

Which Wild One?

An animal choices workshop from National Poetry Day Ambassador, James Carter.

Which creature would you be?

Today I'd choose a whale. We all need
to roam and there's no greater space

than an ocean – a galaxy of salt water
right here on earth. And who wouldn't
want to be that great hulk of life? To see

in sound, to talk in song, to cruise the blue
or lose yourself in endless days of play:
lurching skywards, flopping backwards,

ever huffing lung-loads of warm air
back into the world. Tell me then:
which other beast is as wise

as the moon, has the heart of a star -
or a belly full of memories
from way back when?

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Weird Wild & Wonderful – the poetry world of James Carter
(illustrated by Neal Layton, Otter-Barry Books)



READ IT

Read through the poem a few times silently to yourself. Now work out a way to read it aloud – slowly, with emphasis and occasional pauses here and there.



CHOOSE IT

Think of a few wild animals you would want to be – and crucially, why. Perhaps a dolphin so you could dive in and out the wild waves, an eagle to soar over snow-capped mountains, or a lion, to rule and roam the savannah. The more outgoing, characterful and colourful the creature is the better, as you will have more potential material to use.

Now decide on the creature that most appeals to you. Brainstorm everything that comes to mind. What do you admire about it? Think of adjectives – and not just the obvious ones – that show/reveal/describe the creature in an unexpected way. Spend time thinking about your animal – see it in your mind's eye – and consider what it's doing, where it's going, what it looks like, how it communicates/sounds, what it needs/wants, and moreover what it would be like to live as that creature. Read up about your animal, even watch clips online if you can, making notes as you read/watch.

START IT

You can begin your poem however you wish, or you could borrow or even adapt the opening lines 'Which creature would you be? Today I'd be a ...' Your poem does not have to have the same three line verse structure of 'Which Creature' – you could have more or less line verses or even write all the lines in one long verse if you chose to. Experiment with what works best for your poem.

Try adding some repetition to give your phrasing some rhythm, as in – 'to see' 'to talk' 'to cruise'. You could try alliteration as in 'see in sound' 'lung-loads' – or assonance – 'cruise/lose', 'days/play'. Don't feel you have to rhyme, as all that repetition will give the poem all the music and rhythm it needs. Be daring when you use similes/metaphors, as in 'as wise as the moon' and 'a galaxy of salt water'. Try to invent new and unusual ways of explaining aspects of your creature and its world. Verbs are vital in painting a vivid picture of your animal – again, avoid the most obvious. In this poem there are gerund-verbs – 'lurching' 'flopping' and 'huffing' – which are not words you would immediately associate with a whale.

In this poem, James tries to express how magnificent and other-worldly a whale is, hence the references to space – with 'galaxy' 'moon' and 'star'. To describe its immense size he refers to it as a 'great hulk of life', and to express its song/sounds he states that it can 'see in sound, talk in song' – James takes facts about the whale and makes them more expressive. Above all, aim to write a poem that no-one else has written before, and only you could write.

TWEAK IT

No poem is perfect first time. Once you have completed a first draft, leave it for a day or two. Come back and see it afresh. Does it need more detail – or even less? Could some phrases be more adventurous? Is your poem visual enough? Can you say the same and as clearly with less words? Don't be afraid to lose whole phrases or lines – less is often more! Then perhaps leave it for another day or two, come back and see what needs working, maybe just a few tweaks now. Read it out loud, or ask someone to read it to you. How does it feel? Does the rhythm flow? Does the poem do what you want it to? Overall, aim to bring out the essence, vitality and uniqueness of your animal. Enjoy!

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