

THE
SPOON
RIVER **Poetry Review**

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The 1998 Editors' Prize Contest Winners

Mary Makofske
First Place

An Inward Bruise

...the sovereign'st thing on earth
Was parmacetti for an inward bruise.
Henry IV, Part I, quoted in Moby Dick

What does the whale do with so massive a brain?
Carl Sagan

1. *Photograph: Faeroe Islands*

Whale skulls and vertebrae
jut from a berm where a fisherman
leans on the island handiwork.
The bones are laid in parallel
lines, a skeleton for the wall
that divides the fields.

Holes where nerve chords ran,
eye sockets, and the ivory hulls
that shielded what whales know
are packed with earth.

2. *The Schism*

Buried deep beneath the fat
that insulates them
lie nubs of bone, a pelvis,
all that remain of hind limbs.

An experienced crew can flense a whale
an hour, yet how difficult to strip
from the language of evolution
all judgment, choice. *They turned
away from land.*

Chance after chance
building like deltas at the mouths

of rivers. For some, air beckons
with trees, wind, roiling weather.
For some, the clasp of water,
mountain ranges never lit by sun.

The vaulted arches the whale
builds toward the infinite
are bone and flesh,
obscuring the curious
eye behind the jaw.

3. *Scrimshaw*

Engraved with a fine tool, this tooth
is honed to art, a scene at once
accurate and abstract. A whaling ship,
its sails and rigging carefully rendered,
spawns longboats bristling with oars
and sailors. The sea lies dead calm—
only a few lines, level, propping up
the boats. A sperm whale spouts an inverse
teardrop not unlike the bubbles netting
words in comics, but the whale's is empty
except for blood, which does not show
in this brown and white sketch, muted
as the whale's sight, we believe, though always
we are wrong about so much. A harpoon strung
to a taut rope protrudes from its back,
while a sailor, leaning forward as if
resisting a wind, brandishes a gaff
as he strides along the whale's head.
Perspective is not the artist's skill:
another whale swims above the horizon
and with a flick of its tail severs
a boat that pursues it through the air.
Over this scene enormous birds, even larger
than the whales, hover for spoils,
though their wings and legs are locked

in postures of crucifixion, and they do not seem to be flying, but falling.

4. *Devilfish*

In San Ignacio Lagoon the grey whales rise to scrape against the keels loose skin that flakes off like the memory of whaling. Devilfish, the sailors used to call them, for they were vicious in their attacks, the cows especially, defending their young.

Protected for decades, they loll in these tropical waters, circling boats and tilting one eye toward tourists that line the rails. It seems a compromise, this voyeur industry, and we think it was our idea, though the whales approached us first, cruising near boats like envoys waiting for recognition.

5. *Mythology*

Dionysus, fearing treachery from sailors, hurled them into the sea and changed them to dolphins, incapable of doing harm. The Greeks revered the dolphin, the friendly whale that folklore credits with saving the drowning. On an ancient coin a boy rides a dolphin docile as a pony.

In the mythology of sharks the dolphin cuts a darker figure, a ramming iron whose force can detonate a shark's internal organs.

6. *The Study of Dolphins*

The Navy considers the applications.
Espionage. Defense.

What the dolphin asks
is answered by echoes that tell
not only the shape of an object,
but its composition. Iron, copper,
plastic, steel: what humans form
and form again in words.

Blindfolded dolphins can read
an object's thickness and density,
and choose the one we request.

They're not reliable, though,
for planting explosives
on enemy ships, for some may
return and latch their payload
to the ship they've left.

In the tank their keepers
are more than shadowy outlines.
Unlike sight, sound penetrates
to bone and lung. What enters this element
dolphins know through and through.
Hunger, heart rate, quickened breath:
the raw materials of need, love, fear.

7. *The Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence*

So lonely on this watery planet,
we probe the skies with radio signals,
hoping for life that can speak
in translatable language
or in the cool tones of mathematics.

Surely others exist in that garden of stars.
Speculation often draws them like us,
two-legged, upright. Their hairless bodies
smaller, muscles atrophied, strength centered
in the brain that swells the cranium,
their heads like giant seed pods
on too frail a stem. Their music
a charm that could win our trust.

8. *Whalesong*

Humpbacks flood their ranges with songs
we could call haunting. Scientists
frown. Emotion's a territory
claimed by the human species.

Yet more than science
responds to unearthly cries
repeated and embellished,
floating through the easy medium
of water, through wooden hulls of boats
steered by fishermen and warriors.
Sirens, they called these singers
who lured them over the edge.

9. *Patterns of Culture*

A diver rolls over the edge
of the catamaran. His wetsuit
clings tight as skin, dark back
and white belly, legs encased
in a sheath that ends in flippers
joined to mimic a fluke.

His arms are wrapped to conceal
the nimble thumbs and fingers
that have grasped the world
and turned it to his purposes.

His purpose now is to swim
without the alternate motion his legs
know from walking land, to arc
his body along its length and glide
as the dolphins teach him.
The meaning of gestures
may differ from culture to culture.
When the dolphins defecate
around him, he hopes it is a sign
of welcome.

10. *Regarding Each Other*

Displayed together on a table,
the dolphin brain and human brain
regard each other like fighters
in the same class. Fighting—
so human a metaphor,
so much of our brain devoted
to weapons and competition,
to housing theories
or our vulnerable bodies.

And what engages the convoluted
cortex of the dolphin? Maps
of oceans, language, knowledge
of self? Of death?

When we mimic their voices,
what are we saying?

Like lovers, we reach through darkness
for each other's bodies
in search of the mind's light.

11. *Those Who Swim with Wild Dolphins*

Hour on hour they spin and dive
embraced by water, synchronizing

their movements with the dolphins'
until they swim beyond the physical
into an aquamarine of trance.
They swear time loses meaning,
fear drops away in the joy
of submersion, dance. Around them
dolphins glide and mate, chatter
and eye the curious intruders
streaking their portraits
through the water's colors, composing
a visual language with breath
that floats in quivering globes
to the surface. All they create
disappears, leaving no trace
an archeologist could follow.
Not only touch vibrates
with meaning; the spirals they weave
echo the helix where life began.
The swimmers drift far from the boat
till fatigue or cold forces them in.
Coming aboard again, they often weep.

12. *The Belly of the Whale*

You were the maw that could swallow
ships, the dark unknown that rimmed
our flat and narrow world.
A mystery sunk in our hearts
that could devour us.

Now you lie in your niche
of order, family, species,
diagrammed and studied.
We were never your prey,
and only when you were ours
did your body become a weapon.

What have we to fear?

Lone dolphins that seek out
humans may become possessive,
sometimes pushing a favorite
far from shore. Stroking and play
may lead to roughness. From the genital flaps
emerges a phallus, serpentine and red.

On both sides, desire
to understand intensifies,
and mystery demands some myth.

13. *The Study of Humans*

Sick and disoriented, a young sperm whale
lies moored in a New York harbor.
The distress it pulses out can stun.
A man on the dock feels its force
beneath him, and when he places his hand
on the creature's head,
its calls make a tuning fork
of his fragile bones.

Off the coast of Australia a pregnant woman
lowers her taut belly into water.
One by one the dolphins approach,
bowing and clicking to scan her torso,
and we've watched on hospital screens
the image they hear: curled body
with its heavy head, fingers bunched in fists,
eyes closed, gills healed, lungs folded
tight as buds. The cord throbs with currents,
mooring the fetus in its salty bay.
The clicks of the dolphins grow rapid
as gossip. They bring their infants
into the shallows, the danger zone.

14. *Water Music*

On his sailboat a man plays
an oboe, and from the glassy water
a whale rises on its flukes,
then submerges and arcs
its great body above the surface
like a note held almost beyond endurance.

To be so created
that your motion through the world
caused so little turbulence,
to be sheathed in skin
pliant as the element around it,
what would neurons spark
across the synapses,
if you did not need
to move mountains, but only
to be them?