

Two Humpback Whales

by Jill Talbot

If he made me in his image,

Then he's a failure too...

—*Laura Marling*

Would you like to buy a coupon for a pizza? A girl of about thirteen asks me. Thirteen? I can no longer tell ages. It would be cute if she were younger, concerning if she were older, though they get away with that sort of thing here. In the city even Girl Guides get harassed.

I say, no thanks, to the pizza coupon.

There's a poster of a graph of the ship on the wall with detailed descriptions of the safety apparatus on board. It looks like the outline for a model ship. I wonder if anyone has ever even read it. I am, but that's only because there are many things I am trying not to think about.

There are lights on the boats outside, they make me think of the American naval military that people have claimed are gearing up for a sneak attack. I'm not kidding. At least they found something more interesting than pizza coupons and the perfectly scaled representation of the M.V. Quinsam Ferry with lines like traintracks.

I'm at Assembly Station B. My nephew Cole is with me. He tells me that highschools no longer give out grades, in fear that it'll discourage their self-esteem. Now you can get: beginning, developing, applying or extending. I feel extending but I'm not sure that's a good thing. I think they should learn now how to fail—how to extend at failure. That just because you heard that the American military is out to attack you, you of all people, that doesn't make it true. North Korea is what you should be watching out for.

In the city segregation happens by class, not pain. *A haven for artists* is also a haven for pain. That's what they call this island—a *haven for artists*. Maybe I should have got that pizza coupon, bartered down a bit; I learned how to barter in Mexico, though they probably also thought they got the better deal. Stupid white kids. Class—not pain.

Evening out the distribution only heightens differences. I do have Mexican relatives, this is true, but they don't seem Mexican to me. Cole doesn't seem to care that he's part Mexican. When I was a kid such things were bragged about endlessly.

Two humpback whales, very good size, I hear over the PA system. People rush out. I stay put. I think of ballet—extend those legs, point those toes. Tuck in your tummy. I feel a bit sick about evaluating the size of whales until I remember something—they're just whales. What do they care if they are an A+ or extending? In the city whales are *five star*. Here they are *good size*. I feel like a dollar store dolphin. Cole doesn't want to see the whales, choosing instead to play a game involving giant worms on his iPad.

Kids. There could be free condoms falling from the ceiling and they wouldn't take their eyes off their screens.

We get picked up in the mobile response unit—the crisis van for artists, we joke. Originally belonging to BC Hydro, now they've painted over the Response Unit but you can still see it. Contemporary Arts, it says, though I often read it as Contemptuous Arts. I'm sure it looks like I've kidnapped Cole, who looks much younger than his fourteen years, but nobody comes running. Adam, my brother in law, drives. He's bullied himself onto every arts board we have, creeper van included.

Adam has written on his wall: Is poetry dead or are we dead in the eyes of poetry? I ask him what the answer is. He looks confused, you'd think if he took the time to put the statement up he would've concluded how to answer such a question. But instead he seems to look like I've missed the greater point. He's an extending whale and I'm a crab.

When segregation happens by pain, all artists love to talk about is how unappreciated they are. They want the trophy just for showing up. I think of filling out a grant—I am dead in the eyes of poetry.

Adam gets a drink and is going to pass one to me when he asks if I do drink. Not would I like a drink—do I drink. It seems more like an accusation. The segregation line is right here. The emergency response unit has come—now do you or do you not?

I only do what the voices in my head do, I say, immediately regretting it. One must be careful when playing with clichés with artists. I crossed the line. Death and poetry is okay, voices goes too far.

I will have a glass, I say.

With artists everything is a whale show. I would like to get to know an engineer for a change, carefully graphing out neat lines on paper beside an IKEA lamp with a cup of tea—not coffee or wine—tea. His hands like those of a surgeon. Perfectly sized, perfectly capable, only slightly wrinkled with age—wrinkled in a way that shows wisdom and experience.

I ask Adam why his son has an iPad. Nothing against them myself but he doesn't seem like the type to buy his child an iPad.

His mother—your sister, he says, also as an accusation.

Your wife, I reply.

He signs and drinks half of his wine all at once.

I told my sister Jennifer that being an artist didn't mean he wasn't a misogynist. He's a misanthrope, he hates everyone, she said.

Well that's better, I said.

Yes, it is, she said, purposely stepping over my sarcasm landmine. Perhaps not. It's hard to tell with Jennifer. I've known her my whole life and sometimes I can't tell.

Did you know they don't get letter grades anymore? I ask Adam.

Yes, he says, they also have to wear pink for Pink Shirt Day and are advised to avoid people in white vans, he chuckles.

What about in extenuating circumstances? I ask.

Adam doesn't respond. Adam doesn't entertain any jokes he's not the author of.

Pink Shirt Day was back in February, now it's June. Seems time to get over it.

Adam, of course, doesn't get over anything. No artist does, he would probably say.

I tell Adam about the humpback whales. He starts reading the paper. You sure they aren't American submarines? he asks and I can't tell if he's being sarcastic.

Cole seems to be doing well, I say, searching for a way out. Cole has had some problems for awhile, problems with anxiety and depression, or so the doctor said. I thought he was just fed up with the warheads.

I'm not medicating my kid, Adam says. For once I actually agree with Adam though it doesn't really answer my question.

Meds or no meds, he seems to be doing well, I say.

They made him talk to a social worker, Adam says.

I seem to have landed myself in a corner. Jennifer's away in some new-agey retreat and I promised I would check up on her boys. This is what she refers to them as—her boys. It doesn't seem like a great time for her to skip town but I suppose when one's drowning one must put on one's own life jacket first.

I've crossed the line again.

I'm thinking of becoming a lesbian, I tell Adam.

Is that something one becomes? Adam asks.

Sure, people become religious, become another gender, become their father, why not a lesbian?

I've given him way too much bait, I realize. Especially with the father—the F word.

It seems like lesbians have all the fun out here, that's all, I say.

You want to be a tourist, Adam says.

Maybe, yes, I say.

Lesbian meet-ups are about the only thing to do on this island. They get the award just for coming out.

I was young in Mexico—just eighteen. Some do-gooder program that mostly involved rotating sex partners, drinking and self-righteousness. I never even learned Spanish. Not much of it, at least. The kids played with plastic balls. The ocean didn't seem like the same ocean—seemed like it could kill you with one wave. No humpback whales. We woke up sick every morning, which was when we were to offer ourselves up to any

charity willing to take us. This was when Jennifer was pregnant with Cole and Adam had just won a literary prize from the CBC. Then he won another award for an essay about Cole's heart defect—much of which was factually inaccurate. Fact checkers never look up marital counselling records.

I suppose I have remained a tourist. And what will Cole become? The F word?

Their black lab Charlie starts barking and Cole comes into the kitchen, declaring a state of hunger. I offer to make pizza, remembering the coupon and trying to come up with some way of coming out of this unwounded.

Adam shakes his head.

Charlie jumps on Cole. Adam hits the dog, simultaneously knocking Cole over. Adam drags Charlie outside and ties him up on the porch.

I get out a bag of frozen cranberries for Cole's arm. They feel like they're slipping beneath my fingers—playing their own game with my hands. Ice crackling as they separate and form new triangular arraignments. As if to remind us that we are the fragile ones, not the whales. As if we need the reminder—as if we need the F word.

Cole opens his math homework. Pythagorean theorem, $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$. Somehow I think this is a problem for the social worker to help him with and I'm not a social worker.

I look for a resolution in the local paper. Local papers are always so cautious about what they print—painted telephone poles and a photo of the mayor with the poet laureate. Adam probably has something to say about all of that. I turn the paper over on the kitchen table.

Jennifer told me her new-age retreat was going to teach her about quantum mechanics in the spiritual sense. I wondered, as I often do, how she ended up with Adam. Perhaps she saw a project, wanted to see something that no one else could see—something in the spiritual realm, telling me that any dislike of someone is a sign that one doesn't like oneself. Perhaps a better question is: how did Adam end up with Jennifer? How did I end

up in this kitchen with frozen cranberries, math homework and a madman? What does quantum mechanics have to say about the formation of this degenerate triangle?

Cole attempts to do his homework with one arm resting on the table with the frozen cranberries on top and the other arm going through his textbook. He shows me his report card, he's extending in almost everything—everything but Social Studies and Art where he got beginning and developing. I tell him good job. He tells me he should have got A's. He's right but I don't admit it. He may have otherwise got an F in Social Studies though.

I want to ask Adam how anyone can grade a child's art but I know better. I don't have the lesbians, artists, new-age retreat, doctors or teachers' union on my side. When segregation happens by pain, wounding the enemy becomes a bit of a joke anyway.

Adam comes back inside, walks through the kitchen, towards the bedroom, comes back with a rifle and heads back for the front door.

What the hell? I ask.

I'm getting dinner, Adam says, there are two good-sized turkeys out there.

I think of the humpback whales and the American ships. I think of the game Battleship and the outline of the ferry on the wall. Ships require perfect precision. Artists require chaos. War requires both.

Charlie barks outside, pacing around in an isosceles triangle.

Jill Talbot attended Simon Fraser University for psychology before pursuing her passion for writing. Jill has appeared in Geist, Rattle, Poetry Is Dead, The Puritan, Matrix, subTerrain and The Tishman Review. Jill was shortlisted for the Matrix Lit POP Award for fiction and the Malahat Far Horizons Award for poetry. Jill lives on Gabriola Island, BC.