

The Go-Between

Once spent some time in the Azores, back in the days when so-called “primitive” whaling from open boats was still legal. One afternoon from the deck of one of the little inter-island steamers, I happened to see a whale hunt in progress. A small motor vessel was in the process of towing a string of the light Yankee whaleboats out toward a pod of spouting sperm whales. As the fleet approached the pod, the powerboat dropped its string of whale hunters and motored off some distance, and the little open boats set sail and began rowing and tacking toward the gamboling whales.

A local fellow I knew onboard, whose full name translated to something like “Manny the Man,” pointed the hunt out to me, and I spent an hour or two watching the action with him through my binoculars. Manny had once been a whaler himself, and, as we watched, he described the details of the process to me. The crew, he said, was made up of sixteen- or seventeen-year-old island boys who, when the whales were spotted from a watchtower on the island of Fayal, would be summoned to the harbor by a siren. They’d put out to sea, towed by the powerboat, and then, because the Azoreans believe that the whales were frightened by the sound of the engines, would sail and row after their prey. In typical Yankee style, they would row up to striking distance of a surfaced whale, harpoon it, allow the whale to run out the line, and then begin the long, arduous work of hauling in the “fixed” whale. The carcass would then be towed back to a shoreside whale station where it would be flensed and tried out for its oil.

From where I stood on the foredeck that afternoon, it looked like the boys weren’t having much luck that day. They’d sail after the spouting whales, which would sound and then reappear in another quarter-mile, sometimes half-mile astern of the little group of whaleboats. The crew would turn and sail off in the other direction, trying to catch up with them. All afternoon the little troop of whalers tacked back and forth in the waters off Fayal in this manner, apparently without success.

Truth be told, I was rooting for the whales. These were the first sperm whales

I had ever seen, and these vast marine mammals were almost a part of my soul. I grew up in a family that considered Melville's *Moby Dick* some manner of sacred text, and the art of hunting whales from small fragile craft to be the consummation of seafaring. Unfortunately, however, as I later learned from Manny, the boys killed eleven sperm whales that afternoon.

Part of my attraction to the sperm whale is the downright inscrutability of this animal. The ur-whale, *Moby Dick*, was a sperm whale, and in my childhood the mystique of this great creature was made all the more real by a haunting display in the halls of the American

Museum of Natural History in New York. A sperm whale in the exhibition was locked in shadowed battle with that other mysterious denizen of the deep, the giant squid, or kraken.

Sperm whales are rarely, if ever, seen on the ever-popular whale watches. They range the blue waters of the world and prefer the great depths such as the chasms off the Mid-Atlantic Ridge. They can dive to depths of more than half a mile and stay submerged for over an hour, and they can swim at a speed of twelve knots, easily outpacing rowed whaleboats. Their favorite food is the deepwater species of medium-sized squid, but they will also eat fish and octopus



and normally consume a ton of food a day. They are, in effect, animals of two worlds: they know the murky unlit mysteries of the deep; but they're also air-breathing mammals that know the look of the open sea and the sky. They are toothed with great five- to eight-inch teeth that, as we know from *Moby Dick*, are capable of snapping off a sea captain's leg or crushing a whaleboat. Manny the Man gave me two of these menacing teeth as a parting gift when I left Fayal, not realizing that under the Marine Mammal Protection Act I could not legally bring them into the United States.

Later that evening the steamer put into Horta on Fayal, and, after sipping a fortifying drink at the then-popular Cafe de Sport, a favorite watering hole of yachtsmen, I wandered over to the whale factory. There, on the skids, lay one of the whales from the afternoon hunt, a tragic still behemoth grounded out on the wet cobbles, its gray black thick skin gleaming in the light rain.

Seeing this vast creature dragged from its natural environment and knowing what I knew about the world of whales, the romance of traditional whaling, or what was left of it, was over.

July/August 2002