

The melancholy of anatomy

Beaked whales defy our comprehension with their mystery and their allure. They are among the most subtle of cetaceans, and bear our scrutiny with a certain disdain. These enigmatic, deep-diving animals constitute a family of whales, the ziphids, of whom some have never been seen alive, which is not surprising, since they come at the end of the alphabet, and spend ninety per cent of their time foraging at such great depths, up to three kilometres down.

Comprising two dozen species, but with more still being identified, the last as recently as 2020, the beaked whales are antediluvian-looking mammals, with bizarre dentition. They possess a single pair of teeth that erupt from the tip of their lower jaw, and which act as sexual characteristics rather than tools with which to feed. Indeed, some species' teeth even grow entirely over their owner's mouths in a self-muzzle, yet one through which they can still feed since beaked whales suck in their prey—mostly squid. Their markings are various and odd, and include splotchy spots and long thread-like scratches—probably from encounters with squid or one another's teeth. Yet overall these scars lend them the appearance of something interplanetary, like an asteroid or a dark star, a visitor who has fallen to earth.



Sowerby's beaked whales, Pico, the Azores, 2016; photograph: Jeroen Hoekendijk



Skull fragment of a cetacean, Ziphiidae - Gray, 1850. MMCCAN-CE011043. Museo Marítimo del Cantábrico.

Anterior fragment of the skull (splagnocranium), made up of the premaxillae, maxillae superioris, vomerianos, nasales, frontal and part of the pterygoid fossa. On the surface there are remains of epibionts, such as bryozoans, porifera, annelids and brachiopods. Cranial structure in the process of mineralization with a low content of carbonates and a high content of phosphates. This process confers structure and significant weight to the structure. Cantabrian Sea (Eastern Atlantic Ocean, Atlantic Ocean) Drag, 1982. The remains of sediment found indicate that it was in a bed with a fine muddy bottom rich in phosphates.

Seeing such species at sea is a deeply strange and somehow unsettling experience. One might be encountering a dinosaur. Their rarity settles upon you as they rise up, like aquanauts returning from inner space. As they slide into view at the surface, slyly breaking what Herman Melville called the ocean's skin—the membrane which divides our world from theirs—these mammals announce their disconcerting presence in a series of diagnostic signs: a glimpse of their grey shiny backs; their seldom-seen, tusk-like teeth; and their equally heraldic beaks, which lend them the air of rare birds. We must put them together in our heads like a cetacean jigsaw, these prelapsarian creatures with more than a little of the sea unicorn or griffin about them, compound beasts composed of bits of other animals, all drawn together in one ziphid myth.

This specimen, which we are unable to identify from its cranium, was trawled up from the Cantabrian Sea in 1982. It appeared in the fishermen's net like an underwater alien, a Roswell incident, its extraterrestrial bones mineralised, preserved, and reserved; crystallised like a rare fruit for the delectation of a sea god. Over time the heft of its dense,

convoluted skull—more geographical than animal—has become saturated, not with the nurturing oil that suffused it in life, but by a geological preciousness that charges it with an eerie power. Strangely, its fossilisation seems fit to reanimate the skull like a battery or even spark into a hard, gem-like flame. As if, in growing crystals, it might grow new bones too, and turn back into the complete animal it once was.

This whale relic has itself become a time traveller, turning its interior self into an art object, in the way that the contemporary eco-philosopher, Timothy Morton, has declared that all art is from the future. Whirled about in outer space or tumbled on its ocean bed, the specimen's metaphysical transformation is akin to the one conjured up by Ariel in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, in which a drowned duke's eyes turn into pearls and his bones into coral. Yet it also resonates with the scientific process of whalefall in which a dead cetacean sways slowly to the bottom of the sea, to seed a new ecosystem of its own. There it supports species dedicated solely to the task of grazing on the remains. Thus the grandeur of the whale is reinvented as those same organisms enter the food chain and in turn lead to the making of new whales.

The movements of beaked whales are so secretive that even now the living animals remain largely unknown. Some species have still never been since alive, and can only be judged from dead stranded specimens, or their bones. In the winter of 1927, a single Gray's beaked whale, a species usually confined to the Southern Hemisphere, found stranded on a snowy beach near The Hague, the Netherlands. In the contemporary photograph taken to record this highly rare visitor, a proud gentleman in his homburg hat lays a proprietary hand on the animal's flanks like a hunter claiming his prey or an anatomist his corpse, or perhaps a physician extending his gesture in consolation for his patient's pain. It might not be a coincidence that in the nearby museum in that Dutch city hangs Rembrandt's famous painting, *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp*; or that Tulp himself was the first person to accurately describe a cousin of the beaked whales, the narwhal, the true unicorn of the sea.



Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Tulp*, 1632; Mauritshuis, The Hague

That bewildered, un-wilded whale-tourist to the Hague was regarded with human curiosity, an all-too often fatal gaze. All whales seem to look back at us with an equal sense of surprise and melancholic resignation at their fate in our hands. So too does this exquisite remnant we see here, on display in this gallery, now reduced to an echoing, glittering stone. It is invested with all the oddness and pathos of its lost tribe: an ancient idol to be worshipped, or a reminder of our own brief sway on this planet, a glimpse of what will remain of ourselves.

Philip Hoare, Southampton, March 2022



Gray's beaked whale, stranded, The Hague, 10 December 1927; photographer unknown, www.walvisstrandingen.nl/stranding/spitssnuitdolfijn-van-gray