

Whale-watching

Chris Mann

I was standing in a hot bright wind on a headland
looking out across the sea with a pair of binoculars
when I heard a voice call out, 'Look, there they are!'

My wife was pointing, she is in a way still pointing
across the crowds and the sun-umbrellas on a beach,
the lifeguards on a stand, the tiny heads in the waves.

I swung the glasses and saw a trough of rough water,
breaking, sealing, lifting and dropping in the swells
just where the edge of the land falls like a precipice.

'But isn't that a reef?' I asked. 'Or dolphins, playing?'
I gave her the binoculars. She put them to her eyes,
fiddled with the focus-wheel then stared and stared.

'No, it's them alright!' she said. 'Next to the gulls,
a mother and calf, I can even see the white patches,
what are they, like warts, along the top of her head!'

She handed me the binoculars. I paused, uncertain.
A spurt of gloom, as dark as the ink of an octopus,
was billowing through what little I knew about whales.

I'd seen Captain Ahab again, standing in a longboat,
gripping the tiller in the stern, stump-legged, cursing,
goading on the rowers, an eyeglass pressed to one eye.
What did he see in that brass-cased deadlight of a lens,

a blubber-hulk, breaching a swell like a whale-oil tank?
A devilish dark malevolence, tail up, spoiling for a duel?

Or did he foresee a kill, the dark-grey, heaving mound
roped to a ship as men in spiked boots sliced at its back
and gulls screamed and off-cuts floated on a slick of gore?

*Enough of that, I thought, no more of Ahab's nemesis,
at least for now!* With that I shook him off,
I shook old Ahab's muttering ghost right out of sight

and saw in the bright glass portal of the binoculars
a whale-song mother who wallowed with her calf
across the light green swells, the white sand of a nursery.

Rising, sinking, sieving the water with mouths agape,
shooting up breath like towers of bubbled, airy light
they swam protected seas, safe in that open-ended O

the halo of a saving vision, a vision which had made,
at least for now, the blood-dark seas of Ahab's line
a salt-bright sanctum for the song-ships of the deep.

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Author's Note

The year 2011 marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the International Whaling Commission's moratorium on commercial whaling.

During the last three centuries whales were hunted almost to extinction.

The number of southern right whales dropped from over 50 000 to fewer than 500. Their population is now slowly increasing.

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Whale-hunters called them ‘right’ because they moved ponderously, floated for hours after being harpooned and provided plentiful whale-oil, a significant source of energy for lighting.

Herman Melville in his epic novel *Moby Dick* symbolised the ravenous demand for whale-oil in the character of the obsessive and self-destructive whaler Captain Ahab.

As summer approaches and southern right whales swim from the Antarctica to calve around our shores, we celebrate their survival.

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