

CATEGORY: Poetry

AGE GROUP: Adult

TITLE OF POEM: "Lament of the North Atlantic Right Whale"

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Lament of the North Atlantic Right Whale

I didn't conceive a calf this year.
Nor did the other females in my pod.
If you could understand our language,
our moaning, pulsing songs,
you would know that every summer,
in the Bay of Fundy, we strain fewer and fewer
zooplankton and krill through the sieves of our mouths,
and not because our own numbers are growing.

My mother—bless her shore-stranded soul—
once spoke of how these northern waters
were colder, cleaner, quieter.
Now, they're thickening with sewage, oil, and fuel,
and congested with other man-made things.
Ships slice the surface like predators.
They don't eat us, but they've killed
twenty of our kind in the past two years
with the knuckles of their hulls,
their propellers' spinning blades,
and fishing nets that scar our bodies.

My youngest son drowned in one
four springs ago. He wasn't even a year old
when he strayed too close to the boat,
and the meshing slipped between his baleen plates.
I could only watch as he wrestled with the net;
as it ensnared his head and fins;
as blood spouted from the cuts in his storm-gray skin;
as, eventually, he stilled and closed his blowhole.

I've had no children since then,
and not for lack of trying.
Sometimes I imagine he's nudging my side
or, if I've rolled onto my back,
he's nestled between my flippers.
His weight was an ocean of comfort,
the callosities on his nose and jaw as beautiful
as the shimmer of moonlight through the sea at night.

There was another story my mother told me once:
How, many years ago, our unhurried pace
and coastal wanderings caught the eyes of humans,

how they hunted us with harpoons because,
when we die, the blubber and oil between
our skin and muscles cause our carcasses to float,
and how humans had this grisly obsession
with alchemizing death into gold.
I often wonder if, despite the changing times,
we're being hunted still.