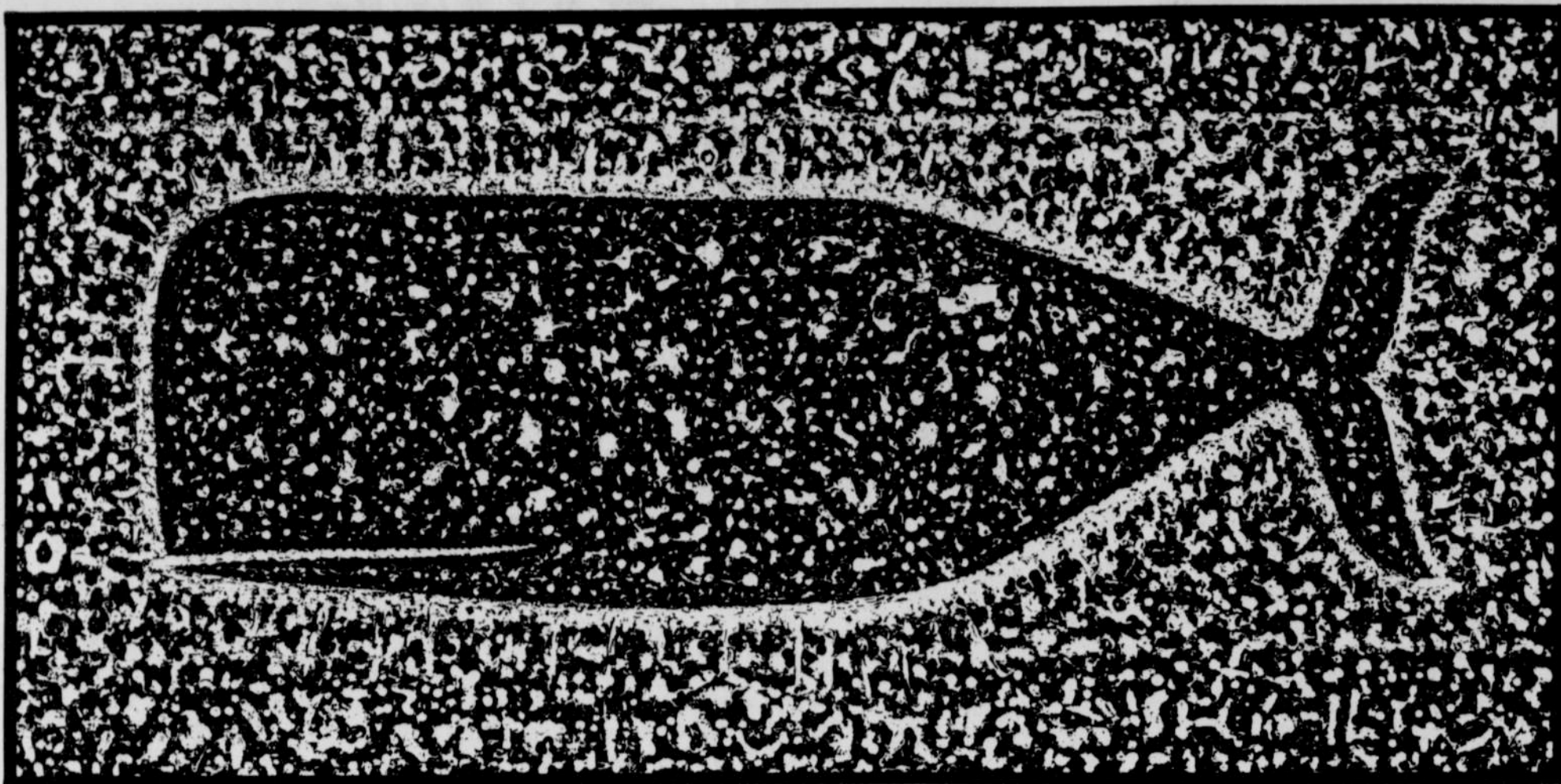


RICHARD POUSETTE-DART, *SAVE THE WHALE* (1980)

WHALES IN THEIR OCEANS

BY WALT CURTIS

It has been 25 years this summer since the United States abolished whaling and set up Marine sanctuaries off its coasts. Walt Curtis wrote this article ten years later for the North Coast Times Eagle.

"So many things fail to interest us, simply because they don't find in us surfaces on which to live, and what we have to do then is to increase the number of planes in our mind, so much that a much larger number of themes can find a place in it at the same time."

~ORTEGA y GASSET

Fresh-killed whale meat is offered for sale
The clash of market knives resounds.

~BUSON

"If the whales don't go to heaven, I'm not going either." I say to myself somewhat absurdly. "We're both mammals with souls!" Looking into the bottomless green and violent waters, clutching for dear life to the rail, then I puked over the far side of the *Taku*, our OMSI whale boat. No one seemed to care. The other landlubbers were ruminating on their own churning stomachs. Even a cabin boy felt queasy.

The mad modern Ahab truckdriver of a captain plowed through the choppy waters, trying to catch up to elusive spouts. 3 miles distant one could see the half-eaten-through Yaquina Head with its lighthouse. Such an ecological sacrilege! Why hasn't that rock quarry owner been kicked off our splendid, so-called public Oregon shore? The whales didn't care about our presence. They sounded like submariners every time we got near. Enjoying the hide-and-seek.

Turning to Rick Rubin, I said weakly, "I see why the guy in the Sandbar Tavern called these tourist boats 'pukers'." Spray splashed me in the face as we took a 10-foot wave awkwardly. Rick smiled inwardly like the Mona Lisa, his ancient seaworthiness reveling in my discomfort. Hadn't Rubin sailed a leaking schooner from the Caribbean to San Francisco? Absolutely at home, his eyes, salt&pepper beard and hair glowed with pleasure, experiencing the liquid element.

BEFORE DINNER

The sea, the sea, oh to make friends with the sea,
Longs Mr. Littlejoy, walking the wide salt marshes
Towards winter, at low tide. The hungry gulls
Above him circle, shriek as he prods a cluster
Of prickly oysters, picks the largest, bags it,
Walks on with care yet crunches underfoot
Mussels marooned in grasses, winkles attached
To sandbank, rock, then plunges a cold arm
Into the slime of a pool's bed, groping for clams.
That underground is depleted. He tries again.
Pool after pool, in vain. Plods on. The near gulls cry.
Peculiar gases rise. He stops, plods on
But to his ankles, to his knees, no, to his waist
Sinks into mud that gurgles at him, holds him,
So fondly sucks at him, he feels, he knows:
The sea accepts me. I've made friends with the sea.
And, stuck there, seems to hear a siren song,
The moan of whales, as caught, as taped by his kind
On their kind's way across depleted waters:
Cow's call to calf, cow's call to slaughtered bull.
Whole cities the soft mire of bog, he marvels,
Fenland supports that drags one lean man down.
The sea, the sea makes me a monument,
Memorial founded on the wide salt marshes
To the sea's friend, recorder of her whales.

~MICHAEL HAMBURGER

This OMSI boat ride was to be the moment of truth for me. As a poet, one of God's chosen communicators, I might actually spy the backside of Leviathan wallowing in the waves. Well, friends, it didn't happen that way. The following profound ecological rap has been garnered from books and my own feverish moral imagination. Even Herman Melville, author of *Moby Dick*, the allegorical literary classic of the New England whaling industry, thought "a whale is a spouting fish with a tail." Aristotle knew better.

As time goes by, is the human race forgetting salient knowledge, i.e., wisdom? The whales worry about human senility. Fact # 1: in 1820 in the South Pacific the American ship *Essex* rammed into a sperm whale, giving the creature a concussion. When it recovered, it came back and stove in the ship's bow, sinking the boat in 10 minutes. And so with the *Ann Alexander* in 1851 off the coast of Peru. The whales are able to fight back if they have to.

Charles Scammons, who published in 1874 the definitive *The Marine Mammals of the Northwestern Coast of North America*, gives cranky, middle-aged, grayish colored Moby Dick his due: "It is the opinion of many experienced and observed whalers — with whom we concur — that the Sperm Whale has a higher organization than any other species of Cetacean. Its massive form is composed of bone, flesh, and sinew, which has a finer texture than that of the *rorqual* or the *mysticetus*.... The mouth of the *Cachalot* is armed with teeth of ivory, finely set, for the purpose of prehension, and the animal is endowed with the power of descending to the remote caverns of the ocean in search of its prey, remaining there a length of time unequaled by any of its congeners."

God, how I love that longwinded, elegant, rhetorical prose of the 19th century writers! It brings wings, sails, billows and bellows to my ears. But in this day and age, editors don't have time for that. Gone are Cotton Mather sermons. Gone are many of the whales and 3-masted schooners. Ours is a century of reduction. We have rendered the mysteries of the biosphere into shoe polish, dogfood and machine oil.

Fact # 2: How big is a blue whale? The largest creature ever to live on the planet. Its size equals a herd of elephants, 1500 men, larger than any dinosaur. The tongue weighs 3 tons. Up to 100 feet long, the blue weighs from 150 to 200 tons. An 18th century anatomist dissecting a whale's heart, slipped into the aorta. His fellows rescued him from drowning in whale blood. Later he easily slipped a slice of the giant artery — without stretching it — over his head and shoulders.

If the whales don't make it on Planet Earth, we deserve to die with them. Isn't that so? Metaphysically speaking, human beings possess an unnatural arrogance about their position in the cosmos. Unreasonably so! We must learn to live with the other flora and fauna, or die animals wired with rusty robot brains. Alone. Bored with ourselves, the video games and weapons systems.

As we approach the 21st century, weird and wonderful plants and animals are rapidly disappearing which have taken millions of years to evolve. Their uniqueness is irreplaceable. Their presence, like that of a yellow/black Monarch butterfly flitting above a May meadow, is surprisingly delightful. Such easy whimsicality can never be programmed.

I hate technology. I hate computers. Silicon chips pollute and replicate worse than styrofoam cups and plastic spoons. How goshawful monotonous! TV viewing is vicarious living at its most debilitating. We enlarge posteriors and devolve passive electronically stimulated rather than reality involved minds. Go



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jump in an icy mountain lake and jar loose neurons starved for sensory input.

In the marvelous book *Mind In The Waters* John Lilly describes how the dolphin Elvar seemed to be impatient that millions of years of evolutionary history could not be bridged in a few weeks. Lilly describes: "He acts as if he wishes we would hurry up and understand him. He apparently is pushing points we as yet cannot imagine. For example, he sometimes inserts long passages of dolphinese alternating with our words as if to translate for us." What was Elvar trying to tell us?

Has a whale or a dolphin a Buddha nature? Their neocortexes are larger than ours! Why? We don't know what dolphins think, imagine, dream or meditate upon. Do other living creatures possess spirituality?

The second most important Zen Buddhist koan asks, "Has a dog a Buddha nature?" If not, how are dogs able to express such love and loyalty? If so, we're no better than they are!

The meaning of a warm blooded, sentient mammal's existence — whatever it is: Why am I here? Why is a whale here? No one knows for certain — is surely equal to our own. Whales deserve to coexist in peace with us. If the man/ape *Homo Sapiens*, evolved from the killer toolmaker of the African veldt, doesn't quit slaughtering and plundering the biosphere, he shall be alone. I mean, we shall feel such cosmic sorrow we may no longer desire to live.

Fact#3: since 1900 two million brother and sister whales have been murdered. Isn't that equivalent to human genocide? We humans are a bloody race of beings.

Humanity has contaminated everything by its presence. Manmade objects and machinery proliferate everywhere. There is no escape from that which is human. The death of *otherness* approaches us. The shining rings of Saturn are a shooting gallery shot at by rockets. Microwaves riddle our brains and penetrate our genes as we kill off the other creatures.

Solo singers, deep-blue divers, whales wallow in their own blood blubber bombed incomprehensibly. Pesticides poison the white heron wading in the polluted pond. Things outside ourselves, pure things which can and did exist, now die. They snarl in sorrow. Their wings wave goodbye to tomorrow. Their disappearing forms rise up to reproach us. We are a cosmic pox. Our presence in the universe is a plague. Perish the pimple.

FROM:

HAVE YOU SEEN THIS MOVIE?

Help! Hurrah! What's going on here? Samsara? Illusion? Reality?

What're all these trailers row'd up hillside, more people?

How can Lyca sleep?

Cows on Canandaigua fields lactate into rubber stainless steel plastic milkhouse machinery vats ashine —

Revolutionary Suicide! Driving on Persian gasoline?

Kill Whale & Ocean? Oh one American myself shifts 1000 times more Chemical waste into freshwater & seas than any single Chinaman!

America Suicide Cure World Cancer! Myself included dependent on Chemicals, wheels, dollars.

metal Coke Cans Liquid propane batteries marijuana lettuce

avocados cigarettes plastic pens & milkbottles — electric

in N.Y.C. heavy habit, cut airconditioners isolation from street nightmare smog heat study decentralized Power sources 10 years

not atomic thermopollutive monolith. Om. How many species poisoned biocided from Earth realms?

O bald Eagle and Blue Whale with giant piteous Cat Squeak —

Oh Wailing whale ululating underocean's sonic roar of Despair!

Sing thy Kingdom to Language deaf America! Scream thy black

Cry thru Radio electric Aether —

Scream in Death America! Or did Captain Ahab not scream

Curses as he hurled harpoon

into the body of the mother, great White Whale Nature

Herself,

thrashing in intelligent agony innocent vast in the oil-can slick waters?

~ALLEN GINSBERG
(1926-1997)