

JOHN DIXON / Saving the Songs of Innocence

When I was a little boy, we called them Blackfish. My father and I would sometimes see them when we strip-cast for coho at the mouth of the Big Qualicum river. We never got very close to them in that shallow bay, and I don't remember much more than the big dorsal fins coming up and going down in the distance—except that the fishing always seemed to go off then. Dad said that it was because the salmon hugged the bottom, dodging the hunting sonar of the Killer Whale pack. I still don't know if that's true.

Many summers later, with my own seven-year-old son, it was different. We were spinning for Cutthroat at the mouth of a stream that flows into Pryce Channel, in the Desolation Sound area of B.C. It was hot, the deer flies were getting very tough, and we were starting to think more fondly of swimming than catching big trout.

"Puuuff." It sounded far away. But loud enough that we stood still in our little aluminum boat, watching in the direction of the Brem River.

In less than a minute, the black fin of a Killer slowly appeared about a quarter of a mile away. Edge on, it looked for all the world like a dock piling slowly wavering out of the water and then falling back in, except that pilings don't spout steamy breath. He was moving along the shore, coming out of Toba Inlet on a course that would bring him right up to us. His dorsal was so tall that its tip drooped over in the way that (we say) means it's a big bull. Excitement! I started our old Evinrude and began idling along the shore waiting for him to catch up.

The next time he surfaced he was beside us, about thirty feet away on the open water side. I speeded up a bit to match his pace, and we held our course, staying about fifty feet off the steep shore. With not a ripple of wind on the water, we could see all of him as he angled into us a bit, coming up ten feet closer after his next short dive.

To say what is seen then is easier than to say what is felt or known. He looked like a huge rubbery thing that had been molded out of six or seven elephants. And I say "thing" because on one level he didn't appear, deliberately swimming at such profound ease, to be alive. Beside the obvious matter of the scale being all wrong, there was none of the fuss or busyness we associate with life, even when it is quietly on the move. But on another level, you didn't have to know that he ate seals like buttered

popcorn in order to feel the near world humming with his predatory purpose. And we were alone with him—primates on a tin half-shell.

He went down again, shallow, and angled in another ten feet. When he came up we saw his eye, and Matthew said, simply and emphatically: “I’m scared now.” “Smart,” I said to myself: “You are being regarded by one who prefers dining as high up the food chain as possible.” But out loud I did my father stuff: “We’re okay. Let’s just go along like this.”

The tip of his dorsal slowly slid under again, and I watched it closely for any change of course. “Look!” Matthew yelled: “Look at the herring!” Under the boat I saw two things at once. We had shallowed up so much that I could see the bottom about twenty feet down, and the boat was over a big school of herring packed against the shore. And then there was a different “puuuuFF!” as the Killer surged up and dove, turning directly under the boat into the feed. I saw white and black under us and hit the gas. We squirted away, and turned around to look just as about 25 yards behind us, the whale erupted out of our wake.

He came out completely, but so slowly that it was hard to believe, from about the point he was halfway, that he could possibly go any further. And when he fell back into the light smoke of our exhaust, it seemed to take as long as the collapse of a dynamited skyscraper.

God knew what he was doing when he reminded a pushy Job that He was the creator of such as the whale. “And canst thou draw out his mouth with an hook?” After that, whether or not Job was satisfied with the Almighty’s account of his afflictions, the not-nearly-so-mighty got them into perspective.

I tend to think of Job whenever I’m whacked over the head with a strong experience of nature. The story of his peek into God’s wild portfolio, and his subsequent attitude adjustment, reminds us of one of the rudiments of human wisdom: we are out of our depth in this world. In this respect, nothing has changed.

What *has* changed, sadly and urgently, is the gap between our relatively unimproved powers of understanding and the monstrous development of our capacity to despoil. I cannot really know the oceans that Homer called “the whale road,” but I can effortlessly reach their deepest regions with a neoprene gumboot which has a half-life of about a million years.

But looking the whale in the eye with Matthew has produced at least one point of clarity in me. I don’t know how I made my children, but I know that—in a way

that has nothing to do with possession—they are mine and I must try to find the strength and wisdom to care for them. Now we know that we have mixed ourselves so completely with the world that not even the mercury and cadmium-laced flesh of the whales has been spared our touch. We have made ourselves so thoroughly immanent in the world that we have taken it away from nature and hence made it—if only through default—our own.

As is the case with God, when the wilderness no longer exists, it cannot be invented no matter how appealing the idea or powerful the human will to realize it. Because an invented God or an invented wilderness lacks the autonomous power that is at the core of its reality. Once innocence is lost, its songs can still be sung, but it can never be genuinely restored.

This means that the pious path of Job, leaving the running of the world to some separate and autonomous competence such as Spinoza's *Deus sive Natura* . . . God or Nature, is now forever closed to us. We never understood the significance of that path (the next best thing to not getting kicked out of the Garden of Eden in the first place) until it was too late, and now must search out a future of which the only thing certainly known is that it will require inestimably more from us than patient restraint. We face responsibilities, and obstacles in the way of their being met, of unfathomable profundity.

The good news—and it didn't have to work out this way—is that this wonderful world, as it reveals itself in Desolation Sound, continues to be as easily evocative of love as are our children.