

## CHARLES PRENTISS

*Pleasure Point Bluffs, 2015*  
Oil on canvas, 48 x 48 in.



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## ZACK FOX LOEHLE

### Ode to the Krill

Sound and survival  
in the open ocean

*“In an experiment off the coast of Tasmania, a single air gun [a common tool used by militaries and corporations to scan the ocean floor] killed every krill larva . . . within more than a kilometer and wiped out most other plankton. The sound waves . . . so ripped up the sensory hairs that cover the animals’ bodies that the plankton soon died, stripped of any ability to hear or feel their world.”*

—David George Haskell, *Sounds Wild and Broken*

For the krill, those invisible masses of the oceans, the little legs and busy bodies flicking with undignified vigor through ceaseless tides. For the whales, yes, the giants whose prickly baleen barbs close around krill by the thousands; and for the birds, plastic-filled bellies distended and legs staggering with hunger; and for the dolphins that choke on toxic algal blooms; and for the manatees, backs battle scarred from careless boat propellers; yes, for all of them, all the many, yes—but today is for the krill.

I once saw the cousins of krill, the sea scuds, hundreds of tiny bodies teeming on a barnacle shell. They were busy, the little crustaceans, shifting sediment and creating a warren of burrows, hills, and caves, an entire civilization in an area the size of my thumb. Out in the open ocean, krill replicate that buzzing mass of life without anything resembling the solid structures land dwellers are used to, devouring even tinier plankton and darting away from the fish mouths that seek to swallow them whole. They move with little regard for gravity, living by the alien laws of the ocean water.

Their bottom legs flutter ceaselessly, as though running, while the front set of legs waves like a fish’s fins, combing the seawater for food. During the day, they sink to the pitch-black ocean depths, avoiding predators by hiding in the darkness. At night, krill are part of a great unsung migration, as billions of plankton rise to the top of the ocean to feed. See it: the vast school of krill, swimming determinedly as the sun sets. They leave the coldest reaches behind, moving tirelessly toward the upper ocean, where moonlight dips beneath the choppy waves.

This migration is loud. Crackles and pops from crustaceans, chirps and rattles of fish, the far-off sound of whales singing; the krill dart through it all, feeling the vibrations of sound in their bodies, countless sensory hairs prickling and moving with each wave of noise. If sound is motion, then the universe of krill is hearing, a sense that precludes the power of sight or smell—the motion of the current; the feeling of the school, krill keeping each other safe from predators; the vibrating snaps and pops and rustling of lively bodies.

When the boom comes, it is fast, and the krill’s sensory hairs are severed. Maybe they have time to know what the sound is, a split-second of recognition as the body shakes before the senseless dark. Or perhaps the deprivation is instant, a faint noise in the distance and then nothing—nothing, maybe, but an overwhelming pain. When it is done, do they have time to think, as they drift in the silence?

Where the ocean was loud, now it is absence in totality—absent the rustling motion of thousands of other krill, moving quickly to avoid being eaten; absent the ripples and arc of the tides, pushing plankton this way and that; absent the singing of whales; absent the splash and plunge of a seabird diving; absent the faint crackling of shrimp, filling the water like static; absent the squeals and chirps and rush of bubbles from a fish passing by; absent any brush of movement; absent that, absent everything, in the great silence that comes before the fall.

**Zack Fox Loehle** is a writer based in Atlanta, Georgia. He received his MA in professional writing from Kennesaw State University and is an alum of the Kenyon Review Online Writers’ Workshop. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Los Angeles Review*, *The Barely South Review*, *Mental Floss*, and elsewhere.