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Commentaries: The Blue Whale P.H. Liotta

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P.H. Liotta

THE BLUE WHALE

Drifting on a river she could not control, the broken carcass of a blue whale came to our shores. By then, jaw already cracked from the prop-blade of another ship, she lingered too long at the surface, unable to feed. Struck by a tanker crossing from Anvers to Providence, buoyed by the bulbous chin of the bow, the leviathan never knew what hit her. Water pressure kept the corpse in place until they entered Narragansett Bay. Dead a week already, she was gaffed and hooked and dragged alongside the pilot boat to Second Beach.

Back then, no one knew if she were male or female. "She" might glory in the sand while "he" grew fetid and fell away, waiting for dissection. The skeleton would be buried in the dunes, in secret, when it was done. Like the odd doctor in Marlow's darkness, who measures the crania of those who drift "out there" and "up the Congo," with caliper-like things, "in the interest of science." *Oh, I never see them come back*, he says.

By the time I get there, cubism has set in. A thousand faces circle the cadaver. The dead remains: a wishbone bent toward nothing, her inverted jawbone jabs at sky. Mist fizzles into rain. The organs splayed out in the drift sizzle like the sound of crackling bacon. Each fleck of water slices at the desiccated blood. Thousands flock to thrill at absence. There's still enough to feel the loss. A river of baleen. A disembodied fluke.

Two days on, the ebb of human flotsam has washed clean. "He" and "she" are going now—into the gloam. A bulldozer grumbles in the downpour: a single beacon, tachistoscopic, flaming red. And when the three of us arrive, everyone and thing are gone. My daughter turns in wind and keeps on asking, *What does she look like? Why did she die?* Just face the order out to sea, the pictures of a floating world: the subject sees but never speaks. The way you fear the menace left unsaid—the natural convergence weighing down. You dream alone.

Out there, what difference between what stretches ahead and what is past. The Acropolis and Parthenon streaming into view. The ruined

Balkans, hope and slaughter. Breadlines in St. Petersburg. Kurds fleeing from the bombing runs. Head for the Kyrgyz steppe. See for yourself: the free spillage of Tajik blood or the chaos-order of the Taliban. The black sturgeon, up from Caspian depths, flashing through air. Diamond in darkness. Behold the nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

I don't know about you. But for me, we're drifting still. I see the wreck of a whale, watch it going, going . . . like seals in the outer harbor, who tumble in brine and do their best ignoring death, like the one tied to the mast with wax in ears who was forced not to listen, what good could come in reading the runes of a ruined life? O lantern without bearer, you, too, are drifting, to spite your course.

*Sachuest Point, Aquidneck
Island*

COMMENTARY

"I drifted on a river I could not control," Rimbaud proclaimed with equal fragments of pride, despair, and willing loss in "Le bateau ivre." So much for poetic intent.

I am writing this from the place once named Yugoslavia. Last night at dinner, my companion Drago, an abdominal surgeon, turned to me and said, "So, you want to know about war?" I supposed that he was joking and did not anticipate his answer. He crossed the room and returned with a sheath of color negatives. Less dramatic, perhaps, than spilling a basketful of human ears onto the table, but by the end more stunning. . . . I held the pictures to the light and saw arms torn from their shoulder sockets, shrapnel from a homemade mortar buried in a woman's skull, the back thigh and buttock of a child ripped away. What was left looked more like automaton than human being. I thought I would vomit. We were at his table, drinking wine, eating *prsut* with *Kackavalj* cheese. Hundreds of these pictures. He claimed to have performed three thousand operations during the war. "This is 'the enemy,'" he said. He was not talking about the artillery or gunfire, the mines. He meant the people he used to laugh and work with. He meant his former neighbors.

I am standing in the ash of Vukovar, in the ruins of the children's hospital, where graffiti on the wall proclaims, "We will slaughter you

all!" Where their broken bodies were tossed into a mass grave only recently discovered near the stadium. The youngest was six months old. The empty hull of the place.

I am writing you from a place where you have never been. I could tell you how I *thought* a prose poem came to be. How I drank too much the night before, how there might have been a celebration for some forgotten end, or how, the morning after, I found myself composed by equal fragments guilt and clarity. How I had seen a Scandinavian film titled *My Life as a Dog*, how the hero of the story, a young boy, spends his time in the barn, dreaming himself into a capsule alongside Laeke—the dog the Soviets launched into space in 1957. But that would be a lie. The blue whale came to Second Beach on the island where I live. A tanker hit the whale somewhere in the vicinity of Nova Scotia and traveled all the way to Narragansett Bay before the crew discovered they had been pushing a behemoth off their bow for days. After study and dissection, researchers learned the "specimen" was a young male, 65 feet in length.

What you name and what you fear are the order you compose. What I've written down is basically true, though there may well be no basic truth. So the river flows. With no control. The earth was salt before the ocean turned to tears.