

The Catch

Volume 2

Article 11

2014

On The Whale-Way

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Recommended Citation

Harlan-Haughey, Sarah (2014) "On The Whale-Way," *The Catch*: Vol. 2 , Article 11.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/the_catch/vol2/iss1/11

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On the Whale-Way

August 2013, Frenchman Bay

Forþon nu min hyge hweorfeð ofer hreþerlocan,
min modsefa mid mereflode
ofer hwæles eþel hweorfeð wide

Now my thought spins out of my chest's confines
My mind's thought with the sea-flood
over the whale's country spins wide.

Humans think in straight lines; our plane of existence is horizontal, and we move from point to point, binding discrete dots across time and space in lines of connection. We think about time, too, in a line. Our great cosmologies are linear, teleological—things begin and move forward to an end, just as we walk.

Anglo-Saxon sailors spoke of the sea as the whale-road: *hwæl-weg*, *bron-rad*. The whale is a being as apt as any to provide a kenning for the paths they follow from port to port. But the idea of a road, itself, is, again, a linear one; it moves neither up nor down through the permeable tissues of the sea, as can the whale.

A real whale-road is something no Germanic sailor could follow. A whale, I believe, must have a different cast of mind from ours. A whale must think in cycles, in spins, but also in depths, in pressures, in whirls reminiscent of their crocodile-like ancestors' movements on long-ago banks—in returns.

I weary of paths from one thing to another thing. I would harness their whirling world, spin out and away into the wild sea, but my own flat one shapes and binds me. I try to escape lines and planes by thinking back through the ages of the world, living in the medieval poetry I study and profess as if it were my own.

I plunge and surface in the ages of man; I would think beyond the trajectory of my own life, beyond Americas, beyond modernities, below those shallow centuries to swim in the irrevocable depths of time. I read Old Norse, Anglo Saxon accounts of whales, of wild sea creatures; my mind dives and spins away, down.

Yet some days I can't bear even to follow my palimpsestic philologies. Thorns, eths, ashes, those organic runic characters that seem to connect that ancient poetry with the world around it in wonderful ley lines, fail to illuminate my pages. I stare at the thorn's shape Þ. It is a barb, it is the tree it is and is not.

Those days, I only want to think like the trees or the microhyzzic earth around me—only connect. Beyond this, I want to know the whales that spin and dive and die off of the rocks of Maine. I, landbound, *landbuenda*, a linear creature, want curls, spins, dives, and returns. I read my sailor people's words about their whales.

One poet: ic wille woðcræfte wordum bi þam miclan hwale—I will though my inspired wordcraft tell of the great whale. I think, maybe there's more to the notion of *hwælweg* than a poetic expression for a path through the sea—what if sailors followed schools of whales as they rode sea-currents, knowing they *kenen*?

I think of my favorite fearful fisherman in Ælfric's *Colloquy*, his awe of whales; when asked whether he ever fishes for whales, he responds decisively, 'Nic'—no way, not me! Why not? asks his landlubber interlocutor. Forþam plyhtlic þingc hit ys gefon hwæl—because it is a dangerous thing to take a whale. Indeed.

I imagine those Sámi magicians calling whales to beach themselves on the shores of Greenland and Vinland in these enigmatic Norse sagas of discovery. Even the multiplicity, the teeming diversity of whales in *Konungs Skuggjá*—at least 160 species of whales or sea monsters are listed—their habits, their food, their edibility.

Finally, the bestiary whale—sailors take his massive flesh for an island, they land, build a fire, only to find their *terra firma* sinking down into the depths, their sinful bodies down to hell: ðonne semninga on sealtne wæg... grund geseceð—then suddenly in the salty waves, he seeks the ground, drowning ship and sailor.

Disgusted, I shut my edition of the *Exeter Book*. This is no whale, it's an allegory. I surface again. Summer passes too quickly for dusty books, Ð and ð.

A trip! From Orono to Frenchman Bay to follow and think with real whales—something deeper than my editions and manuscripts, their thorns, eths, and ashes, their dry and dusty imaginary whales, even the idea long dead, the dust of the dusty monks who recorded the poets' now-dusty words on disintegrating vellum.

On the boat with the tourists, we all scan the horizon, expecting—no, demanding—revelation. But I know, remind myself, the whales we would, no, *must*, see will meet us, keeping their appointment with the airy element; they can't guide us, Virgil-like, down through their dizzying depths.

We will only see them come up to the horizon in a brief connection with our line of sight, our plane, before circling back below. Then, as always, a sudden jolt to my heart, tears to my eyes: two humpbacks spin in and out of our vision. We come to them on our massive iron boat, they display massive tails, play like seabirds.

I think in a flash, it's like the seabirds in *The Wanderer*: gesihð him biforan fealwe wegas, bapian brimfuglas, brædan feþra. He sees before him on the fallow waves, brine-fowls bathing, broadening their feathers. The whales broaden their fins, tails, massive bellies on the briny brim, displaying for each other, perhaps for us?

We landwalkers marvel that the behemoths have shared one aspect of their dark existence in this massive ocean with us. They are something else, something from away. They will soon plunge away. But yet, I see a fin—tattered—marked with arcane characters, raised high then slapped on the flat water.

The troubled, rippled, discolored edges of the fin are like the lumps and tears on the edge of ancient vellum.

The sudden, almost motionless expanse of whale body, seductively stable on the surface—my God, an island!

And the backbone and dorsal hook of the whale as he curves towards other planes shape a thorn.