will My Name Be Shouted Out?*, a memoir, and *Orphan Trains*, biography/history. His fiction, poetry, and essays have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Missouri Review*, *Poetry Magazine*, *Electric Literature*, *The New York Times*, *The Nation*, *The Chicago Tribune*, and *The Boston Globe* among others. His story, "Next to Nothing" was selected by Jennifer Egan for Best American Short Stories 2014, and "Ziggurat," was read by Tim Curry on Selected Shorts in October 2011 and June 2013. He teaches in the MFA programs of Columbia and Sarah Lawrence. His website is: [www.stephenoconnor.net](http://www.stephenoconnor.net)

**Michael Waters'** recent books include *Gospel Night* (2011) and *Darling Vulgarity* (2006—finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize) from BOA Editions, as well as *Contemporary American Poetry* (Houghton Mifflin, 2006). The recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Fulbright Foundation, and the NJ State Council for the Arts, he teaches at Monmouth University.

Perhaps the most controversial conservationist of our times, **Captain Paul Watson** has championed marine wildlife for more than four decades, on the high seas, in the courts, in international forums and in the classroom. He is a master mariner, author, lecturer, teacher and marine conservationist.

In 1972 he became a co-founder of Greenpeace and went on to found Sea Shepherd Conservation Society in 1977, leading Sea Shepherd into hundreds of high seas campaigns to protect marine life. In recent years, Captain Watson has attracted a following as the star of the Animal Planet docu-reality TV series, *Whale Wars*, now in its seventh season.

Captain Paul Watson has received dozens of awards for his conservation work, including the Jules Verne Award and the Philippe Cousteau Award. He was designated as one of President George H.W. Bush's "Daily Points of Light," and was selected by TIME magazine as one of the Top 20 environmental heroes of the 20th Century. [www.seashepherdglobal.org](http://www.seashepherdglobal.org)

