

OCEAN STORYTELLING
WRITING GRANT
2022
F I N A L I S T S

'Hope Spots'

Finalist – Christina Riley

Would you cringe if I said that putting my head underwater takes my breath away? Our swim instructor taught us how to breathe, preempting the exhilaration soon to pour from 10 artists submerged in colour, pattern, texture, shape and movement all defying the logic of land.

Beneath the surface, everything was new. No, not new. New to me. A kaleidoscope of personal discoveries made all the more significant for knowing that this has been here all along. It's a difficult feeling to describe, this not-new-newness. The closest I can come is the task of trying to imagine a colour you've never seen before. It's impossible to imagine something which doesn't exist until, suddenly, it does. A whole new spectrum my eyes weren't tuned to before.

My vision fills with life made of jelly and of light, creatures the colour of candy, writhing with million-year-old grace. They're like nothing I've ever seen, but they're not otherworldly. Everything here is, blissfully, entirely of this world. Despite what I'd been taught mere minutes before, I held my breath, with eyes wide beneath my mask and a heart beating so fast it surely reverberated through the water, fish flinching at the pulses.

Still trying to put it all into words, I think of 'pour' and 'flood'. A river 'in flood' is to be overflowing at its banks. I think of 'new', again. 'Opportunity'. What does opportunity mean? I suppose it means possibility. For new feelings, new experiences, new loves. I suppose it means 'hope'.

Anemone

'It's a dahlia, like the flower,' says Emma, holding one of the several guides to sea life we're softening the spines of. Taking shelter from the rain we gather in the village hall, recalibrating ourselves to solid ground for a chance to process all we've seen so far. Huddling around the computer screen, a photograph of the dahlia anemone's magenta tentacles beams pinky-blue light into our unblinking eyes, lashes sticking with salt.

There are anemones that swim, and anemones that prefer the stability of seaweed or the snug crevices of barnacle encrusted rocks. (Side note: I think that, by this point, barnacle encrusted might as well be one word). Velvety green and pink snakelocks anemones perch upon slender tips of seagrass, while bigger ones, lilac like parma violets, settle on rocks covered in cotton candy algae. One anemone was cooied onto a gigantic ribbon of rippling sugar kelp, curled up at the edges, the seaweed glowing golden in the sunlight as if presenting the anemone in an ornamental bowl. I couldn't begin to imagine how much it's all worth.

Seagrass

It's astonishing how many young sea creatures look at a single blade of grass and see it as somewhere safe to grow. As home. Each green tip holds something more divine than the last. Urchins I could place on the tip of my finger (I won't), not the colour of grapes but the gushing purple of something grape flavoured. A starfish the same colour hugs – I mean literally holds on with its bright purple jelly baby arms – a long green stem and slides almost imperceptibly down to safety. In other words, away from me. Down on the floor, black and white candy stripe flatworms ripple along the sugary white sand. Wondering what the movement reminds me of I realise it is, of course, 'the worm', which is a bit of an anticlimax. It wriggles alongside clusters of white luminescent sea squirts and the sunlight splices between each quivering jelly orb. Light weaving through light. Backlit by the summer sun, the seagrass turns fluorescent apple green and some of the slick stems are topped with small, sorbet coloured snakelocks anemones. Tentacles swaying like silk in the wind, stems dipping in the current, all of it dancing in the same sunlight as we do.

Serpulid worms

Calcium carbonate tubes coil around undersea rocks, formed by the serpulid worm curled up inside, from where fans of red feathery plumes emerge. Bright red. Fire engine red. Chilli pepper red. Finally found the perfect lipstick red.

Their tentacles are more sensitive to touch than I can imagine, sensitive as my own may seem to me; the slightest ripple and they rapidly retract into their tubes in a blink-and-you'll-miss-it motion, and I often did. They look like tiny whack-a-moles. Less violently, I almost expect to hear musical notes sounding through the water as they disappear one by one, like the ding-donging of a glockenspiel.

I see an exuberant display of scarlet fans and slowly drift towards it, sneaking softly, silently, trying to move without moving. Without taking my gaze from the burning cluster of colour, I reach for my camera. Slowly, slowly. I raise it in front of my face. Slowly. But in a flash, they disappear. The heat of the scene is extinguished like candles blown out on a birthday cake. The sea darkens and dulls without their fire.

Boathouse

We leave darkening skies for the timber walls of the boathouse, where above our heads, old bones of boats embrace us like the ribs of a whale. People drag chairs and benches across the floor and cluster together, warming their hands with bowls of homemade chilli and letting the day sink in. 'What did you see?' we ask each other eagerly, while pointing to photographs on our phones, 'What's this?'

Outside, the clouds fizz as the thickening storm presses silver light through the windows, pooling onto plastic tablecloths and over our skin, into drinks, over salty, sticky hair. It fills our mouths when they open in wonder at stories of the undersea. Flashes of lightning fill the room and my skin tingles with a phantom shock. When the time comes for song, the half-full room feels like it could burst. Like it could spill out of the windows, through electric air and into the sea. Sparks from the storm would cascade down to the water's surface but we'd be safe below, singing amongst the brittle stars.