

## PHOTO VIGNETTE

### *Whale Watching, Salish Style*



“The photo was taken on the Salish Sea at Howe Sound while on a family boat trip. I had asked my Mom (Lee) if I Eagle whistled, would the whales breach. She said yes. I whistled and they breached about a dozen times. I watched most and then snapped this one. I call it Eagle Whistle, Whale Dance.” Photo and caption by Columpa Carmen Bobb Photography.

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LEE MARACLE

I wanted to take my children and my grandchildren whale watching in the Salish Sea where I grew up. I had already taken Kwanita and her mother, but this time, I would take my son’s two daughters, his wife, and my second daughter, Columpa, to see the whales. Tania did not wish to come; she does not care for the deep sea and the sound we are heading for is the deepest in the world – or at least this is what they say. I cannot cite the source where I heard that, so let us just say it is hearsay. My son researches where we are going to rent the boat to whale watch.

We love our killer whales (black fish, originally), giant orcas really. For me, they are the embodiment of poetry. Sleek, thinking mammals of the ocean, family, and clan systems intact, they live together, hunt

cooperatively and protect themselves and their friends. They are capable of killing for vengeance, going to war with another animal, and they are predators of the white shark. Expert killers – I respect that. The paradox of being expert killers and beautiful and kind parents stirs my blood.

I was born in the year of the tiger (Chinese calendar) and am Wolf Clan. We hunt in packs too; we are cooperative, expert killers; and we are crazy about our young. Unlike tigers, the young girls from a wolf mother often stay with the pack. The sons stray, but occasionally regather with their original wolf family. Killer whales speak to the wolf in me.

We arrive in sight of the whales within a brief hour. There are at least a dozen in this pod; the captain of the boat we are on begins to discuss who these whales are. I stop listening. I know who they are in a very different way. They are listeners, thinkers, and parents. They are hunters and loyal friends. The whale parents are incapable of anger towards their young. “Watch the animals,” the Elders used to say. “Learn from them.” I still struggle to be that kind of parent and grandparent. It seems that, all throughout the life of my children and grandchildren, I am struggling to earn and deserve their love. I have heard parents say they love their children unconditionally; this makes me chuckle. We spend years trying to shape them into the kind of people we imagine will be good human beings; that is not unconditional love. Children have no way to shape their parents; they accept who you are, and this is humbling ... everything seems to come easy for them.

The whales are floating about as though uninterested and bored. My daughter leans in and says, “Do you think if I eagle-whistled, they would start jumping?”

“Oh,” I answer. “The story says that an eagle fell in love with black fish and wanted to mate with her. She discouraged him at first, saying that she would drown him if he tried to mate with her. He insisted; then finally she relented. In the course of their mating, she got excited and dove deep into the water. Sure enough, he drowned, but not before he had completed the mating ritual. They say that is how killer whale got his spots. So every time the whale hears the whistle of an eagle, she remembers her brief love affair and breaches happily, so try it.”

“Do you think they will hear me?”

“I think so,” I say. I am not sure how far away they can hear, but I have a vague memory of someone telling me it was a long way. “I think they can hear more than ten kilometres,” I say.

Columpa whistles and all the whales leap. Everyone gets excited,

Columpa and me too. She is so excited that she forgets to take pictures. She despairs when they stop jumping. I tell her to wait and then do it again when she is ready to take pictures. She waits briefly, then whistles again and the whales jump. I vaguely recall when she learned to eagle-whistle; I am not clear who her teacher was, but she does a number of calls in animal and bird language, as do my other children, their father, and a number of Indigenous relations and friends. We have a different life.

I get on my phone and Google killer whales' hearing distance: a thousand kilometres. That is impressive. I thought *I* had a big voice.

After jumping about and playing, they sing their language out. Not sure what they were saying, maybe something like, "Come on, guys, huddle up. Show them how to be a family," and they gather in a close group. My grandkids are impressed. My grandson stares at them. Nothing in eastern Ontario comes close to the majesty and size, the elegance of a killer whale. Every time Lum eagle-whistles, they jump; and every time they jump, my grandkids are so impressed. The crowd on the boat is impressed too. Even our captain is impressed. No one is sure how this is happening, but finally the captain hears the whistle, he watches Columpa and the whales, and for a moment, I feel like this is the first time someone understands. He is somewhat awed by what he sees. He stares a moment longer; then gets friendlier with all of us.

From understanding comes respect; from respect, cordiality. I sigh, was not expecting this. The wall between us is now gossamer thin. If we just did things together, it would drop. I thank the whales, sprinkle a tiny bit of tobacco on the ocean, and smile knowingly to myself: another tool in my kit. Do things together and lead with your loving and cultural self. We do not have to hide, nor do we have to make a display of our culture. All we have to do is quietly go about being ourselves in the company of others who are also being themselves. I thank the whales and signal Columpa to whistle one more time before we head for shore.