

# Relic



## SUMMARY

The speaker remembers finding a jawbone on the seashore. On the beach, the speaker recalls, the waves batter the bodies of all sorts of dead or dying sea creatures until they turn into the crusted, decomposing matter that will host new life. The ocean, the speaker says, is deep and cold, and down in its depths there's no such thing as friendship.

The creatures in the sea, the speaker says, touch each other only when they want to eat each other. The same jaws whose very purpose is to kill other animals for food die as they lived, gnawed to bare bone by *other* jaws. Those jaws first eat, then are eaten, then wash up on the beach. And that, the speaker reflects, is what the sea does: it strips bodies down to bones.

The ocean, the speaker concludes, thus creates both life and death, and flings up the bones that don't rot, the remnants of a failed struggle to survive down in the deeps. Nothing in the ocean lives what you'd call a happy, prosperous life. The jawbone the speaker sees now never laughed: all it did was bite and bite, and now it's nothing but a memorial to its career of biting.

The fish's jawbone, in the speaker's eyes, thus becomes a "cenotaph" (or monument to the dead, often the war dead). It commemorates not any individual fishy soul, but rather the eternal war for survival. And the poem's picture of a beach as an oceanic battlefield strewn with the "indigestible" remnants of sea life—"shells, vertebrae, claws, carapaces, skulls"—implies that every living creature fights in this war, human beings not excepted!

### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16



## THE CIRCLE OF LIFE

The whole natural world, "Relic" suggests, is built on an infinite cycle of destruction and creation, of death and rebirth. The fish jawbone the speaker finds washed up on the beach seems, to the speaker, to represent one end of an infinite process. Itself "gnawn bare," this biting jaw reminds the speaker that everything that eats will one day be eaten. Everything that lives has to die someday, this poem suggests, but death also helps to create new life—and this cycle is the eternal law of nature.

The sight of a bare jawbone washed up on the beach reminds the speaker that death is inevitable. The very animal this bone once belonged to, the speaker reflects, once "gripped" and devoured other animals, and then was devoured itself. That fate, the speaker notes, is unavoidable for everything that lives.

Describing a whole beachful of "indigestibles," bits of dead animals that couldn't be eaten—"vertebrae, claws, carapaces"—the speaker reminds readers that death comes for every living thing sooner or later and that it leaves only bleached bones behind. But all that death, the speaker observes, also supports new life; destruction brings creation along with it. The washed-up bodies of "crabs" and "dogfish," "crust[ing]" as they decay on the beach, also "continue the beginning," feeding other animals and supporting new life.

What's more, this cycle goes on and on. The circle of "time" and life in the sea, the speaker observes, "eats its own tail"—an image that evokes the ancient [symbol](#) of the ouroboros, a serpent eating its own tail, traditionally used as an image of infinity and eternity. Destruction and creation, the poem thus observes, feed on each other in an endless loop. Uncomfortable though this idea might be for the human beings wandering beside the ocean, trying to live their comfortable lives, there's no life without death. But on the bright side, there's no death without life either.



## THEMES



### NATURE'S BRUTALITY

The speaker of "Relic" sees a fish's bleached jawbone, washed up on the seashore, as a reminder of nature's constant, indifferent violence. The speaker reflects that these jaws, which once ripped the flesh off of other fish, are now picked clean themselves—and that this emotionless fish-eat-fish brutality is the law of the whole ocean. In the "deeps" of the sea (and in nature more generally), this poem suggests, the only fundamental rule is "eat or be eaten."

The sight of a picked-clean fish jawbone leads the speaker to reflect that the ocean is a place without gentleness or consolation. All the creatures beneath the surface live only to devour each other. "In that darkness," the speaker declares, "camaraderie does not hold"; in other words, there's no friendship in the ocean, and perhaps none in nature more broadly, either.

The bare "jaw" the speaker sees here itself had one goal in life: to "eat" until its fishy owner was devoured. This fish never once "laugh[ed]," not did it grow "rich"; its whole "purpose[]" was just to survive for as long as it could. In short, it lived a brutal, violent life, far away from any of the values that human beings might feel give their own lives a sense of meaning or security.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 8-11
- Lines 12-14

**LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS****LINES 1-4**

*I found this ...  
... Continue the beginning.*

As the poem begins, the speaker remembers finding a grim "relic" on the seashore: a fish's picked-clean jawbone thrown up on the sand by the waves. This jawbone will become this poem's central [symbol](#), an image of nature's indifferent brutality. In this speaker's eyes, life in the sea—and, when you really think about it, life anywhere in the natural world—is [nasty, brutish, and short](#).

To set the scene, the speaker depicts the beach as something like a battlefield. The ocean, the poem observes, is constantly flinging casualties ashore. Take a look at the meaningful [repetition](#) here:

There, crabs, dogfish, broken by the breakers or  
tossed  
To flap for half an hour [...]

"Broken" and "breakers" aren't just an instance of [polyptoton](#); they also introduce a [pun](#). On the surface, the speaker means "broken" in the sense of "injured" and "breakers" in the sense of "waves" (said to "break" on the shore). But those "breakers" also seem to be, well, *breakers* here, breaking those crabs and fish apart. The ocean itself, the poem suggests, smashes its own creatures to bits.

Brutal crushing isn't all the ocean does. Even as these dead, mangled animals decay and "turn to a crust," they "continue the beginning." Their deaths, in other words, aren't *just* a grisly ending. They're also the start of something new. And if they "continue" the beginning, then that "beginning" goes on and on. Exactly how this might be true will be one of the poem's big themes.

**LINES 4-5**

*The deeps are ...  
... does not hold.*

The poem's first few lines are written in [free verse](#), meaning they don't follow a steady [meter](#) or [rhyme scheme](#). But as the stanza closes, the speaker introduces a single, intense rhyming [couplet](#):

[...] The deeps are cold:

In that darkness camaraderie does not hold.

That rhyme invites readers to linger on this idea for a moment. Down in the dark of the sea, the speaker insists, there's no such thing as "camaraderie," no friendship. There's only the law of the briny deep: you're either having lunch or becoming lunch! Sharp /c/ and thudding /d/ [alliteration](#) ("cold" and "camaraderie," "deeps" and "darkness") makes that point even more emphatic.

Of course, readers might respond that they didn't really imagine there *would* be any "camaraderie" in the ocean: no one expects to find fish hoisting flagons of fishbeer, singing sea shanties, slapping each other on the back. The speaker's choice of this rather light, elegant word introduces a note of dark humor here: *Oh, you were hoping for camaraderie? A garden party perhaps? Well, tough luck—this is the OCEAN, pal.*

But the word choice here also suggests that the speaker isn't just talking about fish! When you get right down to it, this speaker seems to feel, every animal—humans included—will lose its nobler feelings of "camaraderie" and fellowship when the choice is "eat or be eaten."

**LINES 6-9**

*Nothing touches but, ...  
... to the beach:*

As the second stanza begins, the speaker paints a bleak picture of life under the sea. Down there, in that "camaraderie"-less darkness, "Nothing touches, but, clutching, devours." In other words, there are no embraces and no tenderness: sea creatures touch each other only to eat each other. The guttural /uh/ [assonance](#) and abrasive /ch/ [consonance](#) of "touches" and "clutching" evokes emotionless, mechanical gulping and guzzling.

This, the speaker reflects, is why there's something grimly [ironic](#) about the washed-up jawbone that opened the poem. Itself picked clean, this jawbone once lived to rip the flesh off *other* creatures.

Listen to the way the speaker uses [synecdoche](#) here:

[...] And the jaws,  
Before they are satisfied or their stretched purpose  
Slacken, go down jaws [...]

Here, a fish is nothing *but* a set of living "jaws," its only "purpose" to "stretch" wide and satisfy its hunger. It's a fish-eat-fish world, the speaker grimly reflects, and this forlorn jawbone is the proof.

Worse still, there's no winning at this eat-or-be-eaten game. *Every* set of jaws will eventually "go gnawn bare," eaten as it once ate. (And notice the way that /aw/ [assonance](#) connects those "jaws" to their eventual fate, "gnawn" down to the bone

by other jaws.)

This brutal cycle goes on and on, the speaker reflects. The whole natural world is just an endless procession of "jaws" that "eat and are finished"; eventually, the "jawbone comes to the beach," and that's that.

### LINES 10-11

*This is the ...  
... claws, carapaces, skulls.*

Once the ocean's countless "jaws" finish devouring each other, the speaker goes on, the bits they *couldn't* eat wash up on the beach. This stanza's closing lines depict a kind of fishy battlefield, strewn with "shells, / Vertebrae, claws, carapaces, skulls."

The [asyndeton](#) of that list makes it sound as if the speaker could go on and on. Rather than rounding things out with an "and" (i.e. "claws, carapaces, and skulls"), the speaker just stops, as if sensing the impossibility of listing every single flavor of bone and shell rattling around on the beach.

The speaker doesn't credit all the "jaws" of the ocean for the carnage, however. Rather, this landscape of bleached bone is the [personified](#) "sea's achievement." In some sense, the speaker suggests, it's actually the *ocean* that devours all these creatures. This moment suggests that the ocean and its creatures aren't really separate. The ocean's big life encompasses all the little lives and deaths of the creatures who swim around in its "deeps."

Readers might also reflect that this after-the-battle landscape isn't just grisly, but starkly beautiful. All those white "vertebrae" and polished "shells" are part of the scene at the seaside, part of what makes it what it is. These lines start to suggest that life and death, beauty and horror might be more closely interwoven than one would think.

### LINES 12-15

*Time in the ...  
... In the sea.*

The speaker has just finished suggesting that the sea is itself a living creature, built from countless lives and deaths. Now, the poem expands on that idea with another moment of [personification](#):

*Time in the sea eats its tail, thrives, casts these  
Indigestibles, [...]*

Here, "Time" itself becomes a living thing—more specifically an [ouroboros](#), a serpent eating its own tail, an ancient [symbol](#) of eternity and infinity. The life of the sea, in other words, is *immortal*: there, "Time" eats, "thrives," spits the "indigestible" bones up, and then does it all again.

The distinction between "Time" and the sea is pretty thin here,

which suggests that the ocean the speaker is talking about isn't just the literal ocean. Rather, this ocean of time, with its infinite depths and infinite devourings, symbolizes all existence. Humanity, too, is part of this endless cycle of birth and death, eating and being eaten.

At this point, readers might think back to the first stanza's idea that the rotting "crabs" and "dogfish" on the shore only "continue the beginning." Death, in this image, is just part of the circle of life: other animals will eat those washed-up creatures, then die themselves and feed other creatures—and so on, into infinity.

With that in mind, though the jawbone the speaker holds might seem to speak of "purposes / That failed" deep down in the dark (that is, its efforts to be a breakfast rather than breakfast did not succeed), it's also an image of a bigger purpose that *did* succeed, and always succeeds. The eternal lifecycle of nature goes on, making new life out of death.

Perhaps that's cold comfort for those who want to believe in "camaraderie" and tenderness—or even plain old security. As the speaker warns, "None grow rich / In the sea": no living creature finds permanent, prosperous security, always the eater and never the eaten.

To this speaker, the one reliable consolation in the world is that, in spite of nature's fish-eat-fish brutality, death isn't really an ending. It's a necessary phase of an infinite cycle.

### LINES 15-16

*This curved jawbone ...  
... now a cenotaph.*

The discovery of a picked-clean jawbone has given the speaker a dark vision of infinity: jaws eating jaws forever. As the poem concludes, another emphatic rhyming [couplet](#) sums up all that has come before:

*[...] This curved jawbone did not laugh  
But gripped, gripped and is now a cenotaph.*

The fish whose jawbone this was, in other words, lived not for pleasure, but to devour—and its own stray bone is now a monument to the ceaseless brutality of nature. The intense [epizeuxis](#) on "gripped, gripped" hammers the point home.

The word "cenotaph" suggests not just a monument, but a monument to the victims of war, whose bodies are scattered and unrecoverable. When the poem describes this jawbone as a "cenotaph," then, it suggests that the speaker is seeing it as a [symbol](#) for something so big it can't even be gathered into one place. Nature, to this speaker, is an endless war, and every living being is a soldier, whether they know it or not.

But the poem also suggests that, even though little lives come and go, and everything that eats will one day be eaten, the bigger life of the universe is immortal. More than that, "time"

and the symbolic "sea" perform a neat trick, transforming decay into new life, eternally "continu[ing] the beginning."



## SYMBOLS



### THE OCEAN

The ocean [symbolizes](#) the eternal rhythms of life and death. [Personified](#) as a kind of vast creature, the sea uses its "breakers" (or waves—but notice the [pun](#) on plain old *breaking* there!) to digest the bodies of dead animals and feed living ones. It thus embodies both life *and* death.

In that sense, the ocean is also like "Time" itself: it "eats its tail" and has no beginning or end. The ceaseless motion of its "breakers" (or waves) represents a ceaseless cycle that transforms living things into dying things and back again. That is, the specific rhythm of the ocean reflects the cycle of life and death that *everything* (not just sea creatures) is caught up in.

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I found this jawbone at the sea's edge:"
- **Line 2:** "broken by the breakers or tossed"
- **Lines 4-5:** "The deeps are cold: / In that darkness camaraderie does not hold."
- **Lines 12-15:** "Time in the sea eats its tail, thrives, casts these / Indigestibles, the spars of purposes / That failed far from the surface. None grow rich / In the sea."



### THE JAWBONE

The jawbone the speaker finds washed up on the beach [symbolizes](#) the fish-eat-fish brutality of nature.

There's something [ironic](#) about this fish's jawbone. Once used to kill and devour other fish, this bone is now dead as a doornail itself—and, by the looks of it, it's been picked clean by the very fish it might have hoped to eat! Through this jawbone, then, the speaker suggests that nature is a brutal place where every living thing is either eating or being eaten.

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I found this jawbone at the sea's edge:"
- **Lines 8-9:** "Jaws / Eat and are finished and the jawbone comes to the beach:"
- **Lines 15-16:** "This curved jawbone did not laugh / But gripped, gripped and is now a cenotaph."



## POETIC DEVICES

### IRONY

The poem's image of a dead fish's jawbone suggests that a dark [irony](#) underlies the struggle for survival: those who eat, the jawbone warns, will always be eaten themselves one day.

The jawbone leads the speaker to reflect that the very part of the dead fish that once "gripped" other fish and devoured them has now been picked clean itself. "Gnawn bare," the bone suggests that there's no comfort to be found in the food chain; no matter how many other fish this one ate, it was always doomed to meet exactly the same fate as its victims. As the speaker puts it, "none grow rich / In the sea": there's no permanent security for any living creature, no matter how efficiently they devour.

The very body part that helped the dead fish to stay alive as long as it did, then, becomes a "cenotaph," a monument to the dead. Or perhaps it's more accurate to say that the jawbone is a monument to *death*, and the natural cycle it's part of. After all, the fish that die "continue the beginning," feeding new life even as they die. In this sense, the poem suggests, perhaps life itself is ironic!

#### Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-9:** "And the jaws, / Before they are satisfied or their stretched purpose / Slacken, go down jaws; go gnawn bare. Jaws / Eat and are finished and the jawbone comes to the beach:"
- **Lines 15-16:** "This curved jawbone did not laugh / But gripped, gripped and is now a cenotaph."

### METAPHOR

The poem's central [metaphor](#) transforms a dead fish's jawbone into a reminder of mortality and of nature's brutality.

Take a look at how the speaker describes the jawbone in the poem's closing lines:

[...] This curved jawbone did not laugh  
But gripped, gripped and is now a cenotaph.

A "cenotaph" is a monument to the dead—but, more precisely, a monument to the dead who are buried elsewhere. Unlike a mausoleum, which contains bones, a cenotaph commemorates unknown or lost bodies (often those lost in war). This jawbone itself, of course, is just a fragment of a lost body, and it makes the speaker think of all the countless lives and deaths that go unnoticed in the ocean. Devouring and being devoured is just the everyday routine down "in that darkness."

The jawbone, then, stands for something more than the life of just one fish. As a "cenotaph," it represents the impersonal,

terrifying cycle of life and death in the ocean (and hints that land-dwelling humanity doesn't get to step outside this cycle as much as people might hope, either). But perhaps by becoming a monument, the jawbone also gains a little special importance of its own: not every fish part, after all, gets a poem written about it.

#### Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 15-16:** "This curved jawbone did not laugh / But gripped, gripped and is now a cenotaph."

## PERSONIFICATION

By [personifying](#) the sea and time, the speaker suggests that the larger life of the world (as opposed to the little lives of creatures that live and die) is immortal and unchanging.

In lines 10-11, in which the speaker describes all the bleached bones and shells of dead sea creatures, the sea itself seems to have conscious intentions:

This is the sea's achievement; with shells,  
Vertebrae, claws, carapaces, skulls.

The sea, here, is given responsibility for stripping all these "indigestible" bits and pieces of living creatures clean. In a sense, then, it sounds as if all the "jaws" the speaker describes attacking each other under the water are just fulfilling the sea's bigger purpose. All of these creatures' individual lives and deaths are in the sea's "hands."

And "Time" seems to work a lot like the sea does:

Time in the sea eats its tail, thrives, casts these  
Indigestibles, the spars of purposes  
That failed far from the surface.

Here, time is compared to an ouroboros—that is, the image of a serpent eating its own tail that [symbolizes](#) eternity and immortality. Time and the sea are *both* infinite devourers and creators, in this image, killing everything that lives in them and creating new "beginning[s]" out of that death.

#### Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-11:** "This is the sea's achievement; with shells, / Vertebrae, claws, carapaces, skulls."
- **Lines 12-14:** "Time in the sea eats its tail, thrives, casts these / Indigestibles, the spars of purposes / That failed far from the surface."

## REPETITION

[Repetitions](#) make this poem sound insistent and unflinching.

Consider, for instance, this moment of [polyptoton](#) from the first

stanza:

There, crabs, dogfish, broken by the breakers [...]

This image of sea creatures' bodies "broken" by "breakers" uses two different meanings of words related to breaking. Those "broken" bodies speak for themselves—but the "breakers" here are waves. The connection between these two words suggests that the waves are in some way *made* to break things down, not just to "break" on the shore. This repetition introduces the theme of nature's destructive power.

[Diacope](#) and polyptoton do similar work in the second stanza. Listen to the key word in these lines:

[...] And the jaws,  
Before they are satisfied or their stretched purpose  
Slacken, go down jaws; go gnawn bare. Jaws  
Eat and are finished and the jawbone comes to the  
beach:

All those insistent "jaws" suggest that the sea is nothing *but* jaws: a landscape of perpetual biting and "gripp[ing]" and gulping, in which no creature "touches" another without "clutching" and "devour[ing]."

And speaking of "gripp[ing]," take a look at the [epizeuxis](#) in the poem's closing lines:

[...] This curved jawbone did not laugh  
But gripped, gripped and is now a cenotaph.

That intense repetition doubles down (literally) on the idea that all this dead fish knew was eating—until it was eaten itself.

#### Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "broken," "breakers"
- **Line 6:** "jaws"
- **Line 8:** "jaws," "Jaws"
- **Line 9:** "jawbone"
- **Line 16:** "gripped, gripped"

## ASYNDETON

[Asyndeton](#) creates a feeling of scale and mass, helping to evoke the sheer number of deaths that matter-of-factly happen in the ocean (and the wider world) every day.

For instance, observe the lack of conjunctions in this passage from the second stanza, in which the speaker describes all the bleached, "indigestible" bits of sea creatures that wash up on the shore:

This is the sea's achievement; with shells,  
Vertebrae, claws, carapaces, skulls.

By refusing to close this list with an "and," the poem suggests that it's only just begun to describe all the ruined fragments of dead animals lying strewn around on this beach. The list, the speaker's asyndeton implies, could go on; the speaker has only stopped because it's pointless even to *try* to enumerate every single bit of dead matter on the shore. (The asyndeton of "crabs, dogfish" back in the first stanza similarly suggests that there are a whole lot of these hapless creatures getting thrown up, half-dead, on the sand!)

Asyndeton similarly suggests something infinite in the third stanza:

Time in the sea eats its tail, thrives, casts these  
Indigestibles, [...]

Here, it's the cycle of "time in the sea" that seems endless. Once again, an "and" here would make the ocean's eternal process of eating, thriving, and excreting seem linear rather than circular. Since this list never quite comes to an end, it can start anew as soon as it seems to be over; as the speaker puts it, time can "continue the beginning."

#### Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "crabs, dogfish,"
- **Line 8:** "Slacken, go down jaws"
- **Lines 10-11:** "shells, /Vertebrae, claws, carapaces, skulls."
- **Line 12:** "eats its tail, thrives, casts"

## ALLITERATION

[Alliteration](#) makes this poem sound intense, dramatic, and darkly musical.

For example, listen to the sounds in these lines from the first stanza:

There, crabs, dogfish, broken by the breakers or  
tossed  
To flap for half an hour and turn to a crust  
Continue the beginning. The deeps are cold:  
In that darkness camaraderie does not hold.

The blend of thudding /d/ and /b/ sounds and crisp, crunchy /c/ and /cr/ sounds here evokes both the speaker's mood and the setting. The thump of "broken by the breakers" or "deeps" and "darkness" sounds uncompromisingly grim (and might also sound rather like the thud those poor "crabs" and "dogfish" make as the waves fling them onto the shore). The harsh, sharp /c/ sounds, meanwhile, evoke the crackly, sickly "crust" that forms on the animals' rotting bodies.

Something similar happens when the speaker describes all the "indigestibles" (that is, the inedible bits of dead animals' bodies)

that lie around on the beach:

This is the sea's achievement; with shells,  
Vertebrae, claws, carapaces, skulls.

Here, the hard /c/ of "claws, carapaces" evokes dry, rattling, crispy bits of—well, claws and carapaces! And the [sibilant](#) /s/ and /sh/ sounds of "sea's," "shells," and "skulls" sound like the sea whooshing away in the background, undisturbed by all the carnage it belches up onto the sand.

#### Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "broken," "by," "breakers"
- **Line 3:** "half," "hour," "crust"
- **Line 4:** "Continue," "deeps," "cold"
- **Line 5:** "darkness," "camaraderie," "does"
- **Line 7:** "satisfied," "stretched"
- **Line 8:** "Slacken"
- **Line 10:** "sea's"
- **Line 11:** "claws, carapaces," "skulls"
- **Line 12:** "Time," "tail"
- **Line 14:** "failed far"

## ASSONANCE

Like [alliteration](#), [assonance](#) gives the poem music and meaning.

Some memorable examples turn up in the first few lines of the second stanza:

Nothing touches but, clutching, devours. And the  
jaws,  
Before they are satisfied or their stretched purpose  
Slacken, go down jaws; go gnawn bare.

Here, the /uh/ of "touches" and "clutching" suggests the guttural grunts of a hungry animal. And /aw/ assonance connects "jaws" to the "gnawn" bones they'll end up as—as well as suggesting all the "gnaw[ing]" they themselves do while they're alive.

At the beginning of the third stanza, meanwhile, assonance calls up infinity:

Time in the sea eats its tail, thrives, [...]

Here, the assonance (like the [serpent](#) these words evoke) eats its own tail, moving from an /eye/ sound to an /ee/ sound and back again.

#### Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "dogfish," "tossed"
- **Line 6:** "touches," "clutching"

- **Line 8:** “jaws,” “gnawn”
- **Line 10:** “sea's achievement”
- **Line 11:** “Vertebrae,” “carapaces”
- **Line 12:** “Time,” “sea eats,” “thrives”

## SYNECDOCHE

[Synecdoche](#) underlines the speaker's bleak view of a heartless, fish-eat-fish natural world.

In the second stanza, the “jawbone” the speaker finds on the beach suggests an ecosystem driven by “jaws” alone. Listen to how biting jaws stand in for the creatures they belong to:

[...] And the jaws,  
Before they are satisfied or their stretched purpose  
Slacken, go down jaws; go gnawn bare. Jaws  
Eat and are finished [...]

In this nightmarish vision of life in the “deeps,” every animal is just another set of living jaws, ready to devour a *different* set of jaws—if those jaws don't devour them first. Not only does this synecdoche present a creepy vision of an ocean swarming with snapping, disembodied teeth, but it also erases the distinction between all the different kinds of life in the sea. When you get right down to it, the speaker believes, everything is just a variation on jaws.

Similarly, when the speaker remarks that “this curved jawbone did not laugh, / But gripped, gripped,” the poem suggests that animal jaws have only one purpose, and smiling isn't it. Perhaps this line even suggests something more uncomfortable: *human* jaws, which can indeed “laugh,” might not be as far away from the cycle of devouring and dying as they might like to believe.

### Where Synecdoche appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-9:** “And the jaws, / Before they are satisfied or their stretched purpose / Slacken, go down jaws; go gnawn bare. Jaws / Eat and are finished”
- **Lines 15-16:** “This curved jawbone did not laugh / But gripped, gripped”



## VOCABULARY

**Breakers** (Line 2) - Waves.

**Camaraderie** (Line 5) - Fellow-feeling, friendship.

**Their stretched purpose slacken** (Lines 7-8) - In other words, “their intention to bite weakens.”

**Gnawn** (Line 8) - Gnawed, chewed.

**Vertebrae** (Line 11) - The bones of the spine.

**Carapaces** (Line 11) - Hard but non-bony shells, like those of

crabs or lobsters.

**Spars** (Lines 13-14) - Beams of wood, as from a shipwreck—here used [metaphorically](#) to describe the wreckage of sea-creature's ambitions to stay alive!

**Cenotaph** (Line 16) - A monument to the dead.



## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

This [free verse](#) poem uses a form of Hughes's own design. The poem's three stanzas move from a cinquain (or five-line stanza) to a sestet (or six-line stanza), then back to a cinquain again. This pattern of growth and shrinking mimics precisely what the poem describes: the endless cycle of birth and death, eating and being eaten, that is the fate of all animal life.

### METER

This [free verse](#) poem doesn't use any steady [meter](#). But its measured lines, all roughly the same length, give the speaker's voice a steady, meditative [tone](#). The poem moves along at a walking pace, just like the speaker ambling down the beach and reflecting on nature's indifferent brutality.

### RHYME SCHEME

While there's no consistent [rhyme scheme](#) here, irregular flickers of rhyme mark some of this [free verse](#) poem's most pointed insights.

For example, take a look at what happens at the end of the first stanza:

[...] The deeps are cold:  
In that darkness camaraderie does not hold.

This rhymed [couplet](#) lends some extra weight to the poem's warning that there's no such thing as friendship in wild nature. The “deeps” here are “cold” literally and [metaphorically](#): the ocean is both icy and unfeeling!

The same effect reappears at the end of the poem:

[...] This curved jawbone did not laugh  
But gripped, gripped and is now a cenotaph.

This closing couplet itself feels rather like a “cenotaph,” a monument to all of nature's grim deaths.



## SPEAKER

This poem's speaker—a thoughtful person with a bleak (or perhaps merely realistic!) view of nature's indifferent, eat-or-be-eaten rhythms—sounds a lot like Ted Hughes himself.

Hughes often wrote poems about his [intense encounters](#) with the natural world, poems that often came to [similar conclusions](#) about devourings and death.

But readers don't have to interpret the speaker as Hughes to understand the poem. All they need to know is that the sight of a picked-clean sea creature's "jawbone" provokes this reflective speaker to consider the currents of life and death that run, not just through the life of the sea, but through the whole natural world. This speaker is a person who sees danger and truth in the smallest things.



## SETTING

The poem is set on the seashore—a thin strip of relative safety next to the vast and dangerous sea. Here on the beach, the speaker observes, people can get a glimpse of all the violence and drama of life in the ocean through the "indigestibles" the sea coughs up: the "vertebrae, claws, carapaces, and skulls" that nothing in the ocean (try though it might) could devour.

In a sense, the setting could be read as an image of the whole natural world. Everything in nature, the speaker implies, is rather like this: little patches of secure "dry land" lie next to chilly, dangerous "deeps," and the eat-or-be-eaten wilderness is never as far away as people might like to think.



## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

Ted Hughes (1930-1998) is one of the best-known British poets of the 20th century. His 1957 debut, *The Hawk in the Rain*, was a shock to the system of UK poetry; its percussive rhythms and raw [imagery](#) challenged the dominance of more restrained and formal poets like [Philip Larkin](#).

"Relic" was first collected in Hughes's second book, *Lupercal*. Discussing his ambitions for this collection, Hughes spoke of wanting to "find a simple concrete language with no words in it over which I didn't have complete ownership," turning away from old poetic traditions to find his own stripped-down voice. Many of the poems in this collection (and many of Hughes's poems in general) depict the [power](#) and [violence](#) of the natural world.

Hughes grew up in West Riding, Yorkshire, a relatively rural part of England, and he cultivated an early interest in the natural world that would deeply influence his poetry. This poem is also one of many he wrote that capture an intense, disorienting [encounter with animals](#). Hughes was both reverent and unsentimental about the natural world, seeing it not just as a source of wisdom and beauty (as the 19th-century Romantics like [William Wordsworth](#) often did) but also as a place full of [instinctive violence](#) and danger.

Hughes's writing was also deeply influenced by his first wife, fellow poet [Sylvia Plath](#); over the course of their short and often tormented marriage, the pair produced a rich, unsettling body of work.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Hughes's long and prolific career ran from the 1950s until his death in 1998. He began publishing his poetry during a period of rapid post-war urbanization and industrialization. In the '50s, Britain had a booming manufacturing industry in products as diverse as ships, cars, metals, and textiles. But with this boom came increasing pollution. Hughes's poetry, with its interest in wild nature and animal instinct, might be read as a skeptical rejoinder to a post-war enthusiasm for civilizing, scientific progress.

But like a lot of Hughes's animal poetry, "Relic" steps outside its specific historical context to a world of eternal (and not especially comforting) truths. This poem suggests that nature's rhythms—life and death, eating and being eaten—keep on going no matter what humanity does, or how human beings feel.

Hughes found awe and inspiration even in the natural world's [harsh moments](#). Though he grew up hunting in the North Yorkshire countryside, as an adult he came to prefer capturing nature on the page.



## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [A Brief Biography](#) — Learn more about Hughes's life and work via the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/ted-hughes>)
- [The Poem Aloud](#) — Listen to a reading of the poem. (<https://youtu.be/7UrMI5TGwY4>)
- [Hughes's Legacy](#) — Watch an event in which contemporary poet Alice Oswald discusses Hughes's work. (<https://youtu.be/vop3NOGMExs>)
- [The Ted Hughes Society](#) — Visit the Ted Hughes Society to learn more about Hughes's work (and his continuing influence). (<http://thetedhughessociety.org/>)
- [An Interview with Hughes](#) — Listen to a 1961 interview with Ted Hughes and his wife, fellow poet Sylvia Plath. The literary duo discuss their writing and their influence on each other. (<https://youtu.be/Vqhsnk6vY8E>)

### LITCHARTS ON OTHER TED HUGHES POEMS

- [A Picture of Otto](#)
- [Bayonet Charge](#)
- [Cat and Mouse](#)
- [Hawk Roosting](#)
- [Roe-Deer](#)



- [Snowdrop](#)
- [Telegraph Wires](#)
- [The Harvest Moon](#)
- [The Jaguar](#)
- [The Thought Fox](#)
- [Wind](#)



## HOW TO CITE

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