

*Excerpts from **Surfacing**, by Walter Jon Williams.*

Anthony Maldalena is a linguist working on a language spoken by the Dwellers, alien whale-like creatures living deep in the sea. He has help from real whales who he brought with him, whose language he can already speak.

Anthony gazed stonily at the translation tree. “I am rising toward and thinking hungrily about the slippery-tasting coordinates” actually made the most objective sense, but the righthand branch of the tree was the most literal and most of what Anthony suspected was context had been lost. “I and the oily current are in a state of motion toward one another” was perhaps more literal, but “We (the oily deep and I) are in a cold state of mind” was perhaps equally valid.

The Dweller that Anthony was listening to was engaged in a dialogue with another, possibly the same known to the computer as 41, who might be named “Upwelling Reflection,” but Deep Dweller naming systems seemed inconsistent, depending largely on a context that was as yet opaque, and “upwelling reflection” might have to do with something else entirely.

Anthony suspected the Dweller had just said hello.

The other Dweller answered.

Through his bare feet, Anthony could feel the subsonic overtones vibrating through the boat. Something in the cabin rattled. The microphones recorded the sounds, raised the subsonics to an audible level, played it back. The computer made its attempt.

A9140 was a phrase that, as yet, had no translation.

The Dweller language, Anthony had discovered, had no separation of subject and object; it was a trait in common with the Earth cetaceans whose languages Anthony had first learned. “I swim toward the island” was not a grammatical possibility: “I and the island are in a condition of swimming toward one another” was the nearest possible approximation.

The Dwellers lived in darkness, and, like Earth’s cetaceans, in a liquid medium. Perhaps they were psychologically unable to separate themselves from their environment, from their fluid surroundings. Never approaching the surface—it was presumed they could not survive in a non-pressurized environment—they had no idea of the upper limit of their world.

They were surrounded by a liquid three-dimensional wholeness, not an air-earth-sky environment from which they could consider themselves separate.

A high-pitched whooping came over the speakers, and Anthony smiled as he listened. The singer was one of the humpbacks that he had imported to this planet, a male called The One with Two Notches on His Starboard Fluke.

Two Notches was one of the brighter whales, and also the most playful. Anthony ordered his computer to translate the humpback speech.

ANTHONY, I AND A PLACE OF BAD SMELLS HAVE FOUND ONE ANOTHER, BUT THIS HAS NOT DETERRED OUR HUNGER.

The computer played back the message as it displayed the translation, and Anthony could understand more context from the sound of the original speech: that Two Notches was floating in

a cold layer beneath the bad smell, and that the bad smell was methane or something like it—humans couldn't smell methane, but whales could. The over-literal translation was an aid only, to remind Anthony of idioms he might have forgotten.

Anthony's name in humpback was actually He Who Has Brought Us to the Sea of Rich Strangeness, but the computer translated it simply. Anthony tapped his reply.

What is it that stinks, Two Notches?

SOME KIND OF HORRID JELLYFISH. WERE THEY-AND-I FEEDING, THEY-AND-I WOULD SPIT ONE ANOTHER OUT. 1/ THEY WILL GIVE THEM/ME A NAME: THEY/ME ARE THE JELLYFISH THAT SMELL LIKE INDIGESTION.

That is a good name, Two Notches.

I AND A SMALL BOAT DISCOVERED EACH OTHER EARLIER TODAY. WE ITCHED, SO WE SCRATCHED OUR BACK ON THE BOAT. THE HUMANS AND I WERE STARTLED. WE HAD A GOOD LAUGH TOGETHER IN SPITE OF OUR HUNGER.

A blaze of delight rose in Anthony. The Dwellers, he realized, had overheard his conversation with Two Notches, and were commenting on it. Furthermore, he knew, A9140 probably was a verb form having to do with hearing—the Dwellers had a lot of them. “I/You hear the shrill sounds from above” might do as a working translation, and although he had no idea how to translate C22, he suspected it was a comment on the sounds. In a fever, Anthony began to work.

A good day. Even after the yellow sun had set, Anthony still felt in a sunny mood. A9140 had been codified as “listen(H),” meaning listen solely in the sense of listening to a sound that originated from far outside the Dwellers’ normal sphere—from outside their entire universe, in fact, which spoke volumes for the way the Dwellers saw themselves in relation to their world. They knew something else was up there, and their speech could make careful distinction between the world they knew and could perceive directly and the one they didn’t. C22 was a descriptive term involving patterning: the Dwellers realized that the cetacean speech they’d been hearing wasn’t simply random. Which spoke rather well for their cognition.

“Anthony Maldalena?”

She was a little gawky, and her skin was pale. Dark hair in a single long braid, deep eyes, a bit of an overbite. She was waiting for him at the end of his slip, under the light. She had a bag over one shoulder.

“Mr. Maldalena. My name is Philana Telander. I came here to see you.”

“I wanted to show you what I’ve been able to do with your work. I have some articles coming up in Cetology Journal but they won’t be out for a while.”

“You’ve done very well,” said Anthony. Tequila swirled in his head. He was having a hard time concentrating on a subject as difficult as whale speech.

Philana had specialized in communication with female humpbacks. It was harder to talk with the females: although they were curious and playful, they weren’t vocal like the bulls; their language was deeper, briefer, more personal. They made no songs. It was almost as if, solely in the realm of speech, the cows were autistic. Their psychology was different and complicated, and Anthony

had had little success in establishing any lasting communication. The cows, he had realized, were speaking a second tongue: the humpbacks were essentially bilingual, and Anthony had only learned one of their languages.

Philana had succeeded where Anthony had found only frustration. She had built from his work, established a structure and basis for communication. She still wasn't as easy in her speech with the cows as Anthony was with a bull like Two Notches, but she was far closer than Anthony had ever been.

“Listen to this,” Philana said. “It’s fascinating. A cow teaching her calf about life.” She touched the recorder, and muttering filled the air. Anthony had difficulty understanding: the cow’s idiom was complex, and bore none of the poetic repetition that made the males’ language easier to follow.

“Can I listen to the Dwellers?” she asked. “I’d like to hear them.”

Despite his resentment at her imposition, Anthony appreciated her being careful with the term: she hadn’t called them Leviathans once. He thought about her request, could think of no reason to refuse save his own stubborn reluctance. The Dweller sounds were just background noise, meaningless to her. He stepped onto his boat, took a cube from his pocket, put it in the trapdoor, pressed the PLAY button. Dweller murmurings filled the cockpit. Philana stepped from the dock to the boat. She shivered in the wind. Her eyes were pools of dark wonder.

“So different.”

“Are you surprised?”

“I suppose not.”

“This isn’t really what they sound like. What you’re hearing is a computer-generated metaphor for the real thing. Much of their communication is subsonic, and the computer raises the sound to levels we can hear, and also speeds it up. Sometimes the Dwellers take three or four minutes to speak what seems to be a simple sentence.”

“We would never have noticed them except for an accident,” Philana said. “That’s how alien they are.”

“Yes.”

Humanity wouldn’t know of the Dwellers’ existence at all if it weren’t for the subsonics confusing some automated sonar buoys, followed by an idiot computer assuming the sounds were deliberate interference and initiating an ET scan. Any human would have looked at the data, concluded it was some kind of seismic interference, and programmed the buoys to ignore it.

“They’ve noticed us,” Anthony said. “The other day I heard them discussing a conversation I had with one of the humpbacks.”

Philana straightened. Excitement was plain in her voice. “They can conceptualize something alien to them.”

“Yes.”

Her response was instant, stepping on the last sibilant of his answer. “And theorize about our existence.”

Anthony smiled at her eagerness. “I... don’t think they’ve got around to that yet.”

“But they are intelligent.”

“Yes.”

“Maybe more intelligent than the whales. From what you say, they seem quicker to conceptualize.”

“Intelligent in certain ways, perhaps. There’s still very little I understand about them.”

“Can you teach me to talk to them?”

The wind blew chill between them. “I don’t,” he said, “talk to them.”

She seemed not to notice his change of mood, stepped closer. “You haven’t tried that yet? That would seem to be reasonable, considering they’ve already noticed us.”

He could feel his hackles rising, mental defenses sliding into place. “I’m not proficient enough,” he said.

“If you could attract their attention, they could teach you.” Reasonably.

“No. Not yet. Humans interacted with whales for centuries before they learned to speak with them, and even now the speech is limited and often confused. I’ve only been here two and a half years.”

“I work alone,” he said. “I immerse myself in their speech, in their environment, for months at a time. Talking to a human breaks my concentration. I don’t know how to talk to a person right now.”

The males [whales] were a lot more vocal than once they had been, as if they were responding to human encouragement to talk—or perhaps they now had more worth talking about. Their speech was also more terse than before, less overtly poetic; the humans’ directness and compactness of speech, caused mainly by their lack of fluency, had influenced the whales to a degree.

The whales were adapting to communication with humans more easily than the humans were adapting to them. It was important to chart that change, be able to say how the whales had evolved, accommodated. They were on an entire new planet now, explorers, and the change was going to come fast. The whales were good at remembering, but artificial intelligences were better.

He could hear the deep murmurings of Dwellers rising from beneath the cold current. There were half a dozen of them engaged in conversation, and Anthony worked the day and far into the night, transcribing, making hesitant attempts at translation. The Dweller speech was more opaque than usual, depending on a context that was unstated and elusive. Comprehension eluded Anthony; but he had the feeling that the key was within his reach.

The next two days a furious blaze of concentration burned in Anthony’s mind. Things fell into place. He found a word that, in its context, could mean nothing but light, as opposed to

fluorescence—he was excited to find out the Dwellers knew about the sun. He also found new words for darkness, for emotions that seemed to have no human equivalents, but which he seemed nevertheless to comprehend. One afternoon a squall dumped a gallon of cold water down his collar and he looked up in surprise: he hadn't been aware of its slow approach.

The whales left the cold current and suddenly the world was filled with tropic sunshine and bright water. Anthony made light conversation with the humpbacks and spent the rest of his time working on Dweller speech. Despite hours of concentrated endeavor he made little progress. The sensation was akin to that of smashing his head against a stone wall over and over, an act that was, on consideration, not unlike the rest of his life.

As far as the Dwellers went, he had run all at once into a dozen blind alleys. Progress seemed measured in microns.

“What’s B1971?” Philana asked once, looking over his shoulder as he typed in data.

“A taste. Perhaps a taste associated with a particular temperature striation. Perhaps an emotion.” He shrugged. “Maybe just a metaphor.”

“You could ask them.”

His soul hardened. “Not yet.” Which ended the conversation.

He put on the headphones and listened to the Dwellers. Their speech rolled up from the deep. Anthony sat unable to comprehend, his mind frozen.

A Dweller soloed from below, the clearest Anthony had ever heard one. WE CALL TO OURSELVES, the Dweller said, WE SPEAK OF THINGS AS THEY ARE.

A pointless optimism began to resonate in Anthony’s mind. He sat before the computer and listened to the sounds of the Deep Dwellers as they rumbled up his spine.

I/we, he typed, live in the warm brightness above. I am new to this world, and send good wishes to the Dwellers below.

Anthony pressed TRANSMIT. Rolling thunder boomed from the boat’s speakers. The grammar was probably awful, Anthony knew, but he was fairly certain of the words, and he thought the meaning would be clear.

Calls came from below. A translation tree appeared on the screen.

“Trench Dweller” was probably one of the Dwellers’ names. “Bubbleward” was a phrase for “up,” since bubbles rose to the surface. Anthony tapped the keys.

We are from far away, recently arrived. We are small and foreign to the world. We wish to brush the Dwellers with our thoughts. We regret our lack of clarity in diction. . .

Anthony hit TRANSMIT. Speakers boomed. The subsonics were like a punch in the gut.

The Dweller’s answer was surprisingly direct.

Anthony’s heart crashed in astonishment. Could the Dwellers stand the lack of pressure on the surface? *I/We, he typed, Trench Dweller, proceed with consideration for safety. I/We recollect that we are small and weak.* He pressed TRANSMIT and flipped to the whalespeech file.

Deep Dweller rising to surface, he typed. Run fast northward.

The whales answered with cries of alarm. Flukes pounded the water. Anthony ran to the cabin and cranked the wheel hard to starboard. He increased speed to separate himself from the humpbacks.

Anthony returned to his computer console. *I/We are in a state of motion, he reported. Is living in the home of the light occasion for a condition of damage to us/Trench Dweller?*

Subsonics rattled crockery in the kitchen.

Anthony typed, *I/We happily await greeting ourselves* and pressed TRANSMIT, then REPEAT. He would give the Dweller a sound to home in on.

The Dweller rose, a green-grey mass that looked as if a grassy reef had just calved. Foam roared from its back as it broke water, half an ocean running down its sides. Anthony's boat danced in the sudden white tide, and then the ocean stilled. Bits of the Dweller were all around, spread over the water for leagues—tentacles, filters, membranes. The Dweller's very mass had calmed the sea. The Dweller was so big, Anthony saw, it constituted an entire ecosystem. Sea creatures lived among its folds and tendrils: some had died as they rose, their swim bladders exploding in the release of pressure; others leaped and spun and shrank from the brightness above.

Sunlight shone from the Dweller's form, and the creature pulsed with life.

Anthony rose to say hello.