

CARIBBEAN LOG: ROMANCING THE HUMPBACK WHALES

A Rhyme Royal

Beneath the sea our bubbles weave their part.
The framed montage is sudden silver-slashed
With black-masked angels practicing their dart
And pivot, coded greetings sequin-flashed.
Poor Michael can't perceive the treasures cached
Around us in the rocking turquoise swells.
He suffers bends outside his scholar's cells.

Each day our boat explores Bahama blue.
The engine cut, our dolphin escort bids
Our bow-waves farewell, turns and arcs on cue,
Parentheses above the froth that skids
The surface with night-coming wind. Our grids
And charts insist we're in a likely place
For migrant whales but, so far, not a trace.

Our week is climaxed with a midnight song.
The humpbacks! Humpbacks tuning like a choir.
We hear a solo, duet, chorus, long
Sea chanties fill our tape, rise up our wire.
We roll their voices on our spools, require
A second playing to convince our ears.
They sound like pinched chain saws and friction gears.

Two days we chase horizons round a bowl
And never see them. Goblets of glass-green
Keep overflowing heads of foam, then roll
And raise the brew-- now writhing serpentine
With shapes of life in skins of opaline.
The pro and poet stare off separately.
Each has his own Cetaceous fantasy.

Behind my lids my data banks recall
Cetacea: Sub order-- Mysticeti--
Reposed on museum platforms near a wall
The dusty hulls of mounted monsters lie.
Their eyes, suffused in facelessness, deny
Ferocity. Their overwhelming length
Would not let me imagine life and strength.

(cont.)

We dive with morning. Slowly we go down
Through gilded glare, a curtain-rise of krill.
Festoons of light define us yellow-brown.
La Mer, the mother of our lot, life's mill--
We come back to our need for fin and gill.
A glimpse of flipper-white in this deep allness--
Oh, Quasimodo-- please forgive our smallness!

If elephants are roots of heaven, whales
Are roots of earth, embodied in eons
Of wrinkled metamorphic rock that sails
Like airborne silk the inner echelons
Of poles, their tails heraldic colophons.
Fear has its moment. Even here we yaw
In their dynamics, helpless bobbing straw.

Somehow their sound should be a great deep gonging,
Vibrating thunder through sarcophagus dark.
Or even low-note blues of bass sax longing
With timbal beats to match the regal arc
Of vertabrae between each piston spark.
Four-octave ranges, shrill with reedy flaws,
Compel us to pursue effect and cause.

They may sing higher, far above our ear--
Sometimes they're racers' engines on a speedway.
But now there's more than sound transmitted here--
The water's charged with living interplay,
Chain energy aplenty to relay
A simple message, one we both receive:
Yes, you're accepted. No one has to leave.

I'm drowning in superlatives and verbs,
My camera weighted down with disbelief.
The nearest humpback glides toward me, but curbs
Its thrust. Its hide hosts life in bas-relief--
Such texture, form-- a frayed sargasso sheaf
Trails down between us, stirs reality.
My film must prove such animals can be.

(cont.)

I long to thank my mentor for all this,
 Enhance his kind of ecstasy with mine,
 Repay him with the gold he'll always miss.
 I'd thread him through each metaphor, then line
 Him up with pulsing aura, angled shine
 And ricochet, implant kaleidoscope
 Receptors in the center of his hope.

I see him thinking now: Why do they breach?
 Why do they roll and wave a flipper skywards,
 Sing, sound, pound the surface, curl their tails, beach?
 He'll drudge for each small truth, ignoring bywords.
 I wish him countermedley, not just my words.
 He figures age, weight, girth and length. He spooks
 A cow and risks too close to sweeping flukes.

The turbulence in-folds him like a pillbug.
 He unrolls, tries to glimpse the calf's baleen.
 But does he also see the flying prayer rug?
 The nephrite chinoiserie, the muraled screen?
 He labels, sorts, bypassing damascene,
 Chiaroscuro, Monet hues and light,
 The minor-key cantata I must write.

With what rare genus does he classify
 Those mermen in the distance? How do they
 Fit food chains? Are they sailors' incubi?
 And the crowned one with the trident? I admit
 It's time to head for ship and shore, acquit
 My goggled eyes. Ascend is not the word--
 I'm higher now than any frigate bird.

As Michael signals for a final shot
 My belly tightens; I move in and nod.
 He paces with a humpback, finds a spot.
 We're both encircled deep within the pod.
 He sidles closer. Touches! RIDES, wing-shod.
 All know he's there. They gentle their slip stream.
 They graze-- content to grace our wildest dream.

The eyes aren't made for Titans; (theirs or mine)
 Baseball-size lenses stud a misplaced butte.
 I can't digest the precedent design.
 Genus: ~~Meg~~aptera. Can we compute
 Intelligence from sound? Can we refute
 Old whalers' tales of boats harrassed and followed
 By Jonah's curse, attacked and wholly swallowed?

As Michael rubs his tiredness, mouth atwist,
 Like private involuted whelks we meet
 At interlocking jogs: Do they exist?
 And were they ever there? Has young conceit
 Propelled us, spending so much on defeat?
 Should we head home with time and money left
 Before this brine-bitch levies total theft?

The evening stirs its palette, bronze and puce
 As proof explodes the sea in flying shards!
 As if Jehovah God would introduce
 A just-made creature launched on gold petards
 Against our gaze. Unearthly bulk bombards
 The amniotic fluid it returns to.
 Then sameness swears no shock took place. No clue.

A hemispheric plug once more breaks free
 From gravity, fast followed by another
 Full silhouette destroying simile.
 We reckon six besides a calf and mother.
 Again they shed one world into the other.
 A final lunge-- downpouring shattered fire-drops
 Interspangled hotly with our heart-stops.

The lead bull takes my spirit, holds the leap
 Sharp at its peak, eternal in suspension,
 Indelible with what words fail to keep.
 Now nothing more can share this sealed dimension.
 We stand agape, our feet a lost extension.
 As all our whooping blows away astern,
 The after-images begin to burn.

(cont.)