

DOROTHY CROSS

FLASH 500

The windows of my house face the North Atlantic. Layers of islands create multiple horizons. Each day a different beach is chosen to walk – weather, tide and mood dependant. Louis discovered the whale – thrilled – sniffing the animal tangled in *Bladder Wrack*, *Sea Kelp* and *Mermaid's Hair*. The whale had not stranded live. The outer layer of skin was flayed by rolling rock, sand and sucking sea. The body shone like pale pink alabaster. It was not recognisably *Sperm*, *Pilot*, *Fin*, *Humpback* or *Minke*. With its fluke missing it measured twenty feet. I learned it was a *Cuvier's* beaked whale, a rare, deep-water species.

Normally the council takes it upon itself to dispose of the corpses of large leviathans by burying, burning or dragging them out to sea. I attempted separating some tail vertebrae, pulling and hauling them into the back of the car. They were a dead weight. I called my friend John, who had just acquired a new digger, to ask for help. The spotless, shining, orange, machine lumbered down the narrow road to the beach. The large, tracking wheels rolled over the stony ridge to sand, and gently levered up the ragged animal. *Alien*-like, the whale curled and drooped over the bucket as John journeyed it along the road to my land. Neighbours watched from high fields; a new digger-machine passing with a whale on it – a slow deposition.

The great body was lifted high over the gateposts, down the rough boreen, past the vegetable patch and out towards the sea through the open field with watching cows. We placed it down by the sea cliff, facing north, at the furthest point from the road, hoping to keep the smell from curious or complaining noses. The prevailing winds are south/south-west. We did not bury it as the peat of the acid soil would have blackened the bones. It took two years of slow decay for the bones to appear. The melting flesh became as black as the surrounding earth. No birds approached.

Two summers later I moved the vertebrae to the stream, scrubbed them in the amber bog water and set them along the dry-stone walls to dry. The bones weathered to a pale porous grey. I pushed them to the studio, wheelbarrow-full after wheelbarrow-full. The bones lay there in a mound under a table for months. Each vertebra of the whale was drilled through and they were strung together like a large string of pearls.

An invitation arrived to show work in an exhibition called *Gravity*. The gallery is Victorian, the high-ceilinged room is thronged with sculpture spanning the history of classical art: Greek and Roman, heroic, mythological, plaster and marble – the goddess *Minerva*, a deposed *Christ*, faun and archer, *Ariadne* and *Adonis*, the struggling *Laocoon* and the great, truncated, form of the colossus of human strength, the *Belvedere Torso*. Amidst these, the *Whale* hung suspended. Its beak almost touching a small rusted-metal bucket placed on a white Cararra marble plinth.

WHALE