

Hiraeth

By Priscilla Kipp

Hiraeth (n.) a homesickness for a home to which you cannot return, a home which maybe never was; the nostalgia, the yearning, the grief for the lost places of your past

“One day there will be no borders, no boundaries, no flags and no countries and the only passport will be the heart” — Carlos Santana

This much is true. Thick into the blustery fall of 1987, a blue whale beached herself at some icy-dark hour, and died on the shore near the oddly named community of Nail Pond, where there is neither a pond nor any known history of nails in it. This is “Up West,” as they say on Prince Edward Island (with a slight roll of the eyes for that wilder population of fishers and farmers known to thrive far beyond the city of Summerside). Where it is fine with the locals that the name doesn’t make much sense, at least not yet.

Other, smaller whales had found their way here before. They were left for the gulls to pick clean, for the scurrying waves to carry away. The shore that became their deathbed has a gentle, inviting bend to it. Here the waters of the Northumberland Strait are about to meet those of the Gulf of St Lawrence at North Cape, a wide welcome mat for North Atlantic sea life: whales, yes, also mackerel, halibut, haddock, tuna, lobsters, snow crabs, and, as neighboring Miminegash’s claim to fame, the disappearing Irish moss. Fishing boats troll across the horizon when the

season is on, and the beaches are wide and smooth, the uncommonly white sand here planed and reshaped by the constant wind.

Reaching the beach at Nail Pond from inland is the only challenge: narrow dirt paths from the main road stop just short of the rolling, grassy dunes. Vehicles have little room to park without sinking into sand. But somehow that fall, after the blue whale arrived, so did the crowds.

It might have been that this whale, whose heart alone is about the size of a small car, bumped into a ship – hard to imagine a hit and run, though, and what would have become of that unlucky vessel? – but no one seemed to know the true cause of her death back then. The fact was, one day the fine sands were only littered with shells, clams, seaweed, and the occasional doomed jellyfish, and the next, there she lay, dominating the entire beach. Something had to be done, and after much conferring among officials – from Charlottetown, capital city of the little province, and from as far away as British Columbia – it was decided to bury her where she lay, until bigger decisions could be made. Eighty feet long, weighing an estimated eighty-eight tons, she was pushed and dragged tail-first by five bulldozers toward the nearby dunes, where it took many Island men and tons of that sand to bury her.

And there she lay for more than twenty years, a new mountain on an old beach, while families went on spreading their towels nearby and the marine biology folks from away pondered where to put her next. Blue whales are the largest animal ever to have lived on earth. They rarely strand on beaches, and very few skeletons have been recovered for research or display. Worldwide, only twenty have been available to the public for viewing. One has even been stuffed and mounted, and on special occasions its mouth is propped open for photo opportunities.

Honeymooning couples and new parents holding their babies are especially fond of these. But that is in Sweden, far from the smallest –and poorest – of the Canadian provinces.

It was finally agreed that a place big enough to showcase her skeleton would be built not on the Island, where the whale herself had perhaps chosen to die, but in a museum in Vancouver, British Columbia. The skeleton in the Beaty Biodiversity Museum's atrium would be the first of its kind in Canada, and about as far away from Prince Edward Island as you can get.

The exhumation began in the fragile spring of 2008. All in all, it is a fine story retold many times since, by storytellers (the Island is ripe with them), balladeers (also in abundance), mythmakers, and gossipers (adding the spice to it all). Winter-weary Islanders flocked to watch the whale's resurrection, to pay their last respects as it were. After her long interment, she should have been no more than a skeletal shadow of her former self. Instead, the volunteers, scientists, scholars and merely curious were confronted with a colossus that reeked: incredibly, rotted blubber still oozed from her decrepit carcass, giving rise to an overwhelming cloud of stink. People held their noses and covered their mouths. Some vomited. Many ran away, never to return.

Now things get a bit “coloured up,” as the Islanders say with some pride. They love a good story. A small army of yellow-slickered excavators waded through the muck and stench for days. They pitched their heads against the chilly winds coming off the water. Armed with pickaxes and shovels, aided by exceptionally strong stomachs, they bent their backs to the work, and began digging their way to the whale's head, starting from her tail. When they got to the mid-section, they found that the left flipper was missing, save for some telltale chainsaw marks at the joint. A

mystery, until a smallish black man, floundering bow-legged through the soggy sand, wearing a sodden wool coat much larger than he and a grimy Red Sox baseball cap also too big for his head, emerged from the shivering crowd and approached one of the workers. He was quickly led a short distance away from the carcass, to a tall man wearing a bright yellow slicker and a white surgical mask, and carrying a clipboard. This was the professor directing the resurrection. He looked down over his mask at the small black stranger hunched over in the blasting wind. He wondered if the man was about to throw up.

This man – who, many locals knew, had come to the Island back in the 1960s as a draft dodger from the States – drew more people around him as he tried to shout above the thundering surf at their backs. In no time at all, he talked the professor into accompanying him back over the dunes to his mud-splattered truck. Together they rode to his nearby cottage on the Kildare Capes. The professor then followed him into a sheltering stand of spruce and junipers, to the spot where this confessing thief, Otis Coates, had buried the blue whale’s flipper more than twenty years ago. With some trepidation and quite a bit of earnest digging, Otis presented the scientist with the largest of the remains, a shredded piece of cartilage about the size of his pinky finger. What about the rest of the thirty-four bones, he was asked politely. Handing the professor a second shovel, Otis suggested they both dig and soon enough all but the very tiniest remains were found. The professor shook hands with Otis and, not being able to help himself, finally asked why he had taken the flipper in the first place.

“I guess you could say I like souvenirs. A kind of talisman, say, maybe, to bring some of the whale’s strength to.... ”

The professor was giving him an odd look. “Seemed like some good idea at the time,”

Otis finished with a shy smile and a quick step away, lest the much bigger man strongly disagree. He didn't stop to explain why in the world it had seemed like a good idea, but quickly added, "But then when I saw yiz all working like that in the stink, I figured it was time to do the right thing, eh."

Otis Coates had fled, with his wife Nadine, to Canada as a desperate young American about to be drafted into the army and, almost certainly, the Vietnam War. In Canada illegally and not sure of their options, they had tried their best to keep a low profile. Otis did some fishing, some fiddling, some whittling, some farming – but mostly he made his living collecting and reselling items at flea markets. He had chosen to keep this peculiar object, for reasons clear only to himself. The professor nodded, shook his head, carefully bagged the bones, and said not another word on their drive back to the shore.