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## A Swim Stroke in Verse: Seventeen Giant Manta Rays and One Hut

### Abstract

Because the ocean steals...

### Cover Page Footnote

A Swim Stroke in Verse was originally published at *Booth*.



October 16, 2015

# A Swim Stroke in Verse: Seventeen Giant Manta Rays and One Hut

by Charlotte Pence

Because the ocean steals  
the color red  
at certain depths. Because

the ocean steals.

Because the ocean—  
a hundred feet of it,  
is squatting on my back.

Because.

A gentle, ungentle casket.

I tell myself to breathe.

---

Past the depth for recreation. Past  
the depth for seeing the surface. Past  
the depth for assistance, if need be.

The nothing impressed. No fish, no speech,  
no coral. Ocean's bottom like the beach  
somewhere, some waves, above me.

A desert in the ocean. A cleaning station  
for giant manta rays. A meeting of titans  
and tiny wrasse who munch off parasites.

I'd been told to lie on the ocean floor  
and wait. But the currents tumbled, tore  
me over myself. I grabbed at sand, trying

to embed, to claw, to force knees down.  
Legs kept lifting, pulling the body out. I found  
a shell and spiked it. But it, too, failed,

leaving me to thrash in an effort to stay.  
Leaving me to suck more oxygen, stray  
toward blue, search for the first glint:

the ghost of a white fin.

---

Let me draw a picture. I  
was right there—at the top.  
But they—creatures that live  
in the deep—were deeper. I was at  
the summit of the underwater cliff, if  
you believe cliffs exist under water. The world  
a mimicry of mountain ranges. Some groan under  
water; some glare above it. But the same possibility exists:  
to hang one's head over the edge, wonder what else is out there  
are out there. I hoped they would glide up the cliff wall, glide over  
my back, wait like I was waiting for the cleaner fish to come nibble  
along their bellies. Parasites irresistible as a platter of wet grapes. Slime,  
a wine. Like all travelers, I looked over the edge, into watered sky that would  
squish my lungs, loop my brain, carbon my blood. And I felt tempted to jump.

---

They

Into the blue.  
Into the blue, the divers call.  
Into the blue, the divers call the depths

that will wring out

their lungs.

I stared, wanting it.  
    Wanting it to change.  
    Wanting to change into it.  
    Wanting to change into its color of silence.  
    Glide

into the blue that burns off the world,  
off the problems of the body,

wanting to ride the thick,  
                    the thick neck of wind,  
    of horse,  
of February plains

when nothing  
    is coming  
            but more.  
            (cold, wind, dark)

And then,  
    out of this country,  
out of the blue—  
White.

White glint.

White glint not of a ghost

    but a giant.

---

Flash of flapped wing emerged into another wing, a belly, a tail, and then the rectangular, car-wash mouth. It swam low and close, an arm's length away,

watching me watching it. I stared at the eye, moving slow in its socket. Stared at the body the size of a living room. What most interested me was the calm. He flapped his wings, only once, in order to hover, a stroke as a way to stay. And then another arrived, and another, until seventeen rays coasted beside the line of my body. Beginning of one ending with another.

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We all think of suddenly ceasing to be. Enjoy the nibble of it. Isn't that invisibility what we are singing to as we drive fast and west through the red rock? No one around except haze ghosting the road. Or in the Midwest, the skittering rows of corn that flip by like decked cards—and the one dead stalk stands like an open door to somewhere grander. Or the X of wood over the old mine shaft. Tempting. All tempting. What is it, though, that calls us back? Dishes? Daughters? Anxious dogs looking out the front window? I imagined a hut hunkered at the ecotone where beach becomes buried in palms. A hut with a dirt floor. A woman is crouched on the floor with her arms over her head. Elbows make divots in the ground. She will stop crying once she can forget about herself, just for a second. Maybe she'll smell the damp clean of dirt, so close to her now, and will realize she needs to wipe her nose. The snot is tickling. And that thought leads her to notice her hair, also tickling, and she'll wipe the strands from her face, the universal gesture that means: I have decided to return. I've decided to return to the world as it is—the tedium, the demands, the water that always needs boiling. She will begin again by clearing the table of its noodle-stuck, oil-slicked plates, washing them for the thousandth time. The air in the hut, the drone of the radio, the scratch of the lizard on the room... And there is the chicken. Her favorite one. The chicken needs her to throw out the feed again, fill the laundry detergent's re-used cup, clear plastic now opaque with corn dust. She will scoop into the grain sack and toss the feed across the yard with such force, as if the yellow arc that hangs before the clatter is not gold, but that other thing we need even more.

Charlotte Pence's first full-length poetry collection, *Many Small Fires* (Black Lawrence Press, 2015) explores her father's chronic homelessness while simultaneously detailing the physiological changes that enabled humans to form cities, communities, and households. A professor of English and creative writing at Eastern Illinois University, she is also the author of two award-winning poetry chapbooks and the editor of *The Poetics of American Song Lyrics* (University Press of Mississippi, 2012).