



After the Whales

by Lynn Doiron

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I discovered the gentle language of whales in 2011. It was mid February when I stepped aboard the panga that would carry us out upon Scammon's Lagoon. We were ten in number, including the pilot, and I sat near the middle of a bench seat toward the back. Two kids in their late fifties sat on the bench behind me; from behind them, the pilot guided the boat. Next to me, close enough to hold my hand, sat a gentle friend. Ahead of us were three young women, half my age, cyclists from New York, seated side by side on the bench seat nearest the prow. They wore black-knit watch caps pulled low to cover their ears and yellow raincoats stamped with the Malarrimo Whale Tours logo. They had taken a train from New York to San Diego, a bus from San Diego to San Quintin, and ridden their bikes over 200 miles from San Quintin to the lagoon. They were brave, I thought to myself. If they spoke, what words they shared were lost to the wind and the outboard engine's noise. Sometimes they turned, one or the other, and I would see the profile of a smile or simple contentment. The lagoon carried us as if gentle hands; the

shores were, for a time, white with salt—it is the industry of Guerrero Negro, the salt. We passed a huge tugboat pulling a barge like an island with a long, white mountain of salt on its way to somewhere. Then there were no shores, only the stretched inland waters. Occasionally, spouts were sighted. Barnacle-encrusted fins began to appear as nearer whales slid out of sight, and others, more distant, offered disappearing flukes as their signatures of passing presence.

Our clever pilot sometimes slowed, idled the panga's engine, brought our attentions to a particular area by calling out a clock's setting of hands. Mama y baby at one o'clock, he may have said, and, eager to see what he'd seen, we turned. We turned as one, although we were nine in number. We turned as the hairs on a head will all turn when the wind catches them clean and strong. There, the mama's back rose to slide in a long visible arc above the water, barnacles the color of yellow calendula daisies spotting her back, and there, her baby's sleeker, gray-mottled body slid up and over hers, disappearing again to glide

beneath her, run near her, weave through her currents, within, I believe, the circle of her sound, her quiet vibrations of breath, of life.

After a time, another mother whale and her young, or perhaps the same pair (who could know when so much of life moved just beneath the surface?) lingered. She seemed to be introducing us, without prejudice, to her child. Here, she motioned, by way of her stillness, are the people of air. Here, *mija*, are our cousins. They are gentle, too. And as curious as we are. If they touch us, it will be with kindness. And we touched them and they kissed us with spray, with great breaths of spray. Then they passed beneath our small boat, the many yards of length and grace passed under the panga's shadow, close enough that we could count the discolorations where barnacles had been and the colorations and textures of what still was.

Too soon, our pilot angled the prow of the panga toward our starting place. It did not matter. I was sliding with mother and child through the saltier waters of Scammon's Lagoon, a diver with flukes, an inquisitive

cousin, a youngster secured against danger by the hand of a friend, tethered to reality—yet floating, gliding just out of sight, inside imagination's world, set free in a wet universe beyond the reach of landlocked vision.

I understood from the tour guide's information about the flow of milk from the mother whale, how she is without teats, and releases a nutritional current her baby feeds upon—a path of milk through the water, the young swimming its mama's milk trail, taking it in. I understood about how dolphin often played in and out of the mother's milk, distracting the young to feed from the same path. And I understood something further: a universal cosmos of sharing. It went beyond the body, this understanding. It went beyond who or what I was in the small boat with the kids seated behind me, the young women seated out in front.

They, those young women, were bound for La Paz, The Peace—if my translation guess was accurate—a city on the Baja peninsula hundreds of kilometers distant. I knew, not suddenly, but as if I

had always known, they would make their destination. I knew this as surely as these coastal whales, these lovely parasite-encrusted behemoth cousins of mine, had known they would make it to Scammon's Lagoon. We were all travelers, all inquisitive students, all parents, and siblings—in one form or another.

When the last of us had stepped from the panga to the dock, when Scammon's Lagoon was far behind us on the peninsula, I was still a part of what had been. As the miles peeled away behind us like a long asphalt wake, the babies and their mothers were yet with me, their vibrations close, their songs, although never heard, still understood. Their flukes had long since glided from sight, yet their backs reappeared, sluicing the calm or choppy waters as if they ran through the pulsed chambers of this heart.

I am telling this story now as if you are my young, sliding close to my body, within the vibrations of heart sounds. After the whales, there seems no other way, because this story is taught by their story, by

what they taught me: to trust what is foreign, the kindness of shallows, of salted shadows, and what can't always be seen. I hear them now, the songs I never heard, the joy, or perhaps wisdom, of simply being another cousin of the universe.

Note from Editor: Lynn lives in Plaza del Mar. For more of her writings go to: <http://lynndoiron.wordpress.com/>

