

Encounters with Ultimacy: *Dispatches from a blue whale feeding ground*

Eric Keen

Gulf of Corcovado, Chilean Patagonia

Thursday, February 17 ~ *My first blue whale*

First of all, its size is either greatly over-hyped or completely ineffable. Surely it is the latter; maybe I just wasn't ready. Seeing her, I was alarmed to feel nothing. Well, almost nothing; something inside me did spark and sputter, a sensation I have never before experienced. Outrageous. Audacious. Ineffable. *Balaenoptera ineffabilis*.

The whale has enough back to curl and arch itself multiple times, almost serpentine. As it rolls into its dive you lose all context of where the animal began and where it might end. Perhaps it really *is* endless. Thoughts of Alpha and Omega flitter by. Finally the dorsal comes, and your worldview is restored. Her back is long. Beautifully, curvaceously long. Maybe it's the full moon, but there is something sensual about this whale's morphometrics today. Like the gods and goddesses of ancient Mediterranea, there is something corporeal – sexy -- beckoning about the blubber-encased apotheosis sounding before you. *B. ineffabilis*. The biological ultimate.

Second, and what took me most: They glow. Yes, they are luminous. A radiant blue. "Blue" like that savage, irrepressible blue of Patagonia's glaciers. An astral, cerulean sheen, like the swirling, chromatic nebulae of deep space. A brilliant, bright, beckoning blue, Caribbean-postcard blue. Hypnotic, ghostly, ghastly blue. Fantastic blue. *Balaenoptera luminosa*. You see their glow underwater long before they surface.

Third, when they do surface, its flanks conjure images of a coastline battered by a surging storm. Even on calm days, the shore-pound along their long, curvaceous back startles you. It gives the whale a geographical aspect. Philip Hoare wrote that there are no pictures of blue whales -- only maps. She belongs to the cartographers of our imaginations, as mysterious and imposing as the blank spaces of old maps. *Balaenoptera incognita*.

All in all, it is foreboding. That its breath jettisons steam more than twenty feet into the air, that it displaces so much ocean...the whale seems to exist so violently. It surfaces like a volcanic island erupting out of the abyss. It is out of context, invasive, bombastic. The seething, stormy seas churning around them give the impression that they are fleeing, tearing away in frantic escape, perhaps in an effort to shake off our voyeuristic chase. But then you realize that it is the sea, not the whale, that is fleeing -- it is the *ocean* renting and tripping over itself in vain attempts to make way. The blue whale batters the sea.

Tuesday, February 22

Today, I was ready for them. It was unreal. Too real. And it hit me. We stumbled upon a widespread group, ten of them, all feeding. I was standing on the *Maranata's* cabin roof with Lucho when suddenly a blue whale surfaced earnestly a hundred feet off starboard. I nearly fell overboard. Unlike my first encounter, when I felt almost nothing, today her size hit me like a freak wave. I was available, susceptible, vulnerable, invested. I was receptive. Maybe seeing whales is like sex: it takes a couple times for it really to get sweet. Beside myself, I let out some desperate noises. I realized I was laughing, groaning. In those seconds the blue whale did with me all I have ever been promised that it would, and more.

“That, Eric,” called Rodrigo, beaming from the helm, “is a blue whale.”

I was on plankton patrol for the day, charged with managing the trawl ropes and hauling in the net as we zigzagged among the pod of feeding whales. The trawls took all my strength and concentration; it was absolute torture – the deepest pain. Not the effort of the trawls, but knowing what was happening around me, feeling it, seeing it out of the corner of my eye, hearing the cries of the captain, the eruptions, the wafts of fishy breath -- and being unable, ever, not once, to give it my full attention. It was diabolical punishment, an abyssal circle of hell. Not once did I have a chance to take more than a glance. But the glimpses I stole were outrageous.

The Lunge Feed: First, seemingly on its own, the water moves, as if Poseidon were brandishing his triton just below, sloshing around the entire ocean. Soon the turbulence coalesces into an enormous wave, sweeping the surface into a chaos of whitewater. A house-sized eddy froths and churns in its wake. The giant pectoral fin emerges, pointed to the heavens, as if the whale were practicing yoga, or a touchdown celebration. If you think to look, her flukes are also visible, projected into the air a surprising distance away, affording you get an ominous sense of this animal's length. Both the pectoral and the caudal are surprisingly thick. Bulky. Thick and rubbery, like car tires, like cartoonishly over-sized boogie boards.

At times, if at that rare and uncanny angle, you see the throat. At first it doesn't make sense. Then you realize what it is, and that it never will. A humongous cylinder of bulbous, thick ridges. A basin and range. A ribbed parachute. A freakish frigate-whale. A nightmarish pollywog. As the inchoate mass corkscrews into view, you lose all track of the whale's orientation. It is upside down or inside out? The horror is teased even further by a sweeping barrel-roll, performed as the feeding whale ploughs through a swarm of krill, mouth agape, and further still by the closing of its jaws, during which the she comes to a near halt, almost thrown into reverse. This massive closure happens to be the largest biomechanical force on earth. Surrounded by six such forces going off one after another for hours, I was barely hanging on.

In their rampage, their breaths become exasperated, exuberant trumpets, the tissues of its nasal passages flapping flaccidly in the tornadic vortex of the geysers. From a half-mile away, that deep, burp-like rumble still shakes you to the core. Last week, with a spotting scope, I saw a spout seventeen miles off. Yesterday, from the hill, we heard a blow that was five miles away. From up close, you see that her breath contains the hydrological cycle in microcosm. Some of it is mist, some falls in sheets of rain, the swirling vapor, the lofty cirrus, those classic updrafts of cumulonimbus. Its own microclimate.

The afternoon wears on, each lunge breaking and stealing your heart. The sun swings low. Lying on the cabin roof, engine off, plankton trawls finished, swaying to a rolling swell, recording acoustics, listening to a symphony of six blue whales trumpeting all around us. O, the power of their breath! With every thunderous *fwbooooosh*, an unstoppable tide of wondrous enthusiasm wells up inside you. A surface lung framed by the blazing Pacific sun. The lullaby of the swells. The glow of blue whales just below surface, all around you, the immensity churned and kneaded from the deep by their throat-acrobatics, that peace that passes understanding...you are held, transfixed, rapt in the most wild and addictive joy, an all-enveloping exuberance uniquely endemic to that phenomenon of human experience: the whale encounter.

Saturday, March 5

Today, I looked down into a blue whale's nostrils, and I saw death. The stone had been rolled away. Its Vulcan furnace of metabolism, our burning bush. Its geyser of breath, our blinding light on the road to Tarsus.

Krill hopping everywhere! I never knew those critters could jump. Such a scene denotes a particularly dense swarm. They are dancing all around us, five-hundred meters in all directions, lighting a sun-carpet prematurely on the waters. The scene is anachronistic. It's too early in the afternoon for that. We stake it out the krill bloom, in wait for the whales to find it too. Sure enough...

Always, it seems, their appearances are impossible to remember. You are left only to doubt your senses. Up close, they destroy you, distort your senses, rattle your screws loose. What remains is but a distorted blur, a mnemonic stutter. Like a worship experience, or an orgasm; gloriously sacred, or utterly profane – or some kinky mixture of both.

Weather was perfect. The temperature of a warm daydream. Sea state impeccable, Beaufort like glass. Remarkable. Whales were everywhere, spouting from all directions, framed by remarkably clear volcanic ranges of continental Patagonia, providing ample context for the towering columns of blue whale breath that would linger endlessly in the still sea air. Geological and biological analogs mirroring each other. My god, the height of their breath. At *least* twenty feet. Corinthian columns. Regal. Authoritative.

They languish and roll about in a soup of krill, plowing trenches through the swarms as they pass, simply opening their parachute-throats and rolling over whenever they feel like a snack. The krill dance on, frantic, doomed.

We followed five or six whales that afternoon, all with marked individuality. This one gigantic and sage, this one nervous and hungry. One particularly large and tranquil whale surfaced next to us six times in a row, not fifteen feet away, utterly calm. Her luminous body drifting under the surface like a radiant phantom...I could see her bulbous nostrils flare open, the infinite oblivion they revealed...I could fit my leg down there. Then I would watch those nostrils collapse, latch and seal shut, with a surprising range of motion. Their thickness! Their roundness! Robustness! Seeing the air vaporize at such close range, as the passages opened and the respiratory geysers fired off in unison...And the smell! Size is not the only

unfathomable quality of this monster. The verdict is in: there is a direct correlation between the size of a whale and the funk of her breath.

Black-browed albatrosses circle above. Some paddle alongside the *Musculus*, glowering up at us.

She dives. The endless curvature of her dorsal horizon: a picturesque landscape. The pronounced bulk of its flanks, still mostly concealed by the surface: a revelation. The sinuous, divinely elegant backwards flex of its tail, that with a single pump careens her into the abyss: a ballet.

The suction of the whale's submergence is like that of a drowning ship. A wave washes from front-to-back up her body as she tilts down for a dive. Then two opposing waves collapse along her right and left shores, colliding with each other in the vacuum of the monster's exit.

And her body print. The water remains eddied, hundreds of square feet of it, for minutes after its gone. As you attempt to predict the next spot she might appear, it allows you to track exactly where she was last. The blue whale, the only force that can scar the sea. Her body displaces so much water that eddies also form where she is about to surface. Betraying her movements, these presaged eddies allow a watchful eye to know exactly where to expect her next, long before you see her glow.

This one left us a farewell gift, and it soon spread to blanket a half-acre. In my reverie I scooped it up in hand. I immediately regretted it. We could smell another patch of it, upwind a mile from us. We could see it too, a bright-red wound on the Pacific. The same reason a flamingo's feathers are pink: it's the krill.

We collect more, this time with a pool skimmer, and point the prow back towards base. Time to leave them be. A sharp, brazen sunset sweeps down upon us. The *Musculus* charges home through a rare, warm Pacific wind. The spouts, like exclamation points on the horizon, recede into the haze that is gathering at the feet of the volcanic skyline. Magellanic penguins dash out of our way. Peale's dolphins race alongside. The sun's long, golden carpet stretches from us to the horizon. I can not stop smiling.

The whale shit is still in its bottle, sitting on the porch at headquarters. No one volunteers to prepare the sample. The neighbors are starting to complain. It's been a good season.

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Biography:

Eric Keen grew up among the manatees and dolphins of Florida's east coast. A naturalist and an educator, he studied biology and religion at Sewanee: The University of the South, before graduating Phi Beta Kappa and completing a Fulbright grant in Indonesia. He has studied cetaceans in the rivers of Borneo, in the Mediterranean, in the geologic records of New Zealand, and in the fiord-lands of Chile and British Columbia. He has been published in *Earth Times* and the *Ecologist*. Eric is currently at Scripps Institution of Oceanography, pursuing a Ph.D. in the coastal ecology of large whales.