

# WHALEFALL

A few years ago, I helped push a beached humpback whale back out into the sea, only to witness it return and expire under its own weight on the shoreline. For the three days that it died, the whale was a public attraction. Locals brought their children down to see it. Then out-of-towners came, too. People would stand in the surf and wave babies in pastel rompers over the whale, as if to catch the drift of an evaporating myth. The whale was black like piano wood, and, because it was still young, it was pink in the joints under its fins. Waves burst behind it, sending spray over its back. Every few minutes, the whale slammed its flukes against the wet sand and exhaled loudly — a tantrum or leverage. Its soft chest turned slack, concertinaed by the pull of the swell.

At first, the mood was festive. People cheered each time the whale wrestled in the breakers. Efforts made to free it from a sandbar in the morning had been aided by the tide. That the whale had re-stranded, this time higher up the beach, did not portend well for its survival, but so astonished were the people in the crowd, and such a marvel was the animal, that hope proved difficult to quash. What the whale inspired was wonderment, a dilation of the ordinary. Everyone was talking about it, on buses and in kiosks. Dogs on the beach, held back by their owners, swept flat quarter-circles in the sand with their tails. A few had their hackles up. How the dogs imagined the whale — predator, prey, or distant relation — was anyone's guess, but they seemed keen to get a closer look. At sunset, armfuls of grease-blotted butchers paper — chips

and battered hake — were passed around. The local surf lifesavers distributed zip-up hoodies. Wildlife officers, who had been stand-offish with the gathering crowd, relaxed and delivered some lessons on whale physiology.

‘Whales are mammals,’ they began, ‘as we are, too.’ This surprised those people who were accustomed to thinking of all marine animals as types of fish. They raised their eyebrows and nodded along. Cetacean — from the ancient Greek *ketos*, made Latinate as *cetus*: an order of mammals that includes whales, dolphins, and porpoises. ‘Under its skin, the whale is wrapped in a subcutaneous envelope of fat called blubber,’ a man in khaki said, cupping his hands. Trying to imagine the properties of blubber, I could only conjure the agar desserts sold in Korean supermarkets; opaque, calorie-rich, and possessed of a curiously unimpressible tactility. While in the ocean, the whale’s blubber insulates it and allows the animal to maintain a constant inner temperature. Out of the ocean, the blubber smothers it.

‘This whale has the opposite problem to hypothermia,’ the wildlife officer explained. Though we were shivering, the whale, only metres away, was boiling alive in the kettle of itself.

That night a group of us slept lightly in the dunes, arrayed like question marks and commas on the white sand. Our minds cast to the cetacean huffing beyond the swale, then swooped back into cloudier visions. Surfers arrived in the early hours. Bouncing down to the water’s edge, they stood watching. I woke and brushed a second skin of pearly sand off my cheek, my shoulder, one thigh. Were those sharks, raiding a lux channel tipped up by the moon? Hard to tell. We resolved that the whale had been washed too high on the beach for any shark to reach it.

Rinsed by pewter light, every detail was particular and peculiar. Ridges in the sand. Plants like handfuls of knives. It felt cold. It felt cold, to us.



By sunrise, a part of the whale that ought not to be outside of it, was outside of it. A digestive organ, frilled and bluish in the foam. The whale's billiard-ball eyes tumbled in its head, and its breathing sounded laboured. The sharks slid into vapour, a squinting rumour. No blood on the tideline. People stayed back from the water's edge nonetheless. Swept slantwise, shallow waves smoothed, over-smoothed, smoothed. I palmed an unremarkable shell that sat for months afterwards, furred with dust on a ledge in my room, until it was lost. A cordon was set up. Seagulls flew down to peck avian hieroglyphs in the whale's back, their inscriptions legible to yet more skyward gulls that dove to elaborate the wounds. At every nip the whale flinched, still intensely alive.

Walking off some agitation I'd accrued watching the birds, I found one of the wildlife officers crouched a way down the beach. A blocky guy wearing wraparound sunglasses, his jaw was set tight. The whale's central nervous system was so large and complex, he explained, that euthanising it in the manner that one might kill a cow or an old horse was impossible. A bolt through the brain would take too long for the heart to register it. A shock to the heart wouldn't transmit immediate death to the brain. Exsanguination (opening the animal's arteries and leaving it to bleed out) could take many hours. A day, even. The volume of blood spread across the beach would be gory, epically so.

Talking with the wildlife officer, I began to think of the whale's body as a sort of setting in which dying could take place at multiple sites, over different durations. The animal, alive on a great scale, didn't die in an instant. Only parts of it did. The humpback's death wasn't, in a word, global. This was the kind of death people call 'a death of a thousand cuts'. The humpback's face — so much as any whale can be said to have a *face*, its eyes either side its huge head, its nostrils in its crown — did not agonise, grimace, or wince. Neither did the animal cry out in anguish. People on the beach took this for a dignified stoicism, though we were only familiar with the human cosmology of pain. It was dawning on me that, because a whale's body is attuned to its oceanic environment, and

because it occupies such immense, physical dimensions, it might suffer uniquely, according to senses I then knew little about.

The wildlife officer told me there could come a point when strapping the whale with dynamite would prove the most humane option. The clean-up afterwards — which needed to be thorough and hygienic if a whale had run aground on a popular public beach — was expensive. (How expensive? In time, I'd look it up. Another humpback, found dead nearby, a few seasons hence, cost AUD188,000 to remove. Biological 'contaminants' sieved out of the sand had to be incinerated. Wires, chains, crane straps, and tarpaulins purchased for the task of transporting the dead whale were all thrown away. The local council and the state Department of Fisheries disputed which government authority should foot the bill: their remits extended to different varieties of calamity. 'Because it's a mammal, not a fish, they believe it's not their jurisdiction,' the mayor said.)

The wildlife officer and I stared out to the horizon, the sea mouthing our shoes. Then we walked up to his van. He wanted me to see the only other mercy he could bring to hand: an injection.

'It's called the Green Dream,' he said.

The needle was near to a foot long, and as thick as a car aerial. A rubber tube ran to a pump container. The whole apparatus was reminiscent of something you might use to administer herbicide. A vivid green liquid swilled inside the plastic canister: the trademarked colour of Fairy detergent and Nickelodeon slime. It might work, he speculated, because the whale was only a yearling. But you wouldn't want to get the dosage wrong.

If administered, the fatal chemicals would linger in the humpback's carcass long after death, and imperil the survival, too, of any scavenger that came to dismantle the whale and gather what could be picked off the bones. Spiny nibblers and jellied dabs that crawl. Feral carrion feeders, slunk in from nearby parklands. In one recorded case, a dog (the breed was Australian Shepherd) fell into a coma after digging up

and consuming a scrap of blubber from a whale killed twenty-three days previous, so enduring was the barbiturate in the euthanising injection delivered to that cetacean.

The lesson here, the way I grasped it, is that what instinctively feels like compassion towards one creature can prove poisonous in the orbit of small and smaller organisms left lying out on the beach, after we leave.

The officer let me hold the Green Dream for a minute, this ghostly prop, heavier than it looked. Whose was the dream, I wondered? I pictured the whale's many veins and arteries, which, if you could unpick them, would lead off a hundred metres down the beach — thinning to capillaries in the distance, like the red thread from a smashed thermometer.

I asked him, 'Is it you, who makes the decision?' I suspected he could get a gun instead, and use that. I had heard he was empowered by certain regulations to fire on a suffering whale, as though it were a chassis on chocks in a paddock.

He held one hand, crab-like, on the wet sand and said nothing. The whale weakly lifted its tail, and dropped it again.

What would happen afterwards: I wanted details, the process. The wildlife officer sighed. He described two mechanical bobcats assigned to collect the carcass. *Beach and bundle*, he called it, *the policy*. The whale would be chainsawed in half, it would be quartered and trucked to Tamala Park Tip, in Mindarie, to decay. I envisioned it jumbled in with household waste, amid defunct whitegoods and bags of rubbish; the skull, an upturned trough of spoil. After death, the whale's putrefaction would generate yet more heat, scorching its bones and turning its organs black within the tight bind of its innards. If no one cut the body open, it might explode. Other whales had before. Gases puff up cavities inside the carcass, straining against the fat. Did the council worry a whale's remains, towed back beyond the shallows, could bring thresher sharks and hammerheads out of the deeps to loiter where swimmers would, after a time, return? I was confused as to why the animal was destined for the

junkyard, even if it didn't end up being given the death-dealing injection.

'This whale is malnourished,' the wildlife officer offered, apropos of a question he was more routinely called to answer. 'We're not sure why it stranded. Maybe it's sick, maybe the mother didn't feed it right as a calf. Maybe the whale ate something it shouldn't have, or it's got parasites, or it's too tired and ill to survive.' He cleaned salt spots from his sunglasses. I saw fatigue pleated around his eyes. 'Killer whales pick off the weak ones,' he went on.

The problem of the hour — what was killing the whale, now it had beached — was gravity. The wildlife officer suggested I visualise the whale as see-through. He said to notice how the heaviest bones lay in the whale's topside; the big, leaden vertebrae, its ribs thickest where they met the spine. Buoyant in the ocean, it was no problem for the whale to be built this way. Even diving to great pressure, its weight distribution didn't trouble it. On land though, its largest bones exerted a downward force on the animal's soft underside, causing crush injuries we couldn't see. 'The chest-wall caves in,' the wildlife officer began, but stopped himself from finishing the thought. Fragments of seafoam spotted the whale, trapped in its tonnage on the wrong side of its known world. One final thing he would say on the matter: 'There's an argument, a conservation argument, not to put a whale that's been weeded out back in again.'

My mother, Leanne, grew up in a township on the south-west coast of Australia where mass strandings of smaller whales species were a feature of the local lore. With our many uncles and aunts, we had often holidayed on the white, overcast beaches of her girlhood; places where pods of pilot whales — both long- and short-finned species — were known to maroon themselves. Some 150 such whales fetched up on the shore of Hamelin Bay together in early 2018, and all but six individuals died. I saw the whales, roughly half the size of humpbacks, thrashing and