**The Washashore**

Christopher X. Ryan

To the other cops, Malcolm is a washashore, a recent arrival from the mainland. But as he stops to crouch, squinting against the sheaves of morning light skimming across the whitecapped southern waters, he sees an even fresher interloper: a juvenile humpback whale, some twenty or thirty feet long. Three days dead, its body is now as misshapen and distended as a parade float caught out in the rain. Only its flukes, shaped like a bracket to an unfinished equation, lie within reach of the surf’s frothy tendrils. Gulls pace nearby, anxious and chattering, for the stench of death is already overwhelming, phrases of fetid air interrupting the typically benign coastal redolence.

Malcom spits, thinking, *A baleen feeder. A creature governed by the laws of thermals and echolocation. All of which are now fucked*.

He unzips his windbreaker, revealing his badge clipped to his shirt pocket—as if such a thing means something to the whale—and rubs his jaw and wonders what does in a creature like this. *Sonar? Chemicals? Plastic? Ships? Strange new tropical currents rising from the seafloor?*

*Ennui?*

He stands and unhooks his radio to call in and inquire about the contingent of scientists en route, then pauses. He walked half a mile just to get here—the sand sucking at his heavy department-issue shoes and the wind flapping his dark-blue windbreaker as if pushing him out to sea like any other skiff—and the silence is rich, made all the richer by the dark-gray *megaptera longipinna* anchoring the stillness to the beach. He rehooks his radio and approaches.

While its hide is cold, as it should be, a sphere of gold still glints in its skyward eye as if the light inside the beast were slowly filtering out. Running his hand along the baleen, he finds it stiff yet yielding, and a coldness canters along the nape of his neck and makes him want to spit again.

He’s been spitting constantly since taking this post six months ago. He asked to be transferred to the island out of some sort of misguided longing for tranquility, but beyond arresting withered lobstermen for DUIs and fining quahog harvesters for emptying their neighbors’ pots, sixty percent of the department’s time is spent hunting down little multicolored drugs that resemble candy. Opioids are everywhere, and Malcolm and the others supposed to stem the tide, but where the pills are coming from no one knows. It makes his mouth hurt. Something about the air, he guesses.

Still, when he can’t sleep, he strategizes and concocts, imagining every possible trafficking method: taped to the bottom of kayaks plying the gray-blue waters between here and the mainland; baked into red bricks ensconced among construction deliveries; stashed at the bottom of pensioners’ shopping bags; in the belly of a whale.

The sun inches skyward. The humpback is drying off. *Defleshing*—he recalls the word for when the blubber is excised from the skeleton. It’s what the ocean would do in time if given the opportunity, as would the birds, sand, and wind. But that’s not going to happen.

Until he’d arrived here, Malcolm had never been so aware of weather systems, the relentless forces that reshape both shorelines and lives. *Is that what drives the whales ashore?* he wonders. *And also what drives the addiction?* It’s as if the locals suddenly stand up and say, “I can’t take another Nor’easter” or “The sound of waves against the dock pilings makes me want to hang myself.” Or is it the constant evisceration and rebuilding, a beach that today is so unfamiliar it almost needs to be rechristened?

“No,” the preacher on the ferry had said. “Here sin is in the salt, and the salt’s in our blood.”

Malcolm’s first night on the job a kid drove his motorcycle into a tree. There were no skid marks; he wasn’t drunk. An animal might have stood in his path. Or had the kid simply had enough? His blood spatter touched two dozen trees in the vicinity of the impact. It’s still there, part of the landscape now, but the pills the motorcyclist was carrying aren’t. Malcom and Connie, a diminutive veteran officer with an unfortunate facial tic, scoured the forest floor for six hours in search of the tablets. Children were their foremost concern, yes, but also the insignia on the drugs: Trident? Heart? Arrow?

These bore a cross.

“This sure as fuck ain’t the Lord’s work,” Connie had said.

Back then six insignias were being investigated. By the time the whale washed ashore, the number was a dozen.

Voices. The beach is no longer empty. Malcolm has anticipated the curious. Fishermen who will provide their age-old expertise in such matters before stubbing out a cigarette in the sand. Tourists with cameras and phones. Children whose parents feel this lesson surpasses any from a teacher who is surely, like Malcolm, also a washashore. And then, of course, the biologists, the most curious of all. They will arrive with scalpels the size of forearms, more scythe than knife, and T-handled hooks for peeling back the whale’s flesh. They will haul away muscle and organ in buckets and reach into its innards as if they’d dropped something there long ago and just need it back. Then, when its organs have been pushed aside and its deepest secrets exposed to the sky—the necropsy at last completed—the cetacean will be hauled to the dump to rot in peace until its excarnated skeleton can be salvaged for a museum. The ocean will not profit from its death, and the shoreline will fall still again.

The sun is higher now but hidden by clouds, and the whale’s eye has been reduced to a rheumy slit. The washashore spits again as if to mark his territory, then unhooks his radio just as a plover darts past. It stops, jitters its wings while glancing at the whale, then speeds off.