

ROMANCING THE HUMPBACK WHALES

1995 Nevada
winner \$50.00

The salty core of my Aquarian (dream:
To slither like a seal through parting swarms
Of small day-feeding fishes; their bright (stream
Defines our path. They plunge like sudden storms
Of flying arrows, cross the scooping forms
Of undulating outriders-- our pair-
Pagliacci faces grinning us a dare.

see comment on
last page

Our bubble wake is coded melody;
Each globule rises to a treble staff
Of living elkhorn branching like a tree.
Loose blue conveys whole notes from sonic graph
To ears attuned to each breath's epitaph.
High coral altars bless the tithes of sun
Along the reeftop posed as Helicon.

For now the dream is real and we are here.
Increasing time each day the sea is home.
The flanking porpoise escort pushes near,
Suspecting us for wetbacks, monochrome
Against a beige and turquoise catacomb,
Who crossed their borders holding rigged passports
And alien marques to dabble in their sports.

ahead, my partner's outline weaves its part,
- ~~on~~ the collage, now sudden sequin-flashed
With black-masked angels practicing their dart
And pivot, ballet-tuned, pink silver-slashed.
Poor Michael can't perceive the treasures cached
Around us in the gently rising swells.
He suffers bends outside his scholar's cells.

dim
pale
whale

He has no feel for magic strewn between
Prolonged depth rapture (my kind always lingers
On for days) and staid degrees in Marine
* Biology. ~~All~~ beauty slips his fingers
Like eels eluding grasp. His spinal tinglers
Misfire; articulation never fails
His clinic facts. Yet he, too, dreams of whales.

theme
supreme

And he who sees no shadings between peach
And tangerine, plies me with finest tools.
He hires my camera eye, takes pains to teach
Me what I need down here, precisely schools
Us to a peak, aggressive, but not fools.
He's handed me a world, made us a team.

- He's reeled and readied my whale of a (dream.

beom

gcom

team

home
scheme

extreme cont.

redeem

He's given my desire
maintained a whole of a theme

seom
regime

refocused me around a whole of a theme.

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: Magoptera. 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.

- down*
- A primordial 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,
 Imprinted with what all 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 afterimages begin to burn.

- They're back with daybreak. We gear for a dive.
 In saffron gauze they loll a mile off port.
 Our prying glasses see one more arrive.
 My tenseness quips: "Looks like they're holding court."
 "And planning how to try us for some sport,"
 My mentor grins, checking my hose and tanks.
 We row our dinghy closer to their ranks.

cont.

They're near the surface; 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 *yards away*
 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. *Pure line
 stoutr day*

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.

I long to thank my partner 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.

cont.

I see him thinking now: Why do they breach?
 Why do they roll and wave a flipper skywards, ~~or~~
~~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 weight, age, 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.

Beneath what genus does he classify
 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.

my marks

This is a masterful creation. You've woven a singing story
 vividly, within challenging bounds. The form has not kept you
 from carrying us where you wanted to go, into a world and
 experiences that must be vicarious for most of us.
 Breaks in meter to enhance a poem, especially one of this length,
 and your use of language leads me to believe you know
 what you're doing; however, in a few lines (marked -)
 I'd encourage you to polish the meter. Even though a number
 of other poems better satisfied my ear for meter, this brilliant
 narrative clung to its place by power of the language, the
 story, the feeling within it. Yours is one of the very best
 titles in this contest.
 nit-picky suggestion, line x: What would you think of simply
 "The beauty...?"