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Poems

Abstract

THE LAST WHALE, OF MOHOMMAD ALI PASHA,

Gunfire from that quaking horizon,
It is the laughter-cratered talk
Of children with thin arms
Small desires, huge hope.

And this is you, following
Your own spoor across a desert,
Dragging your feet across sand
To the sulphuric aridity at
The boulder's heart beating
In your own chest.

But the children will begin counting
In moon language and your years
Will leak into warm stains from
Which footsteps will quicken,
And you will be running towards yourself,
And you will be laughing.

Keki Daruwalla

THE LAST WHALE

When the last whale passes into our Lord's keeping
how will the funeral go?
Will the last post ring out, will there be muffled drums?
A dead Viking, we are told, was laid out
in all his regalia — the mail-shirt unflapping,
his painted shield hanging along the bulwarks,
his drinking horn to remind us of his revels,
sword and battle-axe in memory of his rages.
And they hoisted a square sail
handing boat and body to the wind.

But this is not how it will go at all.
For as the last whale is pulled in
from blood darkened seas, speared
by a harpoon stuffed with explosive,
he will be sliced up with power-saws
and the deck will be slick with blood and blubber.
Whale-meat, after all, is big business in Japan;
and they are murdering them by the shoal
about nine hundred a year for research.
For fifty million years the whales cruised
the oceans without being 'researched',
as much a part of the sea as the tide
as reefs, as molluscs, as sea-anemones.
Now of a sudden we want to kill them
to discover how they survived that long!

When the last whale moves into our Lord's keeping —
the wake abuzz with flies and a procession
of gulls as there never was before —
and the seas turn the colour of red wine
they'll wonder if this is omen or miracle.
Neither! Just the gashed side of a harpooned whale.

The sea-god, his eyes red with salt-burn,
his beard turned to coral, extends his palm
to ask what's in store for him.
It's going to be tough but he better hear the truth:
As many stars as there were before
to brood over tides and chart the course for ships.
The same number of icebergs, more or less;
more oil slicks certainly and tanker fleets,
more aircraft-carriers and submarines. No whales.

OF MOHOMMAD ALI PASHA

We had been into the El Gabal citadel
and the Military Museum housed inside;
walked past prints that showed Thutmose and Ramses
crushing their foemen under chariot wheels.
The medieval contraptions of war were there
from sword and catapult to fireball and matchlock
and a battering ram known as 'Al Kabash'.
After walking past history, at least
the official version, from thrashed crusaders
and Louis IX led captive before Saladin
to the modern campaigns, Yemen in the fifties
and the Yom Kippur war (with nary a word
about 1967) we came
to the Mohommad Ali Pasha mosque
and the guide took us over to the great man's house.

'Welcome to Mohommad Ali Pasha house!
He himself live here in nineteenth century
and rule Egypt in same century.
These walls strong, but the Pasha even stronger;
hard with Egyptians and hard with Mamelukes.
Hard with wife also, but that only presumption.
Come, embroidery class held in inner room.
See how fast their hands work — like pickpocket!
Pickpocket take away what Allah give;
Allah not give back what pickpocket take away.
These embroideries we send to Saudi Arabia.
In the past we sent them because Saudia very poor.
Now we send them because Saudia very rich!

Now you must see dining room. Those days
no eating and sitting room separate;
where you eat you sit and where you sit you eat.
There were Mamelukes those days, very headstrong,
who listen nobody, not Sultan in Istanbul,
not Mohommad Ali Pasha in Cairo!
You know what they kept? Bad faith and concubine;

bad faith with people, bad faith with Ottoman empire
bad faith with Mohommad Ali Pasha.

So Pasha invite Mamelukes in dinner.
This wooden couch where you sit, see how it open?
Inside he place musket, many musket.
Then lid closed; no one know where muskets sleep.
He called *Baltagis* to serve meats and viands.
You know *Baltagis*? Axe-men;
people who were paid to wield axes once.
Pasha start paying them now to wield guns.
When Mamelukes take dinner and finish coffee
Axe-men take muskets and finish Mamelukes.
Only one Bey escaped, all others killed.
Mohommad Ali Pasha, very clever man!

Lauris Edmond

RHINELAND

I walked in the early morning
down the path by the water, and there
I could smell the old river smell

of the brimming Rhine, hear
its purposeful lapping, see the long barges
linked together GEFO TANK2GEFO ROTTERDAM

out already, stooging steadily,
and brown-stained, long abused as it is,
the capable waterway taking on yet another