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4 MARCH 2021

# THE RIVER WHALE

SITA BRAHMACHARI

THE  
RIVER  
WHALE

SITA BRAHMACHARI

Orion



Can't sleep.

My mind keeps meandering to waving Usha off on the coach this morning. My sister Usha. I wonder how she's getting on without me on her 'outward bounds' trip? Better than me, I bet. Knots tangle my belly with missing her.

I suppose this *is* the first time I've ever tried to sleep on my own up here. Back when I got adopted a year ago, I wondered if I would ever sleep in a room with Usha and now I'm struggling to see how I'll sleep all week without her. Funny how quickly you can get used to a new normal.

I let my eyes rest on the anchor sunken into the middle of the room. Soft light glows through the enormous 'Globe Window' that once belonged to some ancient ocean liner. Hard to believe now that this ship-like room ever gave me the creeps, but then it did to our friend Cosmo too the first time he came up here.

What he whispered in my ear when he set eyes on the anchor gets me thinking ... What *would* it feel like to be Usha – to know your granddad

cared enough to design a world like this for you? A dreaming room to let the troubles of the day wash away. I wonder if she's managed to get to sleep in her dorm? Bet that'll come as a shock. Bit of a role reversal: me here and her in a dreary dorm!

I reach into the last fading sun-shaft and watch it turn my skin and a million dust specks golden.

That's what it would feel like to be Usha ... golden! *This is your home too now, why can't you feel it?* I close my eyes and listen to the sift and sway of grasses out on the top deck garden...

shhh

shhh

shhh

I was starting to believe that this all belonged to me too, but it's only taken one day since Usha's been away for me to feel like an outsider again. Now I see, without her by my side I'm not anchored here at all but back to being the old random drifter, arrive-with-nothing-Immy.

I wish Usha's Pops Michael – the grand designer of this dreaming deck – could have been my granddad too.

I wish he'd have words for me ... say, 'This is all yours too, my grandchild. Now steer this ship and dive into your dreams.'

The chronometer's ticking fills my head

the clock that doesn't tell the time

but helps to navigate through water

collected from a distant shore

I raise the conch shell to my ear

losing myself in wave after wave

Long grasses bend on the breeze  
through the Globe Window

drawing me through

and out to sea



Dive into my dreams

forget the kit

snorkle

oxygen cylinder

mask

*Forget forcing my body like sausage meat  
into the clinging skin of a wetsuit*

zipping in

too tight

fitting feet into fins

Here I am

Immy Joseph



no safety checks

or theory tests left to take

just me swimming solo

dream-diving down

The wave-roar in my ear mutates  
to the old chords

lowing deep

the whale song that always  
used to help me sleep

Sonar sound plays me

I am the chord carried on waves

towed on currents

hovering in the lido's water column



sinking

till my belly grazes the  
diamond path of lanes

and I'm lying on the bottom

The distant call of the chronometer's now

tap tap tapping at the tiles



Breaking time

the pool cracks open

and I'm swimming into

aquamarine

startling

sparkling



# Blue Planet

## Ocean

light

Almost free

more whale than human

entering a bright clean watery world

rainbow fish dart at my eyes

shoals of fluorescent colour

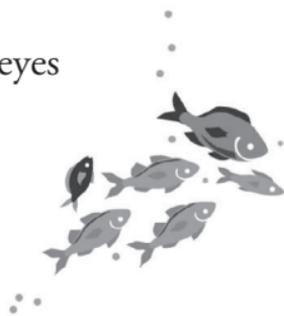
too shimmery to be real

drifting

floating

swirling

emerging



expelling glittering fountains

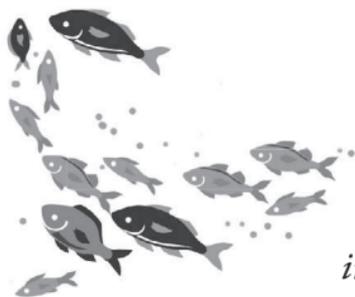


breathing in again

before returning



moving slow and sure through wild water



in dreaming distance

*let me go*

*into the wild*

*let me swim free*



But thoughts pincer into me

*Please let me stay in dream time*

There is nowhere I want to be more

but like it or not I'm blasted back to the  
waking-shore

## MUST PREPARE FOR DIVING TEST

foghorn thoughts

bolt me upright

*If you don't pass tomorrow maybe you never will.*

*If I get my certificate Clynton's got to keep his promise before he goes off travelling.*

*'Here's an incentive for you, Immy. Learn your theory. Complete all your technicals tomorrow and I'll take you wild swimming before I leave. No more pool confines.'*

*But do I know the theory well enough?*

Nerves niggle

like

shoals of nipping fish



darting through the theory in my head



Clynton's dive-safely instructions in my ear.

I wish Usha could test me one last time. Maybe driftwood-doubts are rushing in because *everything* feels like it's switching up new again. Bad enough that Clynton's off on his travels soon and Usha away, but why did our form tutor have to go on the trip with her too? School will feel so strange tomorrow, just Cosmo to hang out with.

Did I definitely lock the Globe Window?

*Get a grip, Imtiaz. You're not even on your own.*

Our kitten Rubey's curled up beside me sleeping peacefully.

*Take a dream-dive, Immy.*

I pick up the conch shell

from my bedside table



press it against my ear

to lose myself again among the

conch-wave chords

whale chords

I gaze at my whale poster

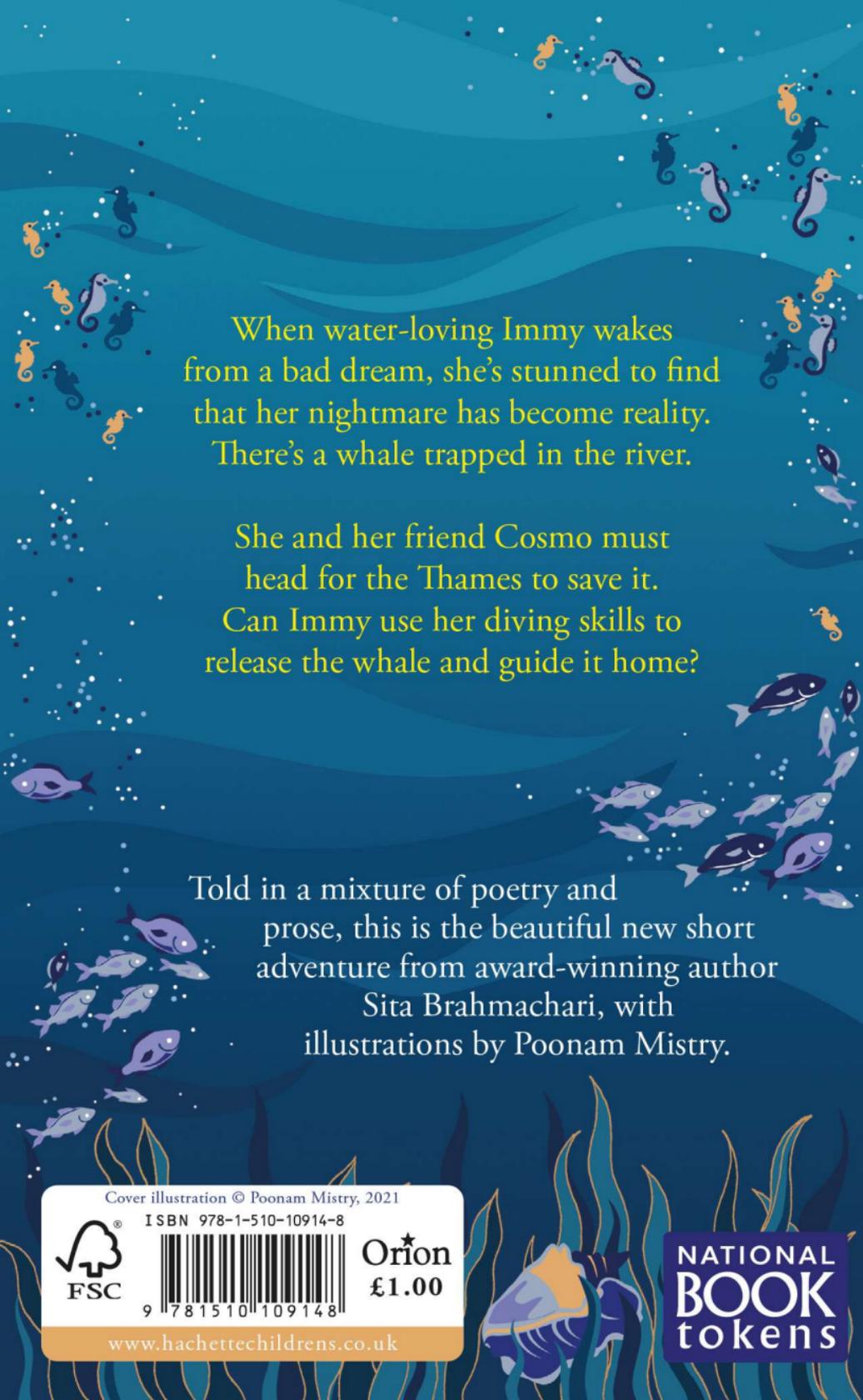
drifting

beyond the frame then

peer into the viewing lens

to take the 'virtual under-river tour'

from our family outing.

The background is a vibrant blue underwater scene. It features stylized waves, numerous seahorses in various colors (yellow, blue, purple), and schools of small fish. The overall aesthetic is whimsical and aquatic.

When water-loving Immy wakes  
from a bad dream, she's stunned to find  
that her nightmare has become reality.  
There's a whale trapped in the river.

She and her friend Cosmo must  
head for the Thames to save it.  
Can Immy use her diving skills to  
release the whale and guide it home?

Told in a mixture of poetry and  
prose, this is the beautiful new short  
adventure from award-winning author  
Sita Brahmachari, with  
illustrations by Poonam Mistry.

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