

WE ARE PLANKTON

This resource has been produced for About Us as part of UNBOXED: Creativity in the UK.

This interdisciplinary resource brings together creative writing, literature and science: teachers can use it in the classroom to explore literary techniques in scientific contexts, and to explore the creativity behind scientific themes. Older students can use the resource in their own time to further their reading and generate ideas for poems of their own.

CURRICULUM LINKS

England:

English: Writing & Reading
Composition
Science: Working Scientifically, Living Things & Their Habitats (Y4–6), Interactions & Interdependencies (KS3)

Key Stages: KS2, KS3, KS4

Northern Ireland:

Language & Literacy:
Writing & Reading
Science & Technology:
Organisms & Health
The World Around Us:
Interdependence
Key Stages: KS1, KS2,

KS3, KS4

Scotland:

Literacy & English – Writing & Reading
Science: Planet Earth
Levels: First Level, Second Level, Third/Fourth Level, Senior Phase

Wales:

Languages, Literacy & Communication:
Literature
Science & Technology:
Being Curious, The World Around Us
Progression Steps: PS2, PS3, PS4, PS5

AGES 7–15

Topics

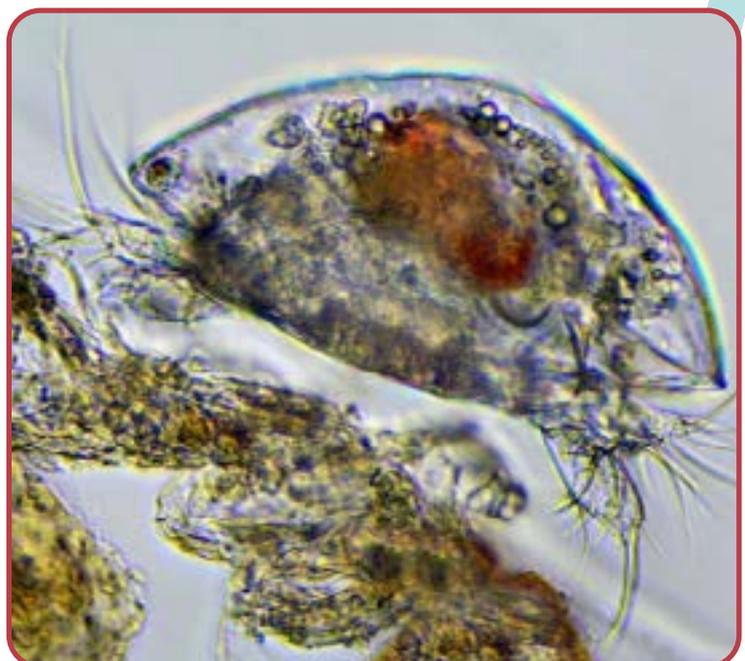
- plankton
- tiny organisms
- Shetland dialect
- sustainability and our future
- wellbeing and resilience

This resource looks at a new poem and related material by poet Jen Hadfield, working in collaboration with photographer Alfred Kern and musician Jenny Sturgeon. The poem, 'Plankton', explores the magic of those tiny organisms that live in the sea, and how they are connected to their wider environment. It includes words in Shetland dialect, with a glossary. The resource contains discussion and writing prompts for young people to engage with the text and create their own poem in response.

GETTING STARTED

The poem you are about to read is all about plankton and how important even very tiny things can be in relation to the wider world. What's the smallest thing you can think of? Why is it important, and how does it relate to its surroundings? Is an elephant any more or less important than an ant?

What do you know about plankton? If you had to draw it, what would that look like? Perhaps you will see some photos of plankton in this resource that will surprise you.



Here is a poem about plankton, by Jen Hadfield. Read the poem aloud to a friend, a parent or guardian, or the rest of the class. Don't worry if some words feel unfamiliar – just try and get a sense of how they fit in the rest of the sentence, and the sounds of them when you say them.

PLANKTON

Is this gentleness –
is this lightsomeness –
is this sense of this
ease a thing imagined?

Is this clemency –
is this wait and see –
is this anytime –

this creel sinking down
through
a
clear
sea –

is this *peeriewise* –
are these tender lights –
is this unlocked door,
these loosely clutching *drooie-lines* –
is this lack of guile –
is this *ower weel* –
is this *back o twal* –

this wishful
thinking meaning
well –

is this rule of thumb –
hit'll aa come in time –
although the evidence
would have me thinking otherwise –
is this champagne bloom –
this transparent room –

this grace this
ease by heart
by eye

expendable in your sight?

GLOSSARY

A lot of these phrases can't quite be translated directly into English, which is fun. Before you read on, can you guess what some of the unfamiliar words might mean?

Here, the poet, Jen Hadfield, offers a sense of their meaning...

back o twal

if someone says to come round at the 'back o twal', it's sometime around midday or midnight

drooie-lines

eel-grass, a kind of seaweed that looks like very long strands of juicy green spaghetti

hit'll aa come in time

'we'll get there in the end'. I was thinking about the climate crisis here, and whether we will change enough, soon enough

lightsomeness

a Shetland word that roughly means 'light-heartedness'. It's a very important word in Shetland, and people use it all the time.

ower weel

this is hard to translate! People say it when they don't like someone or something much, but don't want to be so rude as to say so

peerie-wise

peerie means 'little'. *Peerie-wise* means 'gently', or 'little by little', or 'carefully'

creel

a basket for carrying fish or a trap for catching lobsters



GOING WITH THE FLOW

Jen says:

Plankton go with the flow, because they have no choice.

Planktos means ‘wandering’. If you live in the sea, and you’re too weak to swim against the current, you are plankton, part of that population of often microscopic sea-animals and plants whose nightly commute from the bottom of the ocean to the top is part of the biggest migration on earth.

Individually, many plankton are invisible to the naked eye, but, at the same time, this migration is visible from space. They include fish eggs, jellyfish, crab larvae and other teeny-tiny beasties. *Zooplankton* (animals) eat *phytoplankton* (plants), and fish and big mammals like whales depend on plankton to survive, too.

They’re a vital part of the food chain, and plankton consume carbon dioxide. When they die, they fall down into the deep ocean, where much of that carbon dioxide is stored, instead of being released into the atmosphere. It’s called *marine snow*.

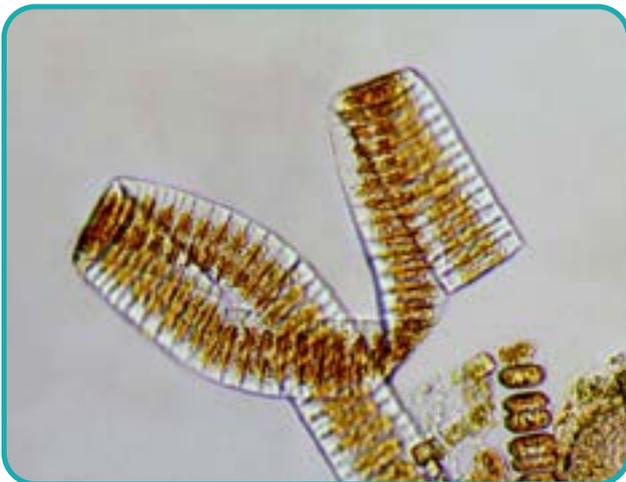
In our busy, ambitious, human lives, we get a lot of chat about achievement and ambition. It is how we survive. It’s how we created the climate crisis, and it will also be how we limit it. But sometimes, you just have to see where the tide takes you, and your imagination especially appreciates that kind of freedom.

Shetland, where I live, is an island community of 23,000 folk halfway between Aberdeen and Norway. We’re far out, and at the centre of the world. People are often surprised by how busy life is here. Sometimes, though, you still meet a lovely go-with-the-flow attitude that feels very healthy. Some of the Shetland phrases in ‘Plankton’ reflect this.

Unusually for me, I wrote this poem as a song, and it came to me through the tick-tocking sound of the open G and D strings on my mandolin. Something about the ringing, high clarity of the notes made me think of plankton – the kind that emit bioluminescence, which means that they glow in the dark. If you swim in the sea at night in Shetland at certain times of year, you can see them, twinkling like fairy lights.

Alfred Kern, who lives in Shetland, took these photographs of phytoplankton and zooplankton through his microscope in the water just off the pier in Weisdale. Maybe you can see what I meant by ‘transparent room’, when you see how many of them are sort of see-through, almost like jewels.

I wanted this song-poem to feel very gentle and wandering. It asks what we can learn from plankton, even though most of us hardly ever think about them. Where would we be without them?





THINGS TO CHAT ABOUT

- What expressions do you use that are hard to translate into other languages?
- A lot gets written about charismatic animals that are at risk of extinction, like puffins and polar bears. Does it matter that thousands of less charismatic animals become extinct or endangered without us noticing? Could writing something make a difference?
- I often think of a poem as being like a snow-globe. You can create a whole, perfect miniature world/scenario, and shake it up, and watch the marine snow falling down. What kind of scene does the snow-globe in 'Plankton' create? What are you seeing in your mind's eye?
- If you look, you'll see that 'Plankton' is a whole string of incomplete questions and that only one – the last one – is answered. What kind of emotional tone does that give the poem?
- I mean, really, how does that make you feel? Listen to the song, and make a list of sensations/emotions that you're feeling in your body. Which words/sounds created those feelings?
- What's the difference between a poem and song lyrics, if anything? Try reading this on the page first, and listening afterwards, to help you think about this. What do voices, instruments, rhythm, silence, add?



WRITING YOUR OWN POEM: TEENYTINY

Writing, thinking and talking about the wild world, it's easy for us to forget, these days, that we're part of it, that we depend on the ecosystems around us as much as plankton too. I want you to write something that crosses that divide and remembers that we're animals too and that we are all in it together.

A lot of nature poetry is about charismatic animals, like polar bears and puffins. I'd like you to choose something small and humble and easily overlooked. You could write something that praises the bacteria that live in your gut, or the spider that lives on the kitchen ceiling. Or the so-called weed that sprouts out of the roof of the bus shelter. Or the microscopic yeast organisms in the air that make sourdough bread rise. You could write a love poem to your own white blood cells, or write a poem in praise of a nit.

Try to write the way you speak, the way you would talk to a close friend. Your writing might feel very different to the kind of thing you normally write in school. Good. You want to write about your chosen crumb of nature in a comfy, chilled-out, familiar sort of way. Slang is fine.

This resource and the poem contained within it, 'Plankton' were written by poet Jen Hadfield. Jen is a poet and visual artist based in the Shetland Islands. She has published four collections of poetry. Her second collection *Nigh-No-Place* won the TS Eliot Prize. Most recently, *The Stone Age* was selected as the Poetry Book Society choice for spring 2021.

The images were provided by photographer Alfred Kern. Poem 'Plankton' © Jen Hadfield. Images © Alfred Kern.



NEXT STEPS

For more poetry opportunities, check out Young Poets Network, The Poetry Society's free online platform for poets worldwide up to the age of 25. You'll find features, challenges and competitions to inspire your own writing, as well as new writing from young poets, and advice from the rising and established stars of the poetry scene. youngpoetsnetwork.org.uk

About this project

About Us is one of ten commissions for UNBOXED: Creativity in the UK. The project explores the infinite ways we are connected to the universe, the natural world and one another. A major live show toured the UK in spring 2022.

59 Productions is an award-winning design studio and production company who created the breath-taking video design for the London 2012 Olympic Opening Ceremony. Stemettes is an award-winning social enterprise working to bring young women and non-binary young people into Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) careers. The Poetry Society is an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation and is one of the UK's most dynamic arts organisations, championing poetry for all ages.