

Also by Stephanie Burt

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Randall Jarrell and His Age

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(with Nick Halpern)

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WE ARE MERMAIDS

Poems

Stephanie Burt

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We Are Mermaids

The salt of the ocean is always the salt of tears,
melancholy but at the right
dilution, or concentration, life-giving.

It has been there since before
the beginning of tragedy,
when what would become
us was just trying to get through the day.

We know the consistent waves, as they
ride fortune's helical gears,
sacrificing their poise for their careers,
need not be the only mode of living.

Look down: the thermophiles
sip at the fumaroles,
whose sulfur steam would kill a human being.
They love it here. And the mottled, diffident ray-
finned fish known as zoarchids or eelpout,
all shrugs and S curves, choose
to nose along the floor of the rough world.

They are both predators and prey,
with gills and wide-set eyes instead of a face.

You don't have to be use-
ful. You are not required
to come up with something to say.

You can spend your life benthic, or brackish,
subsisting and even thriving where a fingertip
comes away saline and still refreshing,
exploring the estuary, the submerged lip

and congeries of overlapping shores
on the green-black water, the harbor, the bay.

You can live with your doubt,
that's why it's yours.

Some of us are going to be okay.

