

# maura pellettieri

## W H A L E

A GRAY WHALE WASHED UP ON CRESCENT BEACH IN AUGUST, in the last few weeks before the season ended. There was panic at the inn almost right away, although it was three or four days before the stink settled in. You could close all your windows but it seeped through the cracks, through the wood, through the glass. The whale arrived without an invitation, a feat on an island where rows of trees had been reared as walls. No trespass, I read on pines and firs and western cedars. The guests were herded away before the smell got bad, and it was only a few more days before we had to close the restaurant altogether.

Normally, the kitchen is a bright place on the southwest corner of the inn. It's the heart of the establishment and everything vital goes in and out of it. But the kitchen's ingredients became tainted with the smell of dead whale. It got into everything — into the well water and the soil in the garden. In town, locals shook their heads and agreed that there was nothing to be done. So the food spoiled and our tasks languished.

Ed ran in anxious circles while we drank vodka at the bar. We crushed rose petals and rubbed them on our noses, but it didn't matter. Even the garden stank of rotting blubber. We kept suggesting to one another that someone air the rooms out, then laughing nervously. Some of us laughed less, or not at all — those of us who'd been around longer, who would stay longer than the summer's end. The dead whale spelled devastation on our shore. More than thirty tons of skin and song, bones and blubber. A whale is not a spider, a bird, or a deer. Normally, we do not see a whale's death, and so its death is rare. The whole idea of what was down there wrung us out. You could smell it on the wind, as far west as Indian Island.

Putrid, oppressive. Those were the words we used.

Ed was infuriated. He had to refund his guests. They were angry because their vacations were ruined. The massage therapist went home. The yoga instructor went home. The chef cried and paced in the kitchen, incensed by the smell of his

heartbreak, unable to leave the kitchen, yet with nothing to do. August is the month in which the tourists come in droves. August prepares us for the total privacy of winter. Guests line our pockets in August and then it's up to us to make August last till spring.

Winter is the season in which you learn who your boss is. Ed said times were tough. He said he couldn't have predicted a whale. Maybe, but we knew he was still drinking good bourbon. The bartender at The Old Cafe told us. In February, a few of us saw Ed buying groceries. I remember coconut butter. I remember chocolate and grapefruits in his arms.

I missed those August paychecks in February. Marta did too. I never remember how you get through those months. After they're over, you don't think about it. You don't eat or you don't drink. You take some job you said you'd never take again. That winter, Marta did some housekeeping for a woman who'd slung words at her once and I dragged cedar logs in the rain.

We went down to see the whale a few times in the beginning, before the stink got so bad you couldn't breathe. Its tongue was falling out of it onto the beach. I wanted to climb onto the tongue and walk up to the whale's head, or lie down on the spongy bed of it, let its glisten suck at me, but I didn't. Marta loved it too. I could tell because she just stared at it with big eyes and didn't touch it. Marta shows her love by keeping distance, and by standing still. She was glad we came, but she knew more than me about the etiquette of these things.

Marta knew more about a lot of things. Every summer, when the Salish tribesmen came through in their canoes, Marta stood on the beach, grilling salmon and hot dogs. When anyone would listen, she said we lived on stolen land. Once, a Salish man was Marta's lover, but he moved to another island and she couldn't commit. Then Phil came along. I figured if anyone knew how to treat a dead whale, it was her. I wanted to touch it, but I didn't.

The whale's tongue was the size of Marta's kitchen table, a long oak table that Phil made for her. I've never seen such a beautiful table. It's finished, and it shines a little bit, softly, just like the whale's skin. When the lights were dim in the evening, you could lose your focus in the gleam of it, you could feel the table's edges become round, and you could follow the line of light until you were submerged inside it. You might see a whale there, follow it below the surface, or that curve could be the earth,

the line of the shore. When you sit at it, you forget there's a door that can lead you out of that room, you forget about any place you ever hated. Sitting at that table is like a having a home, even if you don't have one. If you're like me, if you live where you work, if you go when work goes.

It's long and joined, and I wondered at the time why she didn't entertain more. Phil and Marta are the nicest people. I don't know about Marta's cooking. Whenever I went over she had some cookies or crackers and she'd make tea, and we'd drink it, just the two of us at that big table — but we only ever ate meals at work. I never asked why Phil made it so big, just for two people. I thought maybe he made it in a reverie, that the woodshop had decided.

Eventually a crew of men went down in gas masks and cut it up with saws and machetes. That took just over two weeks with twenty guys working in shifts; by then, the turkey vultures were helping, the eagles and the ravens, the raccoons and seals, and everybody else, all the critters that are too small to see. Phil drove the whale meat into the strait and dropped it overboard. I went with him once or twice and Ed paid us for that.

Lately, I keep thinking about that tongue. You might say my situation has improved since then, but that's just something you might say. Back then, I thought about that tongue. I slept alone, I was drenched in its stink. Maybe I even became what it meant, that something large had died in the place I lived.

It was after the guests had cleared out and before the men came to take the whale apart. The rest of the staff went to stay somewhere else on the island. They crashed with friends or pitched their tents at Obstruction Pass. Some went on backpacking and kayaking trips, a few to the Peninsula, a few to the Cascades. Ed said, Enjoy yourselves until everything is cleaned up. But I knew that by the time the whale was gone, the summer would be over. There would be no work to come back to.

The others were upset when I said I'd stay at the inn. But we'll make room for you, they said, incredulous. We'll figure something out.

They left in twos and threes, and then one day I was alone.

I had always imagined what it would be like to stand over that bay, without guests or co-workers. Without a boss, without a friend. I didn't even bother going into town those days. There was no point. I couldn't wash the whale off of me.

Putrid, offensive, and it seemed like the bravest thing. To wash up on a shore like

that and shut a place down. It was night. I slipped out of bed and put on my socks and jeans. I put on a sweatshirt and I laced up my sneakers. It was very cold like it always was at night, and after I walked through the field I was soaked to my knees.

Come here, I said softly, at the wooden gate, and led myself down to the beach. Come here, I whispered to myself when I saw the great and beautiful hulk lying where it lay. I walked to it slowly because the moment before a first kiss can last forever if you ask it to.

Whale, I said, to its eye, and stood upright, leaning my ear against its icy skin and pressing.

I ran my hand along the length of its body, which gave, sloping down slowly into the crevasse of its tail.

Come here, the whale said. So I ran my hand up the tall hill of its south side. With me, it slipped and squeaked. I crawled slowly towards the tongue. It was so thick. I lowered my knees onto it first, then my hands. It was firmer than I thought it would be. I wondered at all its years of eating and feeling, the light tickling of amphipods and sediment slipping over it, the wash of saline in the birthing lagoon, barnacles settling on its sides as it grew, and scraping away later when it greeted another whale, when it mated. All of this when the whale was alive, living places I would never go. I lay my body in the middle of the tongue, in the place where, on a human tongue, there is a soft crease. I was running my fingers over strange, callused bumps. The tongue sank into the sand, like a seam holding the edges of the world together. I looked up into the sky.

I'd seen stars before. I'd seen stars before. 🍷