

What I learnt from whales

Stirred by a recurring dream, one writer pursues her fascination to the edge of the world

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As a child obsessed with adventures, novels and atlases, I remember how vast the new world seemed. The unknown is enticing, for it allows us to dream, to imagine our own visions of western lands beyond the sea. In my late adolescence I set off, at first exhilarated by every border crossing. Yet over the years, wanderlust gave way to world weariness. The novelty wore off, differences became similarities, unfamiliarity morphed into recognition. In some ways, this is a good thing. As the world becomes smaller, we develop cross-cultural understanding. But as the world becomes smaller, so might our imagination. Gone is the allure of sailing to the edge of the world – it's a well-trodden path. America was long ago discovered, men have walked on the moon, and seemingly every journey has been documented and archived.

Dream recollection is seldom interesting to anyone other than the dreamer, but in last night's, I returned to a place I've been to many times before, a place where I learnt to dream again. I was floating in the middle of the deep ocean, above the great void. Though I wasn't alone there; a whale surfaced metres from me, exposing its tail before returning to the depths. This dream has come and gone over the years,

re-emerging in different forms. Sometimes the water is turbulent. On other days, I'm looking down at migrating whales from a cliff edge, or watching them from a beach. The protagonist is always the same, the whale, close yet distant.

At one time, these dreams recurred so frequently and were so insistent, it made me wonder whether we should be more interested in what our unconscious minds tell us. Cormac McCarthy, author of *Blood Meridian*, asked a similar question in his essay *The Kekulé Problem*; might the unconscious mind, he speculates, have information "we might well envy"? When interpreting dreams, most stray away from literal interpretations. Dreaming of death, for instance, is seldom a predictor of what will happen in waking life. I know this, but since my whale dreams started ten years ago, I've felt a need to see these animals in the flesh.

Thinkers of the past did not think about the world as we do today. Natural philosophy, thought to be the precursor to modern science, comprised philosophy alongside a more empirical approach to nature. The world was considered in more holistic terms. In the 19th century, the Prussian naturalist Alexander von Humboldt wrote about the interconnectedness of →





nature and his place in it. He discussed ideas with Goethe, and despite coming from very different disciplines, they inspired each other's work. I'm not the first nor last to dream of whales. Unsurprisingly, given their sheer size and elusive nature, it's a creature to which many cultures have attributed totemic, mythological and spiritual importance. Hopefully this illustrates why I decided to cast aside my rational mind for once and followed my intuition to the edge of the world, in pursuit of whales. I wondered what, if anything, I could learn about myself, and existence, from the natural world.

Five years ago I sought whales in Iceland. On a cold, windy day I remember standing alone at the stern of a ship and staring out at the choppy sea. I glimpsed minke whales rising from the waves at a distance, a pod of dolphins and porpoises gliding through the surf. It was exhilarating, but I left the country wanting to get closer to these animals.

Last year, my husband and I went to Puerto Madryn, a former Welsh settlement on the barren coast of Argentinian Patagonia. It was winter in the southern hemisphere, and our hotel was on the seafront. The marine

parade was quiet and reminiscent of the small English seaside town where I grew up. Unfamiliar was the view from our room window; looking across the bay, I saw southern right whales blowing and breaching in the winter sun-dappled water.

As the sun set, a friend local to the area drove us to Playa Paraná, a pebble beach with a steep drop off. Our friend had brought *mate*, a communal infusion made from herbs, once popular among indigenous people in the region. We passed around the gourd, watching as the sun sank beneath the placid water. As the dark line of the horizon

encroached upon the sea turning it navy, a whale emerged metres from the beach. We all sat quietly, watching the spectacle that would appear and disappear like a mirage in a desert.

The following day, we set off from Peninsula Valdés in a small vessel, passing rocky sea cliffs and seals on a rocky slope, accompanied by the odd penguin who'd arrived before the mass migration. Leaving behind land, we entered the territory of the southern right whale. A mother and her calf trailed us for a while and swam around our boat.

For the most part, we lowered our cameras. Whales are huge, improbable, primordial and covered in barnacles, like the cities and ships long ago consumed by the ocean. Largely by our own hand, these giants have been pushed to liminal places, surviving in what we consider "the end of the world". When whales surface, they look you directly in the eye. They then return to the unknown.

Peninsula Valdés and its whales are thousands of miles from where I sit now, in my London flat. I hear the familiar hum of cars on the street and of drilling in another building. And

yet I find comfort thinking of those calm waters so far away, recalling those eyes which emerged from the deep and looked into mine, before returning to a place as deep as our unconscious minds. Perhaps our lives are as complex and mysterious. We grow from the void and perhaps return to it. We sit on a precipice between fearing the unknown and longing for it. We seem to have named and documented everything, out of curiosity or fear. Yet in truth the world is still vast; there is still so much left to explore, both in ourselves and in the natural world. I look at whales to remember to dream. ♦