Eel Tail

SUMMARY

Every now and then you can see these "mudfish": eels that look like short lead pipes and hide in the mud when the water recedes. They move like ropes or wag like a dog's tail. They are mystical, ancient creatures from before the world existed, related to the moon. They love the dark and being alone, and they prefer to emerge when the light of the moon is blocked by clouds. They vanish the moment you spot them. They're like interruptions whispered in a strange language, with their broad, cracked, unspeaking lips. Their presence can be mistaken for the wind blowing against the water.

When that wind settles, you continue to search for them as they lurk in shadows under the surface of the water like tiny, unpredictable currents. You lift up the "rooves" they hide under (that is, shelters like rocks and logs), revealing their smooth bodies that lack arms and legs. They look like the pipes of a plumbing system underlying their habitat, the marshes, continually sucking up the water as they breathe. Sometimes, though, they disappear in a flash of ripples that look like a coy little smile. They vanish the moment you spot them. They're evasive and impossible to grasp, like interruptions whispered in a strange language, with their broad, cracked, unspeaking lips. Their presence can be mistaken for the wind rustling the reeds.

When the wind settles, you continue to search for them as they swim backward through the water, those flowing veins of the sea. Like ropes of darkness, tendrils of a retreating dream, or roots of spreading shadow, they tunnel back into the gravel at the bottom of their bodies of water, disappearing like droplets evaporating in the air. They vanish the moment you spot them. They're like interruptions whispered in a strange language, with their broad, cracked, unspeaking lips. Their presence can be mistaken for the wind blowing past your ears.

And when the wind settles, you can catch a glimpse of the skinny end of the eel's tail (as curved and thin as the last few stages of the waning moon) slipping out of view as the eel tunnels back into darkness. As soon as you see her or remark on her presence, she vanishes.

THEMES

THE SLIPPERINESS OF NATURE

In Alice Oswald poem's "Eel Tail," the speaker uses the evasive, shy nature of eels to illustrate how humanity often fails to fully capture or understand the natural world. Gazing into the shallows of a river, the speaker observes that it's just about impossible to clearly see an eel; by the time you recognize what that wiggle in the water was, the eel itself is already gone. The eels' slipperiness suggests that nature itself is a mysterious place. There's an unbridgeable (and fascinating) gap, the poem implies, between humanity and the animal kingdom.

The poem's speaker tries their best to spot eels, "intent[ly] gazing at the mud flats" to see if they can catch a glimpse of one. However, the eels are constantly disappearing: the speaker only knows them by the way they look when they're vanishing. Throughout the poem, eels never make a clear appearance, in fact. Instead, the speaker spots them when they're in the process of disappearing or "transforming" into a different part of the natural world, like the water or the wind. Every stanza of the poem includes some variation on the phrase "then as soon as you see them / gone."

Even when the speaker *does* seem to spot an eel, it remains slippery: eels evade not just the speaker's eyes, but their powers of description. Trying to describe what an eel looks like, the speaker calls them "pre-world creatures" and "cousins of the moon" before comparing them to "the bends of some huge plumbing system," "sea-veins," "dream-lines," and "long roots of penumbra" (that is, wiggly, root-like shadows). All these different images suggest that the eels are ancient, shadowy, and elusive. But they also suggest that the eels won't hold still to be pinned down in words any more than they'll hold still for the speaker to look at them. There's no simple way to describe them.

The eels' elusiveness points to a marked difference between the human speaker and the animal world. Eels, in this poem, are both ungraspable and somehow "unspeakable"—they can't quite be captured in language. This kind of wordless mystery, the speaker suggests, is what makes nature so powerful and interesting.

The poem's title—"Eel Tail"—reinforces the speaker's point. Eels are basically all tail, but the tail is typically considered the "last" part of an animal: the part you see as it's running (or swimming) away. By naming the poem "Eel Tail," the author suggests that the eels—like the rest of the natural world—might be fascinating because they evade perception.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-44

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-7

sometimes you see ...
... of the unmoon

The poem begins with a conditional statement: "sometimes you see mudfish." The speaker addresses the reader using the second person, which immediately submerges the reader in the world of the poem. It's also interesting that the speaker doesn't use the word "eels," but instead opts for "mudfish"—another name for the mysterious ever-changing creatures, which "you" can never expect (and only "sometimes" hope) to see.

The speaker uses figurative language to describe the way eels look and act. They're "short lead lengths," a metaphor comparing the eels to lead pipes based on the way their gray, cylindrical bodies look when they're at rest, and they "hide at low tide" while "roping and wagging," moving like ropes or dog tails. These are strange, skittish animals.

The speaker's next descriptions lean towards the mythic and abstract. They call eels "preliminary, pre-world creatures, cousins of the moon"—almost placing these strange beasts on a pedestal, or elevating them to a level worthy of worship:

- "Preliminary" suggests that eels, with their sleek bodies, are some evolutionary relic; they're a starting point for later, more complicated animals. They are utterly *ancient*.
- Likewise, they're "pre-world": they belong to a time before the world as human beings know it even existed.
- Finally, they're "cousins of the moon"—something utterly alien, not of the earth itself. The moon is often a symbol of mystery and magic, further conveying the otherworldly strangeness of the eels.

Part of what makes eels so intriguing is their evasiveness, of course. If they weren't so hard to spot, the poem implies, then they wouldn't be so fascinating! The speaker states that eels "love blackness, aloofness"—personifying them as cold, solitary creatures who prefer their own company and move only "under cover of the unmoon." In other words, they don't emerge until clouds pass over the moon, obscuring its light.

Notice how the hissing sibilance of "blackness, aloofness" evokes the eels' swift, slithery movements. Indeed, the poem is filled with sonic devices that bring its slippery imagery to life. Listen to these devices at work in lines 1-3:

> sometimes you see mudfish,
> those short lead lengths of eels
> that hide at low tide

Sibilance (those /s/ and /sh/) sounds cast an eerie hush over the poem, while liquid /l/ sounds evoke the creatures' smooth, fluid motions. Assonance ("lead lengths") and internal rhyme ("hide"/"tide") make the length yet more rhythmic and hypnotic.

LINES 8-12

and then as ...
... when it clears

The speaker describes how quickly eels disappear. These lines will reappear throughout the poem like the chorus of a song, reflecting the speaker's own cycle of almost finding and then losing sight of the eels.

Just when "you" finally think you've gotten a glimpse of the mysterious creatures, the speaker says, they're "gone"; they move so swiftly that they seem to outright vanish.

The speaker then uses two surreal metaphors to describe the eels that help illustrate their elusive mystery:

- First, the speaker says that they make "untranslatable hissed interruptions." The metaphor speaks to the way that the eels' sudden appearance and departure "interrupt" their surroundings/the speaker's vision. They speak in "untranslatable hisse[s]," a foreign tongue that's impossible for human beings to understand. The sibilance of the metaphor (untranslatable hissed interruptions") adds a snakelike hiss to the line.
- Next, the speaker describes the creatures' "unspeakable wide chapped lips": their broad, cracked mouths. That these lips are "unspeakable" can be read in a few ways:
    - The eels themselves cannot *speak*, at least not in words that humans can understand.
    - Or, perhaps, this means that people cannot adequately describe the eels in human language.
    - "Unspeakable" can also refer to something that's too terrible to talk about, suggesting that the eels' are utterly grotesque and alien.

The parallelism between the words "untranslatable" and "unspeakable" contribute to the poem's lulling, pulsing rhythm while simultaneously explaining just how impossible eels are to describe. Adequate language, like the creatures themselves, quickly slips away.

The speaker also notes how easy it is to mistake the eels for something else: they disappear so quickly that an onlooker might think the ripples left behind are merely the result of "the wind again cursing the water." Personification makes the natural world here seem at once hostile and vividly alive: the wind swears at the water or wishes it harm.

LINES 13-19

you keep looking ...
... smirk of ripples

At the beginning of the second stanza, the speaker addresses the reader directly once more: "you," the speaker says, "keep looking and looking" for the eels. The diacope of "looking and looking" emphasizes the futility of searching for these creatures, which continually evade your grasp.

Note how, once again, the speaker again doesn't name the eels directly. They call them "underlurkers," creatures that lie in wait beneath other objects. Using another metaphor, the speaker calls them "uncontrolled little eddies": a reference to the way they speed through the water, leaving little whirlpools in their wake. They're defined by their skittish behavior and the signs they leave behind.

Next, the speaker says that when you lift up "their rooves"—the objects under which they're lurking, such as rocks or other aquatic debris—you'll spot them. They "lie limbless and hairless," the fluid /l/ alliteration and consonance evoking the smoothness of the creatures' bodies.

They also resemble "the bends of some huge plumbing system" irrigating their habitat (the marshes), a simile that closely mirrors the "short lead lengths" the speaker compares the eels to all the way back at the beginning of the poem. The eels are so mysterious, so alien that—even at rest, when they're not moving or swimming away—they still don't look like normal animals, but are instead closer to pipes and machinery.

Again, the poem's sounds evoke its eerie, watery setting. The sibilance of lines 17-18 evokes the squelching and hiss the metaphorical plumping system draining the mashes:

> like the bends of some huge plumbing system
> sucking and sucking the marshes and
> sometimes its just a smirk of ripples

The diacope of "sucking and sucking" echoes that of "looking and looking" from the first line of the stanza, again conveying a sense of relentlessness.

The enjambment of these lines mirrors the swift, fluid movement of the eels themselves. Take lines 15-19:

> when you lever their rooves up
> they lie limbless hairless
> like the bends of some huge plumbing system
> sucking and sucking the marshes and
> sometimes its just a smirk of ripples

There are no real pauses here; the poem just keeps winding down the page. This enjambment conveys both the relentlessness of the speaker's search for the eels and the way that the creatures constantly slip out of reach.

LINES 20-27

and then as ...
... backlashes waterwicks

The speaker repeats the lines that concluded the first stanza, with some minor variations. This repetition highlights the futility of the speaker's search. Again, the speaker points out that just when you think you've spotted these elusive creatures, they're "gone." The eels wriggle away before you're even positive that you've seen them at all.

Indeed, upon hearing those "untranslatable hissed interruptions," you might simply think "it's the wind again." Instead of saying that the wind is "cursing the water," now the speaker says that the wind is "bothering the reeds"—a somewhat gentler personification of the wind rustling around the eels' watery habitat. Even though the wind isn't troubling the speaker (or the environment) as aggressively as before, it isn't making finding the eels any easier! Once the wind has settled down, "you keep looking and looking" for the eels—a process that leads to no more fruitful results than it did the first time around.

This time the speaker calls the eels "backlashes": a word meant to describe the way eels can move backward through the water (or, perhaps, to the way that they create ripples in their wake as they swim ahead). They're also "waterwicks," a metaphor, that draws a parallel between the ropelike wicks of candles and the eels' thin bodies. To "wick" can also mean to absorb a liquid, so this metaphor might refer to the fact that eels breathe by sucking up water and absorbing its oxygen through their gills. The whooshing /w/ and crisp /k/ sounds of these words ("backlashses," "waterwicks") calls readers' attention to the eels' surreal, elusive presence once more.

LINES 28-38

you keep finding ...
... when it clears

The speaker next describes the eels as "sea-veins," a metaphor that speaks to their long, thin bodies and also suggests that there's something vital about their presence in the ocean; if they're "veins," then the sea's life force flows through these creatures.

The following metaphors are all deeply abstract, but they share a common thread in that each presents the eels as *just* out of reach; like a dream that you can vaguely *sense* but not sharply *remember*, they're right on the edge of the speaker's perception.

- First, the speaker calls the eels "little cables of shadow." The word "cables" echoes the speaker's earlier comparisons of the eels to lead pipes or part of a "plumbing system" beneath the marshes. The speaker sees echoes of the human world in nature—or, perhaps, of nature in the human world.

And yet, the speaker still can't get a real grip on these slippery creatures. The word "shadow" reflects both their dark color and the idea that they continually evade the speaker's grasp; you can't hold onto a "shadow."

- The eels are also "vanishing dream lines," which might be a reference to the way that one's memories of dreams quickly slip away soon after waking up.
- Finally, they're "long roots of the penumbra." A penumbra refers to the edge of a shadow, where it meets the light, or to the outer region of a shadow that's less shaded than the rest.

Again, these images convey the sensation of being right on the edge of something, of something slipping *just* out of reach. The eels are in the speaker's periphery; the speaker can sense them, be fascinated by them, but see them clearly.

And just like that, the eels burrow into the gravel below their watery habitats, impossibly disappearing "as quick as drips" evaporating in the air. Once again—"as soon as you see them / gone."

The speaker repeats the poem's refrain once more, this time noting that the wind is "pushing on your ears." The wind is getting closer to the speaker here, blowing in their ears. The speaker seems right on the cusp of connecting with the natural world.

LINES 39-44

sometimes you see ...
... gone

Earlier in the poem, the speaker described eels as "cousins of the moon." Now, in the poem's final moments, the speaker imagines spotting one that looks like the "whip-thin / tail of a waning moon" itself. In the last part of the lunar cycle, the waning crescent moon becomes a thin sliver in the sky. This metaphor evokes both the eels' physical appearance and the fact that they always seem to be "waning"—slipping away.

Indeed, every time the speaker glimpses eels, they're in the process of disappearing. As soon as the speaker sees the eel's tail, it has already started "burrowing back into blackness." The heaving /b/ alliteration makes this phrase sound heavy and blunt, evoking the swift, forceful motion of the eels as they tunnel into the dark.

The poem's final lines then feature two interesting variations on the refrain that has appeared throughout. First, the speaker replaces "them" with "her": the poem has zoomed in on a *specific*, *individual* eel. The creature seems a little less anonymous this time around.

Next, the speaker doesn't jump straight from "and then as soon as you see her" to the expected "gone." Instead, the speaker repeats the "and then" line almost word for word:

and then as soon as you see her
and then as soon as you say so

This repetition stretches out the poem's final moments, ramping up the drama and anticipation. It's as though the speaker is *this close* to finally seeing an eel. And yet, as soon as you "say so," the eel disappears.

That "say so" is a new phrase in the poem. The creature slips away before you can say, "There's an eel!" More generally, it implies that it's not just *seeing* the eel that feels impossible; it's also impossible to accurately capture the eel's essence in *language*—or poetry! The creature evades accurate description and human understanding altogether. The poem then ends, appropriately, with the word "gone." Once again, the eels vanish.

SYMBOLS

THE MOON

The moon is a common symbol of mystery, magic, and change, and the eels' connection to the moon reflects their elusiveness and otherworldly strangeness. The speaker calls the eels "cousins of the moon," for example, suggesting that they're somehow alien—that they don't seem to belong to the earth at all. The speaker adds that the eels "always move under cover of the unmoon." This might refer to the time when clouds pass in front of the moon at night, obscuring it from view. The image implies that eels seek out darkness and obscurity and are most comfortable at night or where no one can see them plainly; they like to hide.

The moon is also associated with movement and transformation. It pulls the ocean's tides for example; in myth, the full moon turns humans into werewolves; and the moon itself waxes and wanes, growing larger and smaller over time. The speaker describes one particular eel's vanishing tail as a "waning moon" in the poem's final moments, a metaphor that conveys the eels' shifty, slippery, constantly changing nature. They stay still long enough to get a good look. One moment you think you're seeing "lead pipes" beneath the marsh, and the next all you see is the "smirk of ripples" on the water after they swim away.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "cousins of the moon"
- **Line 7:** "always move under cover of the unmoon"
- **Lines 39-41:** "sometimes you see that whip-thin / tail of a waning moon start / burrowing back into blackness"

DARKNESS AND SHADOWS

The poem repeatedly links the eels with darkness, which symbolizes the unknown. The eels "love blackness," lurk under "rooves" of aquatic debris, and burrow into the darkness the moment you spot them. The speaker also compares them to "cables of shadow" and "long roots of the penumbra." These images convey that the speaker can never truly understand these creatures, nor, the poem hints, can humanity ever truly understand the animal world; some parts of nature will always be in the dark.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "who love blackness"
- **Lines 29-30:** "little cables of shadow, vanishing / dream-lines long roots of the penumbra"
- **Line 41:** "burrowing back into blackness"

POETIC DEVICES

REPETITION

"Eel Tail" is an extremely repetitive poem, as the speaker returns to specific words, phrases, and grammatical constructions again and again throughout. All this repetition makes sense: the speaker insists that it's just about impossible to ever get a good look at the eels, so all "you" can do is keep "looking and looking." The poem keeps circling back on itself, conveying the sense that the eels are continually *just* out of reach.

For example, the word "sometimes" (twice also followed by "you see") and the phrase "you keep" (followed by "looking" or "finding") pop up at the start of multiple lines:

- "sometimes you see mudfish,"
- "you keep looking and looking for those"
- "sometimes its just a smirk of ripples
- "you keep looking and looking for those"
- "you keep finding those sea-veins still"
- "sometimes you see that whip-thin"

There's repetition *within* these phrases as well, as with the diacope of the phrase "looking and looking" (a phrase that *itself* appears twice in the poem). Again, the repetitive phrasing relays just how extensive this "looking" is; it seems to never end, so "you keep" going and going. (The diacope of "sucking and sucking" likewise creates emphasis; the eels' are endlessly "sucking" up the water of the marsh.)

The poem also repeats an entire chunk of lines three times, creating a refrain:

> and then as soon as you see them
> gone
> untranslatable hissed interruptions
> unspeakable wide chapped lips
> it's the wind again [...] and when it clears

The repetition of these lines emphasizes the slippery nature of the eels: over and over, "you" spot the eels only for them to vanish so quickly that you're not sure you ever saw them in the first place. Time and again, you think "it's the wind" causing ripples along the surface of the water, rustling the reeds, or whooshing past your ears. And "when" the wind "clears," you start the search anew.

At the very end of the poem, however, the speaker varies the refrain:

- First, "and then as soon as you see them" turns into "and then as soon as you see her." The speaker has zoomed in on *one specific eel here*, making the image more precise by using the pronoun "her." You're not focusing on a mass of anonymous thems, but one specific creature.
- Next, the speaker repeats the previous line almost word for word: "and then as soon as you say so." This parallelism ramps up the drama; there's now an extra beat between the "and then" part of the refrain and the "gone" that readers have come to expect. You're so close to the eel that it seems, for a moment, like you might actually get a hold of her; alas, she evades your grasp once more.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "sometimes"
- **Lines 8-12:** "and then as soon as you see them / gone / untranslatable hissed interruptions / unspeakable wide chapped lips / it's the wind again"
- **Line 12:** "and when it clears"
- **Line 13:** "you keep looking and looking for those"
- **Line 19:** "sometimes"
- **Lines 20-24:** "and then as soon as you see them / gone / untranslatable hissed interruptions / unspeakable wide chapped lips / it's the wind again"
- **Line 25:** "and when it clears"
- **Line 26:** "you keep looking and looking for those"
- **Line 28:** "you keep finding those"
- **Lines 33-37:** "and then as soon as you see them / gone / untranslatable hissed interruptions / unspeakable wide chapped lips / it's the wind again"
- **Line 38:** "and when it clears"
- **Line 39:** "sometimes"
- **Lines 42-44:** "and then as soon as you see her / and then as soon as you say so / gone"

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker personifies the eels throughout the poem, granting them human-like characteristics. Somewhat ironically, the poem's use of personification highlights the *division* between the human and natural worlds rather than making them seem more alike. Personification emphasizes that the speaker can only view the eels through a human lens despite the fact that they're deeply strange, unfathomable, almost alien creatures.

For example, the speaker says that the eels "love blackness, aloofness." As far as we know, relatively simple creatures like fish and eels don't experience feelings like "love" in the same way that people do! Nevertheless, stating that they "love" particular atmospheres or environments helps sets the poem's tone: it suggests that they have mysterious motives and a kind of animal intelligence that humans are unable to understand. The eels thrive in darkness and solitude, things that people tend to find frightening or lonely.

The speaker personifies the wind and water throughout the poem as well, making nature itself seem vividly alive. When the wind causes ripples on the marsh's surface, the speaker describes this as "the wind again cursing the water." The wind seems violent here, either swearing at the water or wishing it ill. Later, the speaker says that the water is "bothering the reeds" and "pushing on your ears." Again, the wind seems hostile or, at the very least, annoying. The water is somewhat irksome as well, with its "smirk of ripples" that seem to mock the speaker.

Really, the speaker seems to be projecting their own frustration onto the marsh for seeming to interfere with their eel-spotting. The wind and water confuse the speaker and thwart their attempts to definitively catch a clear glimpse of the eels. Personification again highlights the separation between humanity and nature, a world that the poem implies people can never fully fathom.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "who love blackness, aloofness,"
- **Line 12:** "it's the wind again cursing the water"
- **Line 19:** "a smirk of ripples"
- **Lines 22-23:** "untranslatable hissed interruptions / unspeakable wide chapped lips"
- **Lines 24-25:** "it's the wind again / bothering the reeds"
- **Lines 35-36:** "untranslatable hissed interruptions / unspeakable wide chapped lips"
- **Lines 37-38:** "it's the wind again / pushing on your ears"

METAPHOR

The poem's frequent metaphors help to capture the eels' mysterious nature. The speaker keeps comparing the creatures to other things, reflecting the fact that their essence is difficult to pin down in human language.

For example, the speaker calls the eels "preliminary, pre-world creatures, cousins of the moon." The eels look like ancient creatures, so old that they're remnants from a world that existed before our own. They're "preliminary": the first go at something, an early stage of life. They're related to the moon, so strange as to seem not of this earth. The moon is often a symbol of mystery and magic, so calling them "cousins of the moon" further hints at the eels' surreal, even supernatural presence.

The poem's metaphors create vivid imagery throughout the poem as well. Readers can picture their long, dark bodies swimming through water looking like flowing "sea-veins" or their "whip-thin" tails, like the thin crescent of "a waning moon," "burrowing back into blackness" (that is, digging deep into the bottom of the marsh or sea). The speaker also calls the eels "short lead lengths." In other words, they look like cut-off pieces of lead piping. The speaker echoes this idea in a later simile that compares the eels to "the bends of some huge plumbing system." Both figurative images link the eels with sewage, plumbing, and the world beneath society's feet. They're strange, eerie creatures who inhabit a strange, eerie world.

Some of the speaker's metaphors are even more abstract. They repeatedly call the eels "untranslatable hissed interruptions" and "unspeakable wide chapped lips." Their movements in the water look like "interruptions" in the "untranslatable" conversation of nature, and their broad, cracked mouths resemble "wide chapped lips" that don't have the ability to speak. The word "unspeakable" also suggests that the creatures' faces are too grotesque to describe. There's something creepy about the eels.

Finally, the metaphorical comparisons of the eels to "little cables of shadow, vanishing / dream-lines long roots of the penumbra" reflect both their physical appearance and their ineffable nature. The eels are thin, dark, and snakelike, hence the comparison to "cables of shadow" or "long roots of the penumbra" (a penumbra refers to the outer part of a shadow). At the same time, the words "shadow," "penumbra," and "dream-lines" capture the sense that you can never fully comprehend these creatures. They're slippery like memories of a dream when you wake up, as impossible to grasp as darkness itself.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "those short lead lengths of eels"
- **Line 5:** "preliminary, pre-world creatures, cousins of the moon,"
- **Line 7:** "always move under cover of the unmoon"
- **Lines 10-11:** "untranslatable hissed interruptions / unspeakable wide chapped lips"
- **Lines 14-15:** "uncontrolled little eddies, / when you lever their rooves up"
- **Line 19:** "a smirk of ripples"

- **Lines 22-23:** "untranslatable hissed interruptions / unspeakable wide chapped lips"
- **Line 27:** "backlashes waterwicks"
- **Lines 28-30:** "those sea-veins still / flowing, little cables of shadow, vanishing / dream-lines long roots of the penumbra"
- **Line 31:** "but they just drill down into gravel"
- **Lines 35-36:** "untranslatable hissed interruptions / unspeakable wide chapped lips"
- **Lines 39-41:** "sometimes you see that whip-thin / tail of a waning moon start / burrowing back into blackness"

CONSONANCE

The poem is brimming with consonance, particularly of fluid /l/ and /s/ sounds. The poem's language twists, turns, and flows as smoothly as its subject. Listen to the intense sibilance and /l/ consonance of the poem's refrain, for example:

> untranslatable hissed interruptions
> unspeakable wide chapped lips

The lines themselves seem to "hiss" and wriggle. The crisp consonance of "unspeakable [...] chapped lips," meanwhile, creates a puckering sound, as though the eels are smacking those terrible lips.

At the top of the second stanza, more smooth, fluid sounds of these lines convey the smoothness of the eels' sleek, slippery bodies:

> you keep looking and looking for those
> underlurkers, uncontrolled little eddies,
> when you lever their rooves up
> they lie limbless hairless

In the next few lines, sibilance combines with crisp /k/ sounds to convey the squelching, squishy world of "the marshes" in which the eels live:

> [...] some huge plumbing system
> sucking and sucking the marshes and
> sometimes its just a smirk [...]

The poem uses some heavier sounds as well. Take the /d/ alliteration of lines 31-32:

> but they just drill down into gravel and
> dwindle as quick as drips

Here, those thudding /d/ sounds and quick, clipped /ih/ assonance ("drill," "dwindle," "quick," "drips") convey the action being described: the eels quickly, forcefully pounding their bodies into the ground. The blunt /b/ alliteration of "burrowing back into blackness" works similarly.

Altogether, the poem's rich, repetitive soundscape brings its slippery, watery, eerie imagery to life.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "sometimes," "see," "mudfish"
- **Line 2:** "short," "lead lengths," "eels"
- **Line 5:** "preliminary, pre-world," "creatures, cousins"
- **Line 6:** "love blackness, aloofness"
- **Line 7:** "move," "unmoon"
- **Line 8:** "soon," "see"
- **Line 10:** "untranslatable hissed interruptions"
- **Line 11:** "unspeakable," "chapped lips"
- **Line 12:** "it's," "wind," "cursing," "water," "when," "clears"
- **Line 13:** "keep looking," "looking"
- **Line 14:** "underlurkers, uncontrolled little"
- **Line 15:** "lever"
- **Line 16:** "lie limbless hairless"
- **Line 17:** "some," "system"
- **Line 18:** "sucking," "sucking"
- **Line 19:** "sometimes its just," "smirk"
- **Lines 22-23:** "untranslatable hissed interruptions / unspeakable"
- **Line 23:** "chapped lips"
- **Line 26:** "keep looking," "looking"
- **Line 27:** "backlashes waterwicks"
- **Line 28:** "sea-veins still"
- **Line 29:** "little cables," "shadow, vanishing"
- **Line 30:** "dream-lines long roots," "penumbra"
- **Line 31:** "drill down"
- **Line 32:** "dwindle," "drips"
- **Line 33:** "soon," "see"
- **Line 35:** "untranslatable hissed interruptions"
- **Line 36:** "unspeakable," "chapped lips"
- **Line 37:** "it's"
- **Line 39:** "sometimes," "see," "whip"
- **Line 40:** "waning"
- **Line 41:** "burrowing back," "blackness"
- **Line 42:** "soon," "see"
- **Line 43:** "soon," "say so"

ASSONANCE

Assononace links words within lines, filling the poem's language with a sense of steady, fluid movement that calls to mind the movement of the eels themselves. For example, in line 2, short /eh/ assonance combines with alliteration in "lead lengths" to create a smooth, swift-sounding phrase. The poem's *language* subtly mirrors its *content*. Similarly, the mixture of assonance and sibilance in "hissed interruptions [...] lips / its the wind" and the clipped sounds of "dwindle as quick as drips" call readers' attention to the poem's surreal imagery.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "lead lengths"
- **Line 3:** "hide," "tide"
- **Line 7:** "move," "under cover," "unmoon"
- **Line 10:** "hissed interruptions"
- **Lines 11-12:** "lips / it's"
- **Line 12:** "wind"
- **Line 22:** "hissed interruptions"
- **Lines 23-24:** "lips / it's"
- **Line 24:** "wind"
- **Line 32:** "dwindle," "quick," "drips"
- **Line 35:** "hissed interruptions"
- **Lines 36-37:** "lips / it's"
- **Line 37:** "wind"
- **Line 38:** "ears," "clears"
- **Line 41:** "back," "blackness"

ENJAMBMENT

"Eel Tail" features intense enjambment throughout. The poem uses very little punctuation at the ends of lines; instead, it just keeps flowing further and further down the page. In this way, the poem's form mirrors the eels' slippery movements: the lines themselves seem to swiftly wriggle out of the reader's grasp. Take lines 39-41:

> pushing on your ears and when it clears
> sometimes you see that whip-thin
> tail of a waning moon start
> burrowing back into blackness

There are no commas or periods to grant the reader a moment's rest. The poem simply rushes forward, diving down the page just as the eels "burrow[] back into blackness."

Enjambment further conveys the relentless nature of the speaker's search for the eels. There's clear enjambment between stanzas 1 and 2, for instance, thrusting readers swiftly across the white space of the page:

> it's the wind again cursing the water and when it
> clears
> you keep looking and looking for those
> underlurkers [...]

There's no pause after "clears"; as soon as the wind quiets, "you keep looking." If you want to see the eels, you must remain ever-vigilant.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "eels / that"
- **Lines 4-5:** "wagging, / preliminary"
- **Lines 7-8:** "unmoon / and"
- **Lines 8-9:** "them / gone"
- **Lines 12-13:** "clears / you"
- **Lines 13-14:** "those / underlurkers"
- **Lines 15-16:** "up / they"
- **Lines 16-17:** "hairless / like"
- **Lines 17-18:** "system / sucking"
- **Lines 18-19:** "and / sometimes"
- **Lines 19-20:** "ripples / and"
- **Lines 20-21:** "them / gone"
- **Lines 24-25:** "again / bothering"
- **Lines 25-26:** "clears / you"
- **Lines 26-27:** "those / backlashes"
- **Lines 28-29:** "still / flowing"
- **Lines 29-30:** "vanishing / dream-lines"
- **Lines 30-31:** "penumbra / but"
- **Lines 31-32:** "and / dwindle"
- **Lines 32-33:** "drips / and"
- **Lines 33-34:** "them / gone"
- **Lines 37-38:** "again / pushing"
- **Lines 38-39:** "clears / sometimes"
- **Lines 39-40:** "whip-thin / tail"
- **Lines 40-41:** "start / burrowing"
- **Lines 41-42:** "blackness / and"
- **Lines 42-43:** "her / and"
- **Lines 43-44:** "so / gone"

VOCABULARY

Preliminary (Line 5) - "Preliminary" refers to an early version of something, which precedes a more developed or important form. The speaker is acknowledging how old eels are as a species; they evolved a long time ago and look like an early draft of a creature.

Aloofness (Line 6) - The quality of being removed, cold, or distant. The speaker is saying that the eels like to be left alone.

Unmoon (Line 7) - This strange term might refer to the darkness cast when the moon is covered by clouds.

Unspeakable (Line 11, Line 23, Line 36) - This word is a bit of a triple pun in the poem. On the one hand, the speaker means this literally: the eels' "lips" are "unspeakable" in the sense that they cannot talk; the creatures are silent. At the same time, if something is "unspeakable" that means that it's too terrible to speak of. The word thus hints that the eels' mouths are grotesque. Finally, the word suggests that eels "unspeakable" in the sense that the speaker can't find the right words to truly describe these strange creatures.

Underlurkers (Lines 13-14) - To lurk means to skulk about, usually with the goal of spying on or ambushing someone. Calling eels "underlurkers" nods to the fact that they hide

beneath the surface of the water, in shadows, and under pieces of debris. It also suggests, somewhat ominously, that they're lying in wait for something.

Eddies (Line 14) - Circular movements or currents in water. Here, the term refers to the little whirlpools that the fleeing eels leave in their wake.

Rooves (Line 15) - The speaker is using this term metaphorically to describe the tops of the eels' "homes": the pieces of debris the creatures so successfully hide under (and which "you lever," or lift up, in your search).

Smirk (Line 19) - A half-smile. Usually, it's an expression meant to indicate mystery or smugness.

Waterwicks (Lines 26-27) - As a noun, "wick" refers to the thin piece of twine that burns when a candle is lit. By describing the eels as "waterwicks," the speaker compares them to living wicks in the water.As a verb, to "wick" means to absorb (usually a liquid). The word thus also refers more generally to the fact that eels breathe in the water.

Backlashes (Lines 26-27) - The speaker is likely using this word to refer to the eels' movement through the water—either to the way that they travel backward or to how they generally "lash" at the water as they swim.

Penumbra (Line 30) - The less-shaded, outer part of a shadow. The phrase "long roots of the penumbra" paints a picture of the eels' long, thin, dark bodies, and it also is a metaphorical depiction of their elusive, shadowy nature.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Eel Tail" consists of three stanzas of differing lengths. Beyond that, the poem doesn't stick to any regular form or pattern. Many of the poem's lines are enjambed, allowing the text to flow swiftly and smoothly down the page in a way that mirrors the slippery movements of the eels themselves. The poet also indents the single-word line "gone" each time it appears, creating a vast white space on the page that evokes the eels' sudden absence.

METER

This poem is written in free verse, which means it doesn't use a regular meter. Like the eels the speaker describes, the poem's language itself is slippery and unpredictable.

RHYME SCHEME

As a free verse poem, "Eel Tail" doesn't have a rhyme scheme. A steady rhyme scheme would add some structure and predictability to this twisty, surprising poem. Instead, the poem relies on fluid consonance ("lie limbless hairless"), sibilance ("blackness, aloofness"), and assonance ("led lengths," "quick as drips") to create its eerie, slippery music.

SPEAKER

Readers don't learn much about the speaker of "Eel Tail," beyond the fact that they're fascinated by (and perhaps a little frightened or wary of) eels. They seem at once intensely drawn to nature (they describe "looking and looking" for the eels) and acutely aware of nature's hostility (they mention how the wind is "cursing the water" or "pushing on your ears"). Something about the eels' elusiveness draws the speaker in; they clearly want to catch a glimpse of these "preliminary, pre-world creatures," whose mysterious nature conveys that there are parts of the world that human beings simply do not, and may never, fully understand.

SETTING

The poem takes place, readers can assume, in a marsh filled with "limbless hairless" eels that hide when the tide is low. They're hard to spot, and usually, you'll just catch a glimpse of the little whirlpools or ripples they leave behind as they scurry away.

This setting seems mysterious, strange, and even a bit hostile to the human speaker. The wind is "cursing the water" and "bothering the reeds" (the tall grasses of the marsh); it's an almost violent presence that makes the speaker doubt their own perceptions. The eels themselves "love blackness" and swiftly burrow into the muck and "gravel" at the bottom of the marsh to avoid detection. Nothing about their habitat seems comforting or welcome, at least not to human beings.

The poem's setting emphasizes the mysterious nature of the eels' watery world, which is ultimately unknowable to the speaker; the eels don't stick around long enough for the speaker to get a good glimpse of them, and the speaker can't follow the eels into the "blackness" they call home. The border between the human and animal realms can't be crossed, the setting suggests; the speaker can only glimpse a "shadow" of the eels' world, or stand in its "penumbra."

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Alice Oswald (born 1966) is a British poet and the author of 11 poetry collections. "Eel Tail" was first published in 2008 in *Granta Magazine*. Quite a few of Oswald's poems and book-length projects reflect the poet's interests in ecology. Her second publication, for example, required years of research into the environmental and social history of the River Dart (in Devon, England) for which the book is named.

Like most contemporary poetry, "Eel Tail" is written in free verse. While its language sounds distinctly modern, its rich imagery and fascination with nature's mysterious power recall the traditions of 19th-century British Romantic poetry. The Romantics looked upon nature with immense respect, awe, and wonder. The images in "Eel Tail" are ultimately far more grotesque and far less sentimental than those typical of Romantic poetry, however, and are closer in tone to that of more recent poets such as Ted Hughes. In poems like "Hawk Roosting," "Cat and Mouse," and "Roe-Deer," Hughes depicts nature not just as a source of wisdom and beauty (as Romantics like William Wordsworth often did) but also as a world filled with instinctive violence and danger. Oswald herself has drawn comparisons between her work and that of Hughes; in fact, she edited a posthumous collection of the earlier poet's work titled *A Ted Hughes Bestiary*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

A trained gardener and horticulturist who grew up in the English countryside, Oswald's poetry is suffused with her connection to and fascination with the natural world. It's very possible that Oswald's research on the River Dart for her prize-winning book *Dart* inspired this particular poem as well: Oswald spent three years living by and studying the river and the workers connected to it (and she likely saw plenty of river eels in the process!). Oswald also spent a month studying the phases of the moon on the waters of the Severn Estuary for her collection *A Sleepwalk on the Severn*. Her focus in "Eel Tail" on humanity's inability to fully understand nature might also reflect contemporary anxieties around climate change and human beings' increasing destruction of the planet and its creatures.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Alice Oswald's Life and Work — A biography of Alice Oswald via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/alice-oswald)
- Eels: A Fact Sheet — LEarn more about the mysterious creatures described in the (https://www.pbs.org/wnet/nature/blog/eel-fact-sheet/)
- Alice Oswald (Poetry Archive) — Listen a recording of Alice Oswald reading her own poetry. (https://poetryarchive.org/poet/alice-oswald/)

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