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I came into this world flukes first. Light broke around me, vast and blue. Stroking me, my mother nudged me toward air. My first breath was tangy, my lungs filling and every cell welling as I breached in those Pacific waters.

My flukes unfolded. Two of my aunts prodded me along. Clumsily, I swam in the swells. I needed my mother's milk as much as that August air, and so I dove beneath her. As she slowed, I took her nipple. Her sweet rich milk streamed down my throat. My aunts and cousins sang to me. All about me, the sea and sky clicked.



This is my song, a hymn of life—my life and yours. My song is at once beautiful and painful. At times a ballad and an anthem. By turns a psalm and a lampoon—as we would expect from life. Not often an idyll, and never a lullaby. Not a dirge either, for I am not submerged in the inevitable losses of our lives. But a chant, a canticle, a litany.

I am, by nature, gentle. Even shy, at least around those outside my family and friends, my clan. And I hope you will remember this because some of what I sing is neither gentle nor bashful. When, at times, my song sounds harsh, it is that so much is at risk—our survival, certainly, and yours, as well. I do know that we are bound, as sure as a harpoon is to its line. So know that even when my words are sharp, when my barbs strike deep, I am, at the far end of the line, a gentle soul.

You have not yet understood or heeded our songs. Perhaps, you never will. But I will do my best to have you hear me before it is too late. Before all of the songs, ours and yours, sink into time's depth and darkness. Listen. My life depends on it. Your life depends on it.



I weighed only a ton when I was born, but now I am enormous.

My mother's milk was high in protein and minerals and, yes, fat—and I grew prodigiously. Now, as I approach my sixtieth birthday, I am just under sixty feet long and weigh fifty-nine tons. Indeed, now I eat a ton on a good day, and my blubber remains thick. My four-hundred-pound heart pumps five gallons of blood at a beat. Despite my gargantuan size, I am fast. Normally, I travel at four to seven knots; I dive at three. But I can swim at twenty knots when I need to. I'm not bragging. I just need you to know who I am.

My eyes look small because of my bulk, but they are two-and-half inches in diameter. Absolute size controls functioning in eyes—as it does, to a certain extent, in brains. My eyes really are large, and I see well—except, of course, that my huge head causes quite a blind spot. In fact, my head is one-third of my body, about twenty feet and twenty tons: I am the largest of the Toothed Cetaceans. But Blue Baleens are far bigger—the largest animals who have ever lived in this world. So my size is relative, titanic to you but not to a Blue.



I don't really look like anything else in this world. You would, I suspect, think me ugly. And, I suppose I am. My head is squarish—blockish, you might say. It contains the largest brain ever as well

as vast amounts of spermaceti, the oil for which you slaughtered my ancestors. My blowhole is a slit on the left near the front of my head. My blow is bushy, forward, and skewed to the left.

My eyes bulge a bit. I have no visible ears, but I hear far better in water than you. Sound travels through my inner ears, my jaw, and my spermaceti cavity. I have no hair, as most other mammals do, but my blubber keeps me warm and, because it is lighter than water, buoyant. I can open my jaws ninety degrees. My lower jaw is long and narrow and underslung. My teeth—conical, thick, and heavy—fit into slots in my wide upper jaw, which is toothless. My throat is also wide, broad enough, in fact, for you to pass down it.

My skin is creased, *wrinkled*, unlike the smooth skin of other Cetaceans. In the millions of generations since my forebears returned to the water, my arms evolved into short fins with rounded tips. My back has no dorsal fin, just a hump and a series of knobs running toward my tail. My torso is extremely muscular (I have, after all, to propel fifty-nine tons at speed), and I have no vestigial legs at all. My intestines contain ambergris, for which you also massacred my fore-fathers. It is nothing more than an intestinal by-product, but you still value it beyond measure.

My broad triangular flukes are horizontal—enough for you

to know that I am no fish. The trailing edges of my flukes are pretty well frayed. *Scalloped* by life. I have been around a long time, roved the world, experienced much that living offers us all. I realize that my longevity isn't exceptional for a large-brained mammal, but in these last sixty years the changes in our world have been epochal, even apocalyptic. Of these I will sing.



Whenever one of you has spotted me, you have stalked me. You no longer have murder in your hearts, but you still cannot leave me be. I suppose it is my color. I am large, of course, but not much larger than some of my cousins or, had he lived, my brother. My whiteness gets your attention.

Your stalking, understandably, bothers me. My breath quickens, and I don't sing as much. I spend more time on the surface, and I find myself changing course more often than I would like. It's not just your constant noise, though that confuses all of us. Your presence out here doesn't make sense, given all you should be doing on land at this moment.

This pallor of mine occurs every four generations or so in my family. It is not a curse. No one has shunned me, and mating has been anything but a problem. And yet my hue sets me

apart. Always has. But it doesn't change who I am. It just is. My color has never mattered to me or to my family and friends. Why should it?



My spermaceti organ protrudes from my head, making my snout stout. You might think *bloated*, even *engorged*. It appears swollen in large males, and I am an especially large male. It runs from under my blowhole to a crease at the back of my head—in my case, more than sixteen feet, with an air sac fore and aft. All in all, a good sized Pilot Whale could swim inside my head.

Using my spermaceti organ, I can produce sounds in pulses that allow me to echolocate and communicate over long distances. I can, whenever I need to, expand my sensory field for many miles. I can also produce sounds intense enough to stun prey and frighten competitors. And, well, females like my organ—both for its size and the intensity of my clicks and calls, codas and chants. You see, for us, acoustic size matters. I sound even larger than I am, giving me certain advantages in attracting females and daunting other males. Then too, my head provides me, when necessary, with an impressive battering ram.

You have always coveted the oil inside my organ. You first slaughtered my forebears for this fluid I use to navigate and communicate. You could have learned a lot from studying our spermaceti organs, these innate systems that do so much of what you need to understand about navigating and communicating. But instead you massacred us. You demonized us and butchered us, sending us to the edge of extinction, but mostly you misunderstood us. You called us *sperm whales* because this oil, an absolute necessity to us and merely a commodity to you, looked like your sperm.



I dive deep. Deeper and longer than any other animal. The greatest breath-holding diver who has ever lived. Often I dive to more than 3,600 feet for an hour at a time. But I have sounded for twice that long to far more than a mile. Boasting again? I hope not. Just letting you know what it is that I do.

I throw my flukes in the air and plunge vertically. My flukes beat hard, but my heart rate drops as I descend. My lungs are extremely efficient, and my muscles store oxygen well. I dive, as I said, at about three knots. My motto is *Do not rush; do not rest*. If I go too fast, I burn too much oxygen; too slowly, and I burn time. At a depth of 800 feet, my lungs and jointed rib-

cage collapse. Light diminishes, and I start to click. My echolocation is so sophisticated that I really can *see* in sound as the world around me sinks into darkness.

By the time I reach 1,600 feet, it's absolutely dark. The world is cold. Time alters, slows, then vanishes. I can hear distant sounds—storms and earthquakes and the incessant buzzing of your ships. Sometimes, you emit even more discordant sounds, sonar signals and seismic pulses.

At depth, I hunt for squid and octopus; deep-dwelling sharks are good sport, too. Below 3,200 feet, my lungs are flat, but air in my nasal passages still circulates so that I can reflect sounds and create clicks. I flow, lit in an acoustical world. Like you, I am composed mostly of water. And when I go especially deep, I become water. The world beyond, air and sky and sun and stars, evaporates in the aquatic moment.

And here I meet Architeuthis, the giant squid, my most worthy foe—and my favorite food. Though I am one hundred times heavier than Architeuthis, the outcomes of our battles are never foregone. The greatest invertebrate in the ocean, he is superbly fit for life in the deep, with a large brain and gigantic unblinking eyes that provide him with sharp sight in what appears to be total darkness. His funnel propels him forward and backward; ink from his sac provides a concealing cloud. The ringed suckers on his eight arms and two long tentacles are

toothy, and his hooked beak is sharp. Indeed, with him I can never be certain that I will return from the hunt's dark depths.



My life is a cycle, the pace slow. I was in my mother's womb fifteen months. I took milk for three years. I was twenty-nine before I was a father. I have been roving, North and South, East and West for more than fifty years. The ocean, my home, cycles with the tides, the day, the moon, the seasons. Though the current runs north and west around the tip of Alaska, it flows south along the rest of the continent. Near the equator, it heads west toward Asia where it turns again and circles back, forming the mammoth North Pacific Gyre. Even our home, the world itself, cycles through the year and through the ages. My pace within these cycles provides me with time to think. My thoughts cycle, too, between good and evil, comedy and tragedy, hope and despair.

Your thoughts would cycle, as well—if you took the time. But you are too busy. And your busyness, your business, hurries you toward the apocalypse. There will be flood and fire, strife and starvation, carnage and catastrophe. Your home, our world, will howl.

And yet, and yet my thoughts cycle. Our destruction isn't

predestined. At this moment, the light dances on the water, the sparse clouds form runes, and the current whispers to me, even as the melting ice moans and the calving bergs groan. Ice has always sung its own sad song, but it is transmuting now—fast becoming a requiem. Here and in the Southern Ocean.



Life has scarred me from head to flukes. It can't be helped, of course. Life does it to us all. The front and top of my head are thoroughly cross-hatched. Tattooed by the beaks and suckers of *Architeuthis*. But, in truth, my head is scored as much by the teeth of other Cetaceans.

We males fight. We compete for the right to mate. None of us mates every year, and some of us never become fathers. Our battles are real, not ritualistic. When I was younger, I fought hard, attacked with my whole being. I gnashed my teeth and flailed my flukes. I broke jaws, but I never killed another Cetacean. Never.

Even though I didn't lose a battle for a decade and a half, I only fathered five offspring. Our reproductive rate is lower than that of any other animal. Three of my daughters survived to adulthood, and two are now themselves mothers. One has already lost a baby, an event from which she has never quite

recovered. You see, females only bear a child every five or six years. Twins are rare. The young die far too often, and mothers do not easily get over their deaths. My daughter carried her son in her mouth for a week after he died.



The sun is heading south. Fall is here, and I am leaving. It is time. Time to descend from the higher latitudes as I sing to you. Time to return to the Galapagos, to the sea of my birth where this song began for me.

Winter is coming, but even here in the Gulf of Alaska it is not what it once was. Fall arrives a bit later now, and spring earlier. I can feel the difference in the water. It is warmer, perhaps even a full degree. The current is changing, too—not a lot yet but enough so that we who live here can't help but notice the shift. And all life as we know it will turn with the current. I hope you are finally beginning to comprehend how much the currents affect us all. How much the currents influence even your life.

I have put Polaris behind my flukes. I am again pelagic, the seafarer roving one last time. Everything wheels through the night sky around the polestar. The wheeling is beautiful, the night sky cycling as the year does. And our lives. But the