

WHAT I TALK ABOUT WHEN I TALK ABOUT WHALING

Soul of Whale

Antarctica: Died 2008

“Thank God for books and music and things I can think about.”

- Daniel Keyes, *Flowers for Algernon*

My mother's mother was one of the minke whales caught by the Yushin Maru in 1943. The men aboard the ship followed her pod for an hour until they were forced to surface. In total, six whales were harpooned and dragged through the water until they died. One male had lost a partner, and my mother later told me he dove further than we should ever go and never surfaced. I asked her, how could he stay below for so long? And she told me, his loneliness weighed him down.

In 1991 my mother was born. She'd developed prematurely and in her youth became completely blind. In the gloom of our ocean it rarely bothered her, save for when we surfaced for air and watched the sun rise or fall. Then she'd ask me, how bright is the sun today? Does it look happy? And I would tell her it looked as joyful as it did when it sank yesterday. My other considered herself something akin to a poet. She spoke in prose and never meant anything literally. The other members of our pod thought her strange, and then me by association. I always resented her for it. Sometimes I believed she conceived me just for another whale to share her insight with.

I was born in 2000, the year time reset. My mother named me Karasu. By then whaling ships were as common as storm clouds passing overhead. I encountered my first ship when I was eight months old. We'd been watching the sun begin its sluggish march across the sky, when a dark circle appeared at its centre. It grew larger and took on the shape of an arrowhead. My mother urged our pod to dive. I sank as slow as I could, until I was at the end of the pod. Then I rose and waited until the iron belly of the ship was above. I emerged behind it, and on its deck I saw silhouettes of men. They moved like Moreau's creatures, swathed in thick pelts that contorted their shapes into prey. The ship itself was steel and gray, and sleek like a shark. It carried itself with a cold resolve that broke my nerve, and I suddenly craved the warmth of the water below. Before I slid beneath the waves, I saw the empty bodies of two whales draped across the ship's side, like deer slung across the shoulders of a hunter. Later, I asked my mother what the humans wanted from us. Our humanity, she told me.

As I grew older, my fascination with humans grew greater. Perhaps it was a morbid curiosity or a depraved urge to communicate with them. What I wanted was to know if they loved us or despised us. I knew by then that whales and dolphins were also captured as devices of entertainment. We could be taught to perform tricks like a horse, beg for food like a dog, and display mockeries of affection like a cat. But if we were so loved and kept like pets, why did they hunt us in such violent ways? The modern weapon for whaling was an explosive harpoon. It entered our bodies as a needle and expanded into a five point hook upon impact. It was ensured to be the most efficient and humane way of killing a whale. This is a lie. We do not die upon impact. It almost always takes a second harpoon, and a high calibre rifle if we're stubborn. I have always scorned the idea of a 'humane' kill. It implies this is the way a human would like to die. I had always thought it deeply unfair for a creature of another world entirely to decide how I would like to die.

I once followed a harpooner, as its sister ship had followed my mother's pod 8 years ago. I watched it tow two whales through the water, leaking blood like spilled oil. Their bodies were transferred on the Nisshin Mary, a whale factory that waved a white flag with a sun at its centre. I watched the half-men on board strip the carcasses methodically like ants. They extracted cubes of fat to be melted down into tiger butter.

Later, I waited until the ship threw anchor and the light turned on in the night guard's box. Then I sidled closer to the ship's flank and listened to the radio. I fell asleep to the voices of presidents I would never meet. When I woke beneath the ship in the morning, I heard music. It was the first time I had experienced jazz. The sound moved through the water and pricked me between the eyes. I surfaced a few yards away, and Sidney Becket blared from the radio to fill my body with electricity. I knew if the sun ever heard this, it would shine as bright as it did on its first dawn.

Sometimes the night guard turned off the radio and read aloud to himself. He cycled through Dostoevsky, Wells, Flaubert, Keyes, Murakami and more. It was intoxicating, the way the author's voices flowed. They were all read by the same man, but the stories carried such varying tones of intelligence. My favourite was *Flowers of Algernon*. I found the irony in man's desperate bid for intelligence incredibly funny. Was music and Literature not enough?

I knew it was foolhardy venturing so close to the boat. They eventually caught on and followed me back to my pod. They surrounded us and the waters churned pink. When the first harpoon latched onto me, I felt a pain so clear it was as though glass had crystallised within me. I wailed for my mother and thrashed as they dragged me aboard. From the mouth of the Nisshin Mary I hear a whale calling out. I did not look, I do not know if it was her.

It is commonly agreed upon that man and beast ought to be friends, but only when it benefits man. The domestication of lesser creatures such as dogs and horses for hunting and war is one such example. To exert power over a creature means to outsmart it or overpower it. And we follow for we cannot utilise pain as a weapon in the way man has. Man demonstrates his ability to kill, for he has built rockets, started wars and made money from trees. Man is a paradox, for he is smart because he kills. But if he kills, he is an animal, and an animal cannot outsmart man. There is a passage my dear night guard once read aloud:

"Not to go on all fours; that is the Law. Are we not Men?"

Not to spill Blood; that is the Law. Are we not Men?"

Man thinks he is the sayer of the law. But we whales walk not on all fours, are we not men?