

One

December 7, 1992: Whidbey Island, Puget Sound. The World Wars were over. The other wars were over: Korea, Vietnam, the Persian Gulf. The Cold War was finally over, too. The Whidbey Island Naval Air Station remained. So did the Pacific, its waters vast and fathomless beyond an airfield named for an airman whose body was never found: William Ault, who died in the Battle of the Coral Sea. This is how it goes: The ocean swallows human bodies whole and makes them immortal. William Ault became a runway that sends other men into the sky.

But at that Naval Air Station, on that day in December, the infinite Pacific appeared as something finite: audio data gathered by a network of hydrophones spread along the ocean floor. These hydrophones had turned the formless *it* of the ocean and its noises into something measurable: pages of printed graphs rolling out of a spectrograph machine. These hydrophones had been used to monitor Soviet subs until the Cold War ended; after their declassification, the Navy started listening for other noises—other kinds of *it*—instead.

On December 7, the *it* was a strange sound. The acoustic technicians thought they knew what it was, but then they realized they didn't. Petty officer second class Velma Ronquille stretched it out on a different spectrogram so she could see it better. She couldn't quite believe it. It was coming in at 52 hertz.

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She beckoned one of the technicians. He needed to come back, she said. He needed to take another look.

The technician came back. He took another look. His name was Joe George.

Second Petty Officer Ronquille told him, “I think this is a whale.”

Joe thought, *Holy cow*. It hardly seemed possible. For a blue whale, which is what this one seemed to be, a frequency of 52 hertz was basically off the charts. Blue whales usually came in somewhere between 15 and 20—on the periphery of what the human ear can hear, an almost imperceptible rumble. But here it was, right in front of them, the audio signature of a creature moving through Pacific waters with a singularly high-pitched song.



A recording of 52 Blue, sped up for audibility.

Whales make calls for a number of reasons—to navigate, to find food, to communicate with each other—and for certain whales, like humpbacks and blues, songs also seem to play a role in sexual selection. Blue males sing louder than females, and the volume of their singing—at more than 180 decibels—makes them the loudest animals in the world. They click and grunt and trill and hum and moan. They sound like foghorns. Their calls can travel thousands of miles through the ocean.

The whale that Joe George and Velma Ronquille heard was an anomaly: His sound patterns were recognizable as those of a blue whale, but his frequency was unheard of. It was absolutely unprecedented. So they paid attention. They kept tracking him for years, every migration season, as he made his way south from Alaska to Mexico. His path wasn't unusual, only his song—and the fact that they never detected any other whales around him. He always seemed to be alone.

So this whale was calling out high, and he was calling out to no one—or at least, no one seemed to be answering. The acoustic technicians would come to call him 52 Blue. A scientific report, published 12 years later, would describe his case like this:

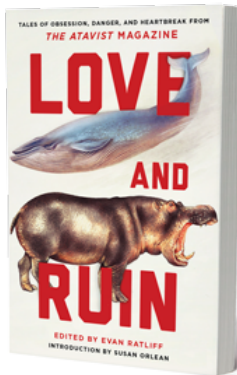
No other calls with similar characteristics have been identified in the acoustic

data from any hydrophone system in the North Pacific basin. Only one series of these 52-Hz calls has been recorded at a time, with no call overlap, suggesting that a single whale produced the calls. ... These tracks consistently appeared to be unrelated to the presence or movement of other whale species (blue, fin and humpback) monitored year-round with the same hydrophones.

Much remained unknown, the report confessed, and difficult to explain:

We do not know the species of this whale, whether it was a hybrid or an anomalous whale that we have been tracking. It is perhaps difficult to accept that ... there could have been only one of this kind in this large oceanic expanse.





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two

The drive from Seattle to Whidbey Island, a little less than two hours north, took me through the plainspoken pageantry of Washington State industry: massive piles of raw logs and cut lumber, rivers clogged with tree trunks like fish trapped in pens. I passed stacks of candy-colored shipping containers near Skagit Port and a collection of dirty white silos near Deception Pass Bridge, its steel span looming majestically over Puget Sound—hard-sparkling water glinting with shards of sunlight nearly 200 feet below. Craggy cliffs rose on either side over the water, studded with crooked straggler pines clinging to the steep rock. In front of me on the two-lane highway, a biker wore a jacket full of skulls.

On the far side of the bridge, the island felt pastoral and otherworldly, almost defensive. “LITTER AND IT WILL HURT,” one sign read. Another said: “Space Heaters Need SPACE.” The lawns were full of goats and rabbit hutches.

Whidbey Island often calls itself the longest island in America, but this isn’t strictly true. “Whidbey

is long,” the *Seattle Times* observed in 2000, “but let’s not stretch it.” It’s long enough to hold a kite festival, a mussel festival, an annual bike race (the Tour de Whidbey), four inland lakes, and an annual murder-mystery game that turns the entire town of Langley, population 1,035, into a crime scene. In 1984, the island was a refuge for a white supremacist named Robert Jay Mathews—leader of a militant group called the Order—whose home burned down around him when a pile of his own ammo caught fire during a shoot-out with the FBI. His body was found next to the charred remains of a bathtub. Every year, it’s rumored, his followers gather on the day he was killed, at the site where his home once stood, to commemorate his death.

The Naval Air Station, on the northern end of the island, specializes in electronic attack, which means manipulating the electromagnetic spectrum: sending out radio and radar frequencies to locate and neutralize enemy operations, or using these same techniques to defend against similar tactics. The station also monitors the intricate array of hydrophones known as the Sound Surveillance System (SOSUS), part of an undersea surveillance network that ranges across the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, from Nova Scotia to Hawaii, seafloor-mounted hydrophones connected by underwater cables to facilities that process the audio data onshore. SOSUS was initially built for one reason: to track Soviet subs. Its earliest hydrophone arrays were installed on the seafloor between Greenland, Iceland, and Britain—a naval-warfare choke point known as the GIUK Gap, the waters that Soviet subs would have to cross if they were heading west.

SOSUS tracked its first diesel sub in 1962, its first Victor- and Charlie-class subs six years later. The system was expanded through the 1960s and helped locate the only two U.S. nuclear submarines ever lost at sea.

But once the Cold War ended, operations were downsized, and much of the equipment was declassified. The hydrophone arrays still did military duty, but the Navy started looking for other uses for them, too.

Joe George, the technician who first identified 52 Blue in 1992, still lives in a modest hillside home perched on the northern end of Whidbey, about six miles from the Naval Air Station. When I visited, he answered the door smiling—a burly man with silver hair, no-nonsense but friendly.

He’d offered to show me around the naval base. Though he hadn’t worked there for 20 years, he was still able to get us past security with his Navy ID. He told me he uses it whenever he comes back to the base to drop off his recycling: the profits go toward a Morale, Welfare and Recreation Fund that pays for bleachers and baseball diamonds for the base. We passed by the looming hangars where the planes are kept, “prowlers” and “growlers,” all designed for electronic warfare.

Whidbey Island is currently home to 17 active-duty electronic attack squadrons, including the VAQ-133 Wizards (radio call sign: Magic); the VAQ-142 Gray Wolves (formerly the Grim Watchdogs, radio call sign: Timber); and the oldest electronic-warfare squadron in the Navy, the VAQ-130 Zappers (mascot: Robbie the Dragon, who is pictured with lightning bolts coming out of his angry lizard eyes). The VP-40 Fighting Marlins also sport a fierce insignia: a marlin spearing a submarine alongside a squid that bleeds fat red drops.

*I asked Joe
what he thought
the strange sounds
were. "I can't tell
you that," he said.
"It's classified."*

We passed smaller simulator buildings, where some guys step into a cockpit for the first time and other guys do their best to mess up the ride. Just beyond these dreary beige boxes, the coastline was ragged and beautiful—waves crashing onto dark sand, salt wind moving through the evergreens. Joe told me that a lot of people like getting stationed here: The work isn't bad, and the island itself is pretty stunning. Outside the officers' club, men in flight suits were drinking cocktails on a wooden deck.

Joe explained that his team—the team responsible for processing audio data from the hydrophones—was fairly disconnected from the rest of the base. It was a question of security, he said, and when we reached his old building I saw what he meant: It was surrounded by two fences topped with razor wire. Some of the other servicemen on base, Joe explained, used to think his building was some kind of prison. They never knew quite what it was for; its machinations were mysterious. The only contact Joe's division had with the rest of the base was passing along whatever information they'd gathered about subs.

Joe stressed the intensity and secrecy of his old work, everything that happened past the razor wire. I asked him what he thought the strange sounds were, before he realized they were whale calls—back in 1992, with Second Petty Officer Ronquille. "I can't tell you that," he told me. "It's classified."



three

July 2007: Harlem, New York. Leonora knew she was going to die. Not just someday, but soon. She'd been suffering from fibroids and bleeding for years, sometimes so heavily that she was afraid to leave her apartment, heavily enough that she grew obsessed with blood: thinking about blood, dreaming about blood, writing poems about blood. She'd grown increasingly reclusive. She'd stopped working as a case supervisor for the city, a job she'd held for more than a decade.

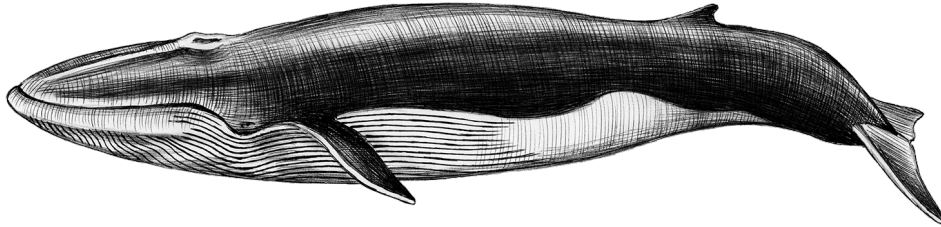
Leonora was 48 years old. She had always been a self-sufficient person; she'd been working since she was 14. She'd never been married, though she'd had offers. She liked to know that she could support herself, but this was a new level of isolation. She'd grown obsessively focused on a self-

directed exploration of embryonic stem-cell research and increasingly distant from everyone in her life. One family member had told her, “You are in a very dark place,” and said she no longer wanted to see her.

By summer things had gotten worse. Leonora felt truly ill: relentless nausea, severe constipation, aches across her whole body. Her wrists were swollen, her stomach bloated, her vision blurred with jagged spirals of color. She could hardly breathe when she was lying down, so she barely slept. When she did sleep, her dreams were strange. One night she dreamed about a horse-drawn hearse moving across the cobblestone streets of another century’s Harlem. She picked up the horse’s reins, looked it straight in the eye, and knew it had come for her.

She unlocked her apartment door so that her neighbors wouldn’t have trouble removing her body before it “stank up the place.” She called her doctor to tell her as much—*I’m pretty sure I’m going to die*—and her doctor got pissed, said she needed to call the paramedics, said she was going to live. So Leonora called the paramedics. When they were wheeling her off on a gurney, she asked them to turn around and take her back so she could lock the door again. This was how she knew she’d regained faith in her own life: If she wasn’t going to die, she didn’t want to leave her door unlocked.

That request, asking the paramedics to turn around, is the last thing Leonora can remember before two months of darkness. That night in July was the beginning of a medical odyssey—five days of surgery, seven weeks in a coma, six months in the hospital—that would eventually deliver her, in her own time and her own way, to the story of 52 Blue.



focus

Back at his house, Joe showed me how he'd been spending his time since retiring from the Navy. In addition to a job restoring salmon habitats—putting in the right plants and taking out the wrong ones—he was regularly participating in 18th-century fur-trapper-rendezvous reenactments. He kept an impressive collection of carnivorous plants and raised bees to feed them. He showed me the cobra lilies, his favorites, and explained how their translucent hoods coaxed trapped flies to exhaust themselves by flying for the light.

Certain patterns emerged across Joe's various vocations: evident care and conscientiousness, a desire to be accurate and meticulous. He fixed a frost cloth over his cobra lilies right after he showed me their elegant green-veined hoods, and it was with conspicuous pride that he showed me

the 18th-century musket he'd built from a kit. I saw the same sense of pleasure at precision when he explained the sheaf of papers he'd pulled out from his old days tracking 52 Blue. They were computer maps documenting nearly a decade of migratory patterns, 52 Blue's journey each season marked by a different color—yellow, orange, purple—in the crude lines of mid-nineties computer graphics. He showed me charts of 52's song and explained the lines and metrics so I could compare its signature to more typical whale noise: the lower frequencies of regular blues, the much higher frequencies of humpbacks.

Blue whale songs hold various kinds of sounds—long purrs and moans, constant or modulated—and 52 Blue's vocalizations showed these same distinctive patterns, only on a wildly different frequency, one just above the lowest note on a tuba. The brief recorded clip of 52 I listened to, sped up for human hearing, sounded ghostly—a reedy, pulsing, searching sound, the aural equivalent of a beam of light murkily visible through thick fog on a moonlit night.

Joe clearly enjoyed explaining his charts and maps. They took him back to the days when the story of 52 was still unfolding, still a mystery—this inexplicable whale and his singular sound. At the time, Joe had recently arrived at Whidbey after several years of what was technically classified as “arduous duty” on a base in Iceland, though he explained that those years weren't particularly arduous at all; his kids built snowmen by the Blue Lagoon. Joe was a good candidate for Whidbey. He was already trained as an acoustic technician, already prepared for the work that happened in his squat little bunker behind the razor-wire fence.

SOSUS, Joe told me, was a “bastard child”: It had bounced from one Navy division to another over the years, and was treated differently depending on where it was housed at any given time. It got a lot of funding when it was in the submarine division, headed by an admiral. But after it was moved to surface fleets, which had less pull, there was less money to go around. And then the Cold War ended.

Without Soviet submarines to listen to, the Navy started thinking about how else the expensive hydrophone array might earn its keep. That's when they decided to offer it to science, so they could listen to everything else. Dennis Conlon—a civilian Navy scientist with the Space and Naval Warfare Systems Command—invited an acoustics expert from Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution in Massachusetts named Bill Watkins out to Whidbey. Watkins, who'd worked with the Navy in the past, realized he could use the equipment to track blues, fins, and humpbacks—their migration patterns and areas of seasonal density.

Now Navy guys who'd spent years tracking subs were suddenly tracking songs. They were accountable for making sense of something other than threats. The sounds they gathered were

processed and examined by Watkins's team back at Woods Hole.

Joe spoke of Watkins—who died of cancer in 2004—with evident respect. This was a pattern in the various accounts of Watkins I heard, this reverence: He was honest and passionate and kind. He could talk to anyone. He spoke a bunch of languages, the precise number changing each time I heard it: Twelve. Six. Thirteen. Nancy DiMarzio, one of his former research assistants, claimed it was twenty. She also said he once fled an African country in the middle of a war. Darel Martin, another naval acoustic technician who worked with Joe at Whidbey, told me the story of Watkins' Ph.D: how he learned enough Japanese to defend a doctoral dissertation at the University of Tokyo.

Watkins was born in 1926 to Christian missionaries stationed in French Guinea. According to Darel, he hunted elephants with his father when he was a kid. He could hear the elephants from farther off than anyone else: "He found out that he could actually hear 20 hertz, which is extremely low for any human," Darel told me. "You and I can't hear that—20's pretty low—but he could actually hear the elephants in the distance. And he would tell his dad which way to go."

Watkins studied broadcast technology at a Christian college in the United States and then returned to Africa to work in radio. He spent most of the 1950s operating a station in Monrovia, Liberia. When he first started working at Woods Hole, in 1958, he was hired not as a biologist but as an electronics assistant—it was the recording he excelled at. He didn't know much about whales then, and he wouldn't earn his Ph.D in biology until he was in his fifties. By the time he did, however, he had already made profound contributions to the field, developing much of the technology and methodology that made it possible to record and analyze whale songs: whale tags, underwater playback experiments, location methods. He developed the first tape recorder capable of recording whale vocalizations, which opened up new frontiers of fieldwork.

During the years the Whidbey Island team tracked 52 Blue, Watkins came out to the base every few months during migration season, and Joe and Darel would show him the vocalizations they'd picked up. The three men enjoyed working together. While some of the other Navy guys didn't like going from tracking subs to tracking creatures—the stakes of intelligence work felt more palpable—Joe and Darel loved eavesdropping on marine life. "It's just endless what you can hear out of the ocean," Darel told me. "We went from being experts on sharks of steel to tracking living, breathing animals."

For Joe and Darel, 52 Blue's unusual frequency was interesting for largely practical reasons: His singularity made him easy to track. Because you could always distinguish his call from others, you always knew where he was traveling. Other whales were harder to tell apart, their patterns of motion harder to discern. The possibility of particularity—*this* whale, among all whales—was

unusual: It allowed for an abiding relationship to 52 as an individual creature, while other whales blurred into a more anonymous collective body.



Joe George on tracking 52 Blue.

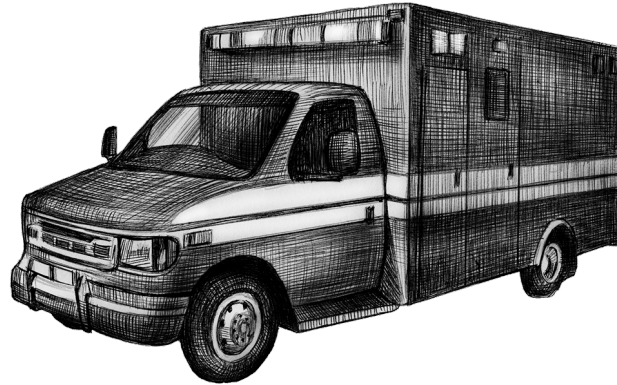
52's particularity, as well as his apparent isolation, lent him—they figured it was a him, as only males sang during mating season—a certain kind of personality. “We always laughed when we were tracking him,” Darel told me. “Maybe heading to Baja for the lady blues.” His jokes echoed the way frat brothers might talk about the runt of a pledge class, the one who never had much luck with chicks: *52 was ugly, 52 struck out, looked again, tried again. 52 never let up with that song.* It was something more than a job. Darel bought his wife a whale necklace during the years he spent tracking 52; she still wears it whenever they go to Hawaii.

Joe had his own fixations. “One time he disappeared for over a *month*,” he told me, his inflection registering the mystery; it clearly still engaged him. At the end of the month they finally picked him up—farther out in the Pacific than he’d ever been. “Why was there that gap?” Joe wondered. “What happened during that time? You just wonder about stuff like that. What happens in that month. You always kinda wonder.”

Watkins was the driving force behind the whale tracking, and he fought hard to maintain the funding, but he couldn’t keep it running forever. The Twin Towers happened and everything changed. Just as the end of the Cold War had signaled the beginning of a new era, so did the onset of another war signal the beginning of the end. “When 9/11 came around, it was a couple weeks after that, Bill told me all the funding was gone,” Joe explained. “Everything.”

The whale-tracking team hunted around for other jobs on the base or within the Navy. Joe tried the marine-acoustics field but didn’t have much luck. So he went back for an associate’s degree in environmental sciences, which paved the way for his current job restoring salmon habitats.

Now the records of 52 are just reams and reams of data taking up space in filing cabinets at Woods Hole. The mystery survives in splinters: just a man sitting at his kitchen table, pulling out old folders to point out the ordinary-looking graph lines of an extraordinary song.



five

Leonora grew up in Harlem near Bradhurst Avenue. She was raised mostly by her grandmother, who was four foot eleven and blind from diabetes, a determined and resourceful woman who'd come to the United States from Chennai by way of Trinidad. She always said people back home in India thought America was full of golden sidewalks. It was the flecks of silica in the pavement, she said, their sparkle. Word had spread.

Leonora's grandmother was a woman who felt blessed by an extraordinary second sight—she got a strong sense about people, could feel the energy coming off them. If she didn't want to get to know

you, she'd tell you. If she did want to get to know you, she'd run her hands over your face and body to get a better sense of the spirit inside. She could describe your clothing without seeing you. She could sense the energy of different colors: the calm of blue, the heated intensity of red.

During the mid-seventies, when Leonora was in high school, Bradhurst was something of an urban war zone, with its own police task force and sky-high murder rates. One summer when Leonora got interested in photography, taking pictures of friends and folks in the neighborhood, people started calling her Death Photographer because so many of her subjects ended up becoming victims of violence.

Leonora worked hard to find a way out, started City College and made good money bartending at the Red Rooster and Broadway International. One day she was walking along the Hudson and had a vision: It started looking like another river entirely. This was how she realized she needed to get to Paris. She needed to get even farther away from home.

She kept bartending until she had enough money saved, then got herself across the Atlantic as an exchange student. She found a place on the Boulevard Saint-Michel and spent the next year in a happy blur: walked around with a corkscrew in her hand, took a trip to Capri, where she and her friend met a pair of amorous lifeguards, broke into an abandoned villa and ate bread and jam off the dusty kitchen table.

It was tough coming back to New York. Her friends resented the fact that she'd been somewhere—done something—that they hadn't. She lived in New Jersey for six months, which she hated, then returned to the city to be with a man she almost married. They went to the courthouse and she got such terrible cramps that she had to go to the bathroom. She realized it was her body telling her: *Don't do this*. She listened. She stayed in the bathroom until the offices closed; a police officer had to tell her to come out.

She eventually started working for the city as a case manager for clients on food stamps or welfare. It was emotionally draining work: dealing with families in states of desperate need, hungry kids, a mother who'd scored a little money in the lottery but still dressed her kids in rags and wanted her own mom's share of food stamps. For a while in the nineties, Leonora worked for a city program helping Russian immigrants. They got off the plane at La Guardia with visas and apartment leases and not much else; she helped them figure it out from there.

She was dedicated to her clients, respected their courage and determination, but by the mid-aughts her health was in decline. She was holed up in her apartment and bleeding all the time. Home was a refuge but also a container for her increasing isolation. By the time she was hospitalized, in July

2007, she'd retreated from the world so much that her time in the hospital felt less like an absolute rupture and more like the continuation of a descent that was already well under way.

•
six

In 2004, three years after the funding dried up, the Woods Hole researchers published a paper about 52 Blue in a journal called *Deep Sea Research*. The paper explained how the audio data had been recorded—gathered by more than ten arrays of hydrophones and analyzed by acoustic technicians familiar with whale calls—but gave few details about the process, for security reasons: “These Navy facilities, hydrophone arrays, their characteristics, and associated data processing techniques have remained classified.” The paper described the units of noise recorded from the whale (“calls,” “groups,” “series,” and “bouts”) as well as patterns in his motion: “The tracks for the 52-Hz whale indicated relatively slow, continuous movement” across “the deep waters of the central and eastern portion of the North Pacific basin,” where he “roamed widely” and “spent relatively little time in any particular area,” and—of course—never seemed to cross paths with any other whales.

The article was accepted in August 2004. Bill Watkins died in September. Though he was listed as the lead author on the article, another member of the team—Mary Ann Daher, his former research assistant—was listed as its corresponding author. Soon, Daher started getting notes about the whale. They weren't just typical pieces of professional correspondence. They came, as *New York Times* reporter Andrew Revkin wrote at the time, “from whale lovers lamenting the notion of a lonely heart of the cetacean world”; others were “from deaf people speculating that the whale might share their disability.”

After Revkin's story ran that December, headlined “Song of the Sea, a Cappella and Unanswered,” more letters flooded Woods Hole. (One marine-mammal researcher quoted in the story, Kate Stafford, may have inadvertently fanned the flames: “He's saying, ‘Hey, I'm out here,’” she told Revkin. “Well, nobody is phoning home.”) These letters came from the heartbroken and the deaf, from the lovelorn and the single; the once bitten, twice shy and the twice bitten, forever shy—people who identified with the whale or hurt for him, hurt for whatever set of feelings they'd

projected onto him.

A legend was born: the loneliest whale in the world.

In the years since, 52 Blue—or 52 Hertz, as he is known to many of his devotees—has inspired numerous sob-story headlines: not just “The Loneliest Whale in the World” but “The Whale Whose Unique Call Has Stopped Him Finding Love”; “A Lonely Whale’s Unrequited Love Song”; “There Is One Whale That Zero Other Whales Can Hear and It’s Very Alone. It’s the Saddest Thing Ever and Science Should Try to Talk to It.” There have been imaginative accounts of a solitary bachelor headed down to the Mexican Riviera to troll haplessly for the biggest mammal babes alive, “his musical mating calls ringing for hours through the darkness of the deepest seas, broadcasting a wide repertory of heartfelt tunes.”

A singer in New Mexico, unhappy at his day job in tech, wrote an entire album dedicated to 52; another singer in Michigan wrote a kids’ song about the whale’s plight; an artist in upstate New York made a sculpture out of old plastic bottles and called it *52 Hertz*. A music producer in Los Angeles started buying cassette tapes at garage sales and recording over them with 52’s song, the song that was quickly becoming a kind of sentimental seismograph suggesting multiple storylines: alienation and determination, autonomy and longing; not only a failure to communicate but also a dogged persistence in the face of this failure.

People have set up Twitter accounts to speak for him, like @52_Hz_Whale, who gets right to the point:

Hellooooooooo?! Yooohoooooooo! Is anyone out there? #SadLife

I'm so lonely. :(#lonely #ForeverAlone

*A legend was born:
the loneliest whale in the world.*

seven

Leonora woke up in St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital in September 2007. What had happened in the previous two months—after the paramedics wheeled her out of her apartment—was only explained to her long after it was over, once she'd recovered enough to process it. The doctors had discovered that a severe intestinal blockage was making her ill, and she'd had major surgery over the course of five days. The surgeons removed everything the blockage had rotted; the more they looked, the more necrotic tissue and gangrene they found. They kept cutting out portions of her intestines—seven inches, nine inches, three inches—until they'd gotten it all. By the time they were finished, nearly three feet of her guts were gone. The remaining incision was huge.

Leonora was put into a seven-week coma so she could recover more efficiently, and after she awoke she remained hospitalized for several months to keep the open wound from becoming infected. She was on an IV. She hardly knew how to speak. She thought it was 1997. Her father came to visit once, and she vomited when she saw him. She could barely make herself understood, barely convey how much she wanted him to leave.

At one point, she sensed an incredible stench around her. She didn't know where it was coming from. She said "smell," and someone understood; eventually they realized it was her hair, which was matted with blood. She asked one of her doctors to cut it. The doctor said that wasn't her job. Leonora said, "If you don't do that, I will start screaming now and I will not stop." The doctor did it. It turned out looking pretty good. Weeks later they joked that the doctor might have a second career as a hairdresser.

For Leonora, the hardest part of recovery was losing her self-sufficiency. "Feeling that I could no longer be independent," she said, "that I could no longer take care of myself. Ever since I was 14, I've been doing that." In the aftermath of her coma, Leonora couldn't walk. She had trouble remembering words. She couldn't count past ten. She couldn't even quite count *to* ten. But she pretended. She didn't let on. She didn't want other people to see her struggling. The hospital offered decent physical rehab but nothing to help her re-inhabit her own mind.

Leonora was wheeled into the hospital on July 6, 2007, and wasn't home again until 2008. She went to a rehabilitation facility in November, then had a bad fall—she still wasn't walking well—and returned to the hospital, then to another rehab in December. During those months at various institutions she had visitors but generally she felt abandoned—like everyone in her life was fleeing her damage, pushing her away for a simple, primal reason: The healthy don't like to be around the sick. Her illness made them uncomfortable, because it reminded them of their own mortality—or the fact of mortality itself.

When people did come to visit, she perceived a dark energy coming from them; it made her feel nauseous. When her father visited, he told her over and over that she looked like her mother—a woman he hadn't spoken about in many years. She felt that her illness raised long-buried emotions in him, feelings of anger and loss.

During much of her recovery Leonora couldn't even watch television. It gave her headaches. So she turned to the Internet. It was a way to find interest and beauty in the world. And it was then—alone and late at night, once again, searching for something that might offer a sense of meaning—that she came upon the story of 52 Blue.

By then the story of the whale had been floating around the Internet for several years. But it spoke to Leonora with a particular urgency. It resonated. “He was speaking a language that no one else could speak,” she told me recently. “And here I was without a language. I had no more language to describe what had happened to me. So I too... I was like him. I had nothing. No one to communicate with. No one was hearing. No one was hearing him. And I thought: *I hear you. I wish you could hear me.*”

She identified with his plight. She felt that her own language was adrift. She was struggling to come back to any sense of self, much less find the words for what this self was thinking or feeling. It was hard to speak, because her trachea was so scarred from all the tubes that had been thrust down it during her coma. She felt the world pulling away. When she found the whale, she found an echo of this difficulty.

She remembers thinking: *I wish I could speak whale.* She found a strange kind of hope, a sense of certainty that he must know he wasn't alone. “I was like: Here he is. He's talking. He's saying something. He's singing. And nobody's really understanding, but there are people listening. I bet he knows people are listening. He must feel it.”

She remembers thinking:

I wish I could speak whale.

right

When I first began looking into the story of 52 Blue, I reached out to Mary Ann Daher at Woods Hole. I was hoping she could help me understand how the story of this whale had jumped the bounds of science and become something more like a rallying cry.

Daher's role in the story was curious: She'd become the unwitting confessor for a growing flock of devotees simply because her name was on a paper recounting work for which she'd been a research assistant years before. "I get all sorts of emails," she'd told one reporter, "some of them very touching—genuinely; it just breaks your heart to read some of them—asking why I can't go out there and help this animal."

But it seemed the media attention had started to grate on her nerves. "It's been pretty painful," she told a reporter in 2013. "You name the country and I've had a phone call, wanting to get information. And I haven't worked on this since 2006 or so. ... And ... oh God, [Watkins would] be dismayed, to put it mildly, to know of the attention."

I was eager to speak with Daher; I pictured the two of us at Woods Hole, meeting by the sea, locking eyes, nursing two cups of coffee in the salt air. *How did it feel to get those letters?* I'd ask her. And she'd tell me about the tug on her heart each time, her inbox turned into confessional booth. Perhaps she'd recite one from memory, the one that had moved her the most: *He is hope and loss at once*. I'd hear some break in her voice, and I'd copy her words, and I'd copy the break—I'd make

note of it: scientific neutrality showing the strain at its seams, nearly torn open by a lonely stranger's hapless wonder.

It could have gone like that. Perhaps there is another world in which it did. This world, however, holds only her refusal to return my emails. The Woods Hole media-relations representative made it very clear: They were done. Daher was done talking about the whale; done refusing to make assumptions about the whale; done correcting other peoples' assumptions about the whale. She'd already said everything she had to say.

The last journalist Daher agreed to talk to, as best I could tell, was a writer named Kieran Mulvaney. After I contacted him, he offered to send me the transcript of their conversation from 2013. It gives a sense of Daher's wariness and aggravation about the phenomenon 52 had become: "We don't know what the heck it is," she said of the cause of 52's odd song. "We don't know if it's a malformation. ... Is he alone? I don't know. People like to imagine this creature just out there swimming by his lonesome, just singing away and nobody's listening. But I can't say that. ... Is he successful reproductively? I haven't the vaguest idea. Nobody can answer those questions. Is he lonely? I hate to attach human emotions like that. Do whales get lonely? I don't know. I don't even want to touch that topic."

Research can quickly grow tiresome to its own researchers once it's been distorted by the funhouse mirrors of public fancy. For Mary Ann Daher, I came to realize, I represented little more than the persistence of that distortion: *It's been pretty painful. It's been worldwide.* The phenomenon itself was a reproach to Watkins' legacy: *He'd be dismayed.*

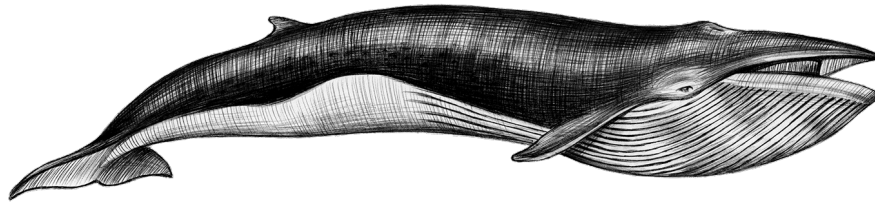
I thought I understood why she was done, why she was sick of it, why she was tired. This was part of the story, too: the way a phenomenon could alienate its own midwives. But I wanted to talk to her, and I wanted those letters, the ones she'd been sent—I wanted them so badly that I started to resent her refusal. I even wrote about her in my diary:

I get angry at Mary Ann Daher because she stands between me and the piece I'm capable of writing—the ghost text, hypothetical and unrealized, that includes every angle, every perspective; the white whale of completion and wholeness—she stands between me and the editor (stand-in for the father figure/lover/mentor/teacher) who says "good job," the paycheck, the readers who say "this story moved me."

I tried her one last time. She didn't have to talk to me, I told her. I just wanted the letters. Then I

told her media rep. I tried to explain my aesthetic; how my piece would be different from all the others. I tried to explain: I just wanted to find all the people who'd been moved by this animal.

She never sent the letters. So I went looking for the people on my own.



•
nine

They were voices out of the digital ether, at first, emails appearing in my inbox. I found them on a Facebook page devoted to the whale. Juliana was a 19-year-old English major at the University of Toronto. For her, she explained, 52 Blue was “the epitome of every person who’s ever felt too weird to love.” He represented “the fears that all of us have about never finding love and dying alone.” Juliana was no stranger to these fears herself. The summer she discovered 52 she “wasn’t really

seeing as many people as [she]’d have liked.” She felt out of sorts at college—described herself as a “lonely soul”—and believed the whale represented not just her but anyone “wandering alone,” anyone “trying to find someone who accepts us for our weaknesses and faults.”

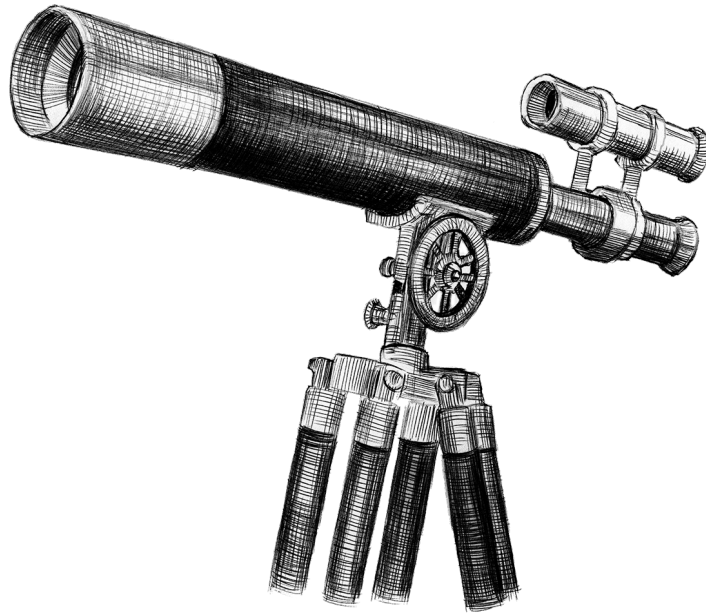
Zbigniew—a 26-year-old photo editor at the biggest daily tabloid in Poland—decided to get the outline of 52 Blue tattooed across his back after a bad breakup, the end of a six-year relationship:

i was deeply in love. but as it came out she was treating me like a second category person in relationship...i was devastated mainly because i have given her everything i could, and i thought she would do the same for me. [Because] of her i lost connection with important friends. View of the wasted time made me sad....Story of 52 hz whale made me happy. For me he is symbol of being alone in a positive way...He is like a statement, that despite being alone he lives on.

For Zee, as he calls himself, 52 came to represent the lonely days after the breakup, watching sad movies alone at home with his two cats, Puma and Fuga: “for long time i was ‘singing’ in other frequency than everybody around.” But the whale also represented resilience: “this is what my life looks like for last 2 years. im swimming slowly through my part of ocean, trying to find people like me, Patient, going past life being sure that im not crippled but special in positive way.”

52 Blue
was the epitome
of every person
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too weird to love.

The tattoo was a way for Zee to honor what the whale had meant to him, and to communicate that meaning—to sing at a frequency that might be understood. It stretches across his upper back, the “only place on body huge enough to make it look awesome.” Rather than offering a visual representation of 52, the tattoo is actually an artful evocation of the fact that 52 hasn’t ever been seen, and might never be seen: behind a detailed rendering of Moby Dick—another one of Zee’s fixations—there is a second whale, a ghost whale, just a negative space of bare skin defined by an outline of ink.



ten

In 1894, a wealthy amateur astronomer named Percival Lowell built a telescope in Flagstaff, Arizona. He spent the next 20 years looking through it and finding things no one else could see: a series of canals extending from the poles of Mars, a network of spokes radiating from a hub on Venus. He took both as signs of extraterrestrial civilization. He was mocked. He kept seeing the canals, kept seeing the spokes. He kept insisting. Years later an optometrist solved the puzzle: The settings on Lowell's telescope—its magnification and narrow aperture—meant that it was essentially projecting the interior of his eye onto the planets he was watching. The spokes of Venus were the shadows of his blood vessels, swollen from hypertension. He wasn't seeing other life; he was seeing

the imprint of his own gaze.

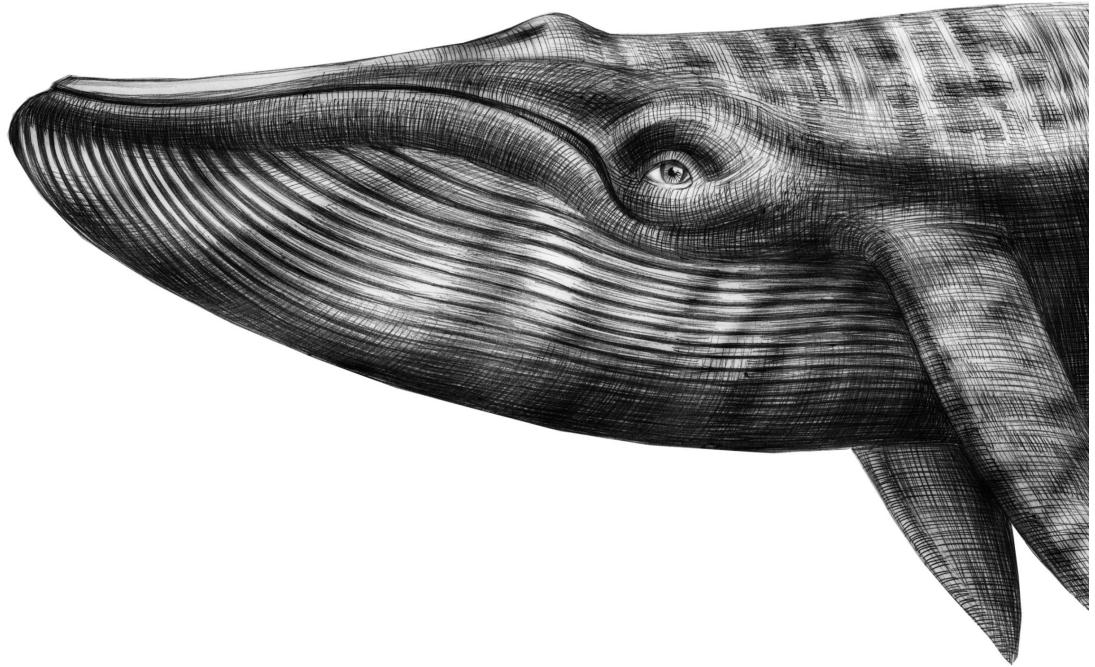
The natural world has always offered itself as a screen for human projection. The Romantics called this the pathetic fallacy. Ralph Waldo Emerson called it “intercourse with heaven and Earth.” We project our fears and longings onto everything we’re *not*—every beast, every mountain—and in this way we make them somehow kin. It’s an act of humbling and longing and claiming all at once.

“Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact,” Emerson wrote. “Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind.”

For Emerson, these correspondences offered a kind of completion: “All the facts in natural history taken by themselves have no value but are barren, like a single sex.” Put crudely: Human projection fertilizes the egg. It not only brings meaning to the “barren” body of natural history; it also offers sustenance to man: “His intercourse with heaven and earth,” Emerson wrote, “becomes part of his daily food.”

Emerson’s celebration of this process was not without interrogations. “We are thus assisted by natural objects in the expression of particular meanings,” he wrote. “But how great a language to convey such pepper-corn informations! ... We are like travellers using the cinders of a volcano to roast their eggs. ... Have mountains, and waves, and skies, no significance but what we consciously give them, when we employ them as emblems of our thoughts?”

Roasting our eggs on volcano cinders: This is like asking the splendid form of an elusive whale to embody dorm-room homesickness or post-breakup ennui. We offer animals and mountains as ritual sacrifices at the altar of metaphor. *Is he lonely? I hate to attach human emotions like that. I don’t even want to touch that topic.*



eleven

Shorna, a 22-year-old in Kent, England, told me she relates to 52 Blue because she's always felt "on a different wave length to other people ... like I don't fit no where." The feeling grew particularly acute after her brother was killed when she was 13: "I felt I couldn't talk to no one. That no one understood or cared enough."

Years later, learning about 52 gave her a way to understand the isolation of that time—a sense that her grief was nothing anyone else could understand. Her family didn't want to talk about it; no one at school understood. Therapists were telling her what she should feel. The whale never told her what to feel; it just gave a shape to what she'd already felt: "I felt withdrawn and it made it worse along with the pain of his death." She felt she couldn't connect with anyone.

Sakina, a 28-year-old medical actor living in Michigan, associates 52 with a different kind of loss—a more spiritual struggle. I first saw her in a YouTube video, wearing a hijab, describing how the story of 52 immediately made her think of the prophet Yunus, who was swallowed by a whale. “It makes sense that the loneliest whale feels lonely,” she says. “Because he had a prophet with him, inside of him, and now he doesn’t.”

I met Sakina in a coffee shop in downtown Ann Arbor, where she told me what happened after she read about the whale online: She started crying and needed to lie down. He evoked certain lonely periods of her childhood—she grew up Muslim in New Mexico—and reminded her of the first time she’d ever learned about the prophet Yunus in religious school, when she was six: “I was frustrated with my teacher for not recognizing that, you know, she can be straight with me and just say this is an allegory.” She said: “I found it hard to believe in miracles.”

She wondered if 52 Blue came back into her life to finish the lesson that had begun when she was a child. She was being told: *Take it literally. It’s more than metaphor.* She didn’t imagine 52 seeking love so much as purpose, wanting a prophet to swallow or a prophecy to fulfill. She found herself wondering: “Is he aching for the divinity again?”



There used to be a name for the kind of people who tell tall tales about animals: *nature fakers*. The phrase emerged from a turn-of-the-century debate between a coterie of nature writers and the naturalists who hated their sentimental tales of animal communities, a genre they dubbed “yellow journalism of the woods.”

“I know as President I ought not do this,” wrote Teddy Roosevelt, but he went on to do it anyway: offered a scathing public condemnation of these nature fakers for their syrupy accounts of the natural world—tales of wild fowl setting their own legs in mud-made casts and crows convening schoolrooms for their young.

He is not a student of nature at all who sees not keenly but falsely, who writes interestingly and untruthfully, and whose imagination is used not to interpret facts but to invent them.

Roosevelt was especially concerned about what he called “fact-blindness”: the possibility that telling fake stories about nature might blind us to the true ones. This is the danger of nature faking, making the whale lonely or prophet-hungry, asking the duck to set a mud cast for his own broken leg—the possibility that feeling too much awe about the nature we’ve invented will make us unable to see the nature in which we actually live.

Roosevelt’s argument finds a strange modern echo in one of 52’s twitter accounts, @52Hurts, which actually imagines the whale protesting his own symbolic status: *I am no symbol, no metaphor. I am not the metaphysics you feel stirring in you, no stand-in for your obsessions. I am a whale.* Some of his tweets are just nonsense, as if protesting the projection of language in the first place: *Ivdhggv ahijhd ajhlkjhd* *jhljhh ajlj dljl 52 skjhdslkn* and then, a few hours later:

*Feeling too much awe
about the nature we've
invented will make us
unable to see the nature
in which we actually live.*

Tjhgaskj agjgd ahg jhs kjslsljhs. These are the tweets of a whale that *doesn't know why it's on Twitter*. Something about them feels weirdly honest: gibberish that’s more interested in what *isn't* legible than what we force into hollow legibility, more interested in acknowledging the gap than in voicing the projections we hurl across it.

thirteen

I first found David, an Irish father of two, through a YouTube video he’d made of himself singing a song he’d written: *I’ve followed sorrow like Whale 52 Hertz—it doesn’t have to be this way*. When I reached out by email, he told me he’d written the song after losing his job at Waterford Crystal, where he’d been working for more than 20 years. But he’d identified with the whale even earlier —“another being similarly living in parallel”—even when his life appeared to have all the external

trappings of belonging: marriage, family, stable job. David insisted he'd always felt alone. It was his wife who first told him about 52, invoking the whale as his echo. "That's you, that is," she'd said.

After the layoff, David and his wife moved to Galway, and they began forging a new life. In a letter he wrote to me last year, during his first autumn there, he described himself at the cusp of change:

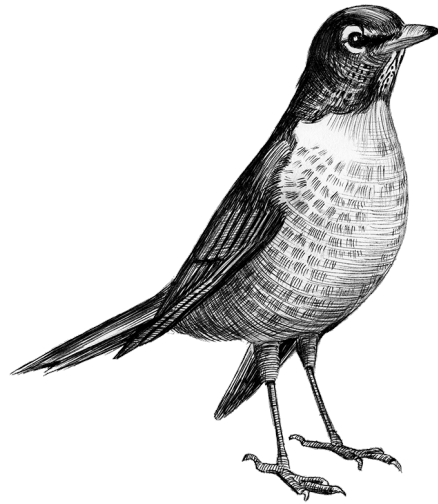
"I am told by everyone that Galway will be good for me and that I need to do something 'arty.' I'm starting tonight with a singing group. It's my first day at school again. And I'm 47." He felt the whale as inspiration and assurance in this sense of beginning again: "I have taken the discovery of the Whale as a signal from the depths that I am close to discovery... All I really know is that the 52 Hertz Whale is out there singing and that makes me feel less alone."

When I checked in with David in the spring, he said things in Galway had been a mixed bag. He'd found a job he loved—as head of IT for a farmers' cooperative in a little village called Tubbercurry—and was enjoying the new folks he met in Galway on the weekends. There was a sense of being in a new city full of unexpected kindred spirits. But the singing group, he wrote, had been "a bust. Lots of hugs from pig-tailed 60-somethings."

Struck by the fact that his wife had been the person to show him the story of 52 in the first place, I asked David if she'd always thought of him as an isolated person. "My wife does think I am someone who has always felt alone," he said. And in fact, just after he'd started his new job, he told me, his wife said she couldn't live with him anymore. "Our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary is in August," he wrote. "Communications have broken down. I am, to quote an old song, 'seething and bewildered like a din-deafened army.'"

But the whale still held something for him, despite the fact that things in Galway hadn't turned out as he'd planned. "I *do* still think that I am close to discovery," he said. "I still don't know what I am watching out for. When I hear 'Whale 52 Hertz,' I feel at peace. I know that I am still heading in generally the right direction. I often think of the whale. I know that she's still out there. I see others searching. Maybe, I won't be alone for much longer."

*" I see others searching.
Maybe I won't be alone much longer. "*



Fourteen

I found Leonora on the same Facebook page where I found Juliana and Zee. After I wrote to her, she responded immediately to welcome me into the “vast vibrational pool” of 52 devotees and then told me pieces of her own story over the phone. Before we met in person, she wanted to know more about what kind of story I was telling about this whale and how she might fit into it. But eventually she agreed to meet at Riverbank State Park, in upper Harlem, where she was working as a volunteer and taking art classes four days a week: beginner and intermediate at once.

We met one afternoon in early March, a day caught between winter and spring, wind still chilly off the Hudson. Leonora wore a purple wool cap, a sweater, and slacks. She moved carefully and deliberately and chose her words with the same care. Riverbank was clearly a special place for her. She said it was built on top of a sewage-treatment facility and seemed eager to tell me that—proud of how it had turned ugly necessity into possibility.

The park had also been an important part of her rehabilitation process: It was where she went once she had relearned how to walk after coming out of her coma. She called her sister on the phone after the first time she had successfully crossed “the big street,” which is what she called Broadway then—her language was still fumbling at that point, grasping at whatever it could hold. She felt embarrassed at the thought of having her home-care aide see her practicing how to walk, watching her stumble at every step. So she went to the park instead. The park never judged. It just let her practice.

Now that it was almost spring, Leonora told me she was proud of herself for not getting a cold all winter. She knew it was because of her vitamins—she’d been taking a “barrage” of them ever since she died. That’s how she described her illness and coma: a process of dying and coming back to life.

“My ticket back came with conditions,” she said. She had to learn to take care of herself—hence the vitamins, the art classes, and the desire to start growing her own vegetables this spring. She was hoping to get one of the small gardens that the park association was going to auction off before

summer. The plots were down by the running track, full of the residue of winter: shriveled stalks, leaves withered to a crisp, bent lattices that had once held tomatoes and would hold them again. Leonora said she wanted to plant peppers and parsley, a small crop perched above a sewage plant—a way of saying, *We do what we can with what we have*. She'd come back from her coma in pieces. She was still putting these pieces back together into a life.

A red-bellied robin hopped across one of the garden plots—just across the fence from us—and Leonora couldn't believe we were seeing it when it was still so cold. She told me we needed to wish on it. She told me about her three-day rule. When she asks the universe a question, she always gets an answer in three days—in a dream or a visitation: maybe an animal or something as simple as the smell of lavender. She is open to messages from everything, all the time, in languages that aren't even recognizable as languages at all.

We walked inside and settled at the snack bar—the last place in New York, Leonora assured me, where you could get coffee for a dollar. We sat by the ice rink, where some of the younger hockey players—the Squirts—were practicing. It was Leonora's home turf. The guys behind the counter knew her order before she ordered it. The guy riding by in a motorized wheelchair said hello. The guy lurking by the register wanted her to sign a petition for a candidate for parks superintendent.

At our table, Leonora pulled out a large notebook to show me some of her pen and pencil sketches of 52 Blue. She'd also painted him in acrylic on a scrap of canvas. These were the materials she was using in her current art class, but she'd been drawing him for years already. "He obsesses me," she explained. "I was trying to get a sense of what he looks like."

Her early drawings were "muddled," she told me. So she started looking at photographs of other whales to get a better sense of him. "But I still wasn't finding *him*. He's so elusive." She kept sketching him anyway. I saw his colored-pencil body curving under lists of relevant websites she'd gathered. She told me she was working on a painting of 52 for her class's final exhibition, to be displayed in one of the recreation-center hallways.

As we spoke, it became increasingly clear that Leonora's sense of connection to 52—from that first online encounter onward—had always been twofold. It was about communication, and it was about autonomy. He represented the struggle to be heard and also the ability to live alone. He represented her difficulties in recovery—the failed attempts to speak—but also the independence that these difficulties had taken away. Others saw the whale as heartbroken, because he couldn't find a companion; she saw him as a creature that didn't need one. She cherished the capacity to live alone, and this capacity was precisely what her illness had imperiled.

Apropos of very little, she told me suddenly: “I haven’t been in a relationship since the last century. I haven’t been on a date.” She said it bothered other people in her life. “I’ve had cousins, people, family members, friends, try to hook me up with somebody. It’s like a woman is not a whole person until she has a man.” But it didn’t bother her. “I’ve never felt lonely. There is not this lonely factor. I am *alone*. But I am not lonely, OK? I go over to a friend’s, I buy cases of wine, I have people over, I cook. I’m a very good cook.” It bothered her that people conflated 52’s aloneness with loneliness. It bothered her that people conflated *her* aloneness with loneliness.

It was hard not to feel a hint of *doth protest too much* in her distinction, but it also felt like a sincere call for a certain kind of legitimate humility: *Don’t assume*. Don’t assume the contours of another person’s heart. Don’t assume its desires. Don’t assume that being alone means being lonely. The scientists would say of 52, of course: Don’t assume the whale is either one.



Leonora on solitude and self-worth.

The first time Leonora ever listened to 52’s song, she told me, she felt skeptical of the clip available online. It was short and had been sped up for audibility. She felt sure 52 had “more to say.” But she kept listening. “I think I played it back at least 50 times, just trying to get a sense of it.” And the listening did something: “As I listened to it over and over, it helped me meditate into him. That was a key.”

She told me she believes we could locate 52 this way. “If you want to really find him,” she said, “all you need is five people, ten people, to concentrate hard enough, and to send that request out.”

She once traveled with 52 in a dream. He was in a pod of whales, no longer alone, and she was swimming with them, maybe carried in their wake—moving just as quickly, her head huge, her body sleek and hairless. Her coma recovery was full of dreams about water. She’d felt a particular connection to water ever since falling over the side of a waterfall at the edge of 17—when a voice inside her told her to hold her breath, assured her that she wouldn’t die. In her recovery dreams she swam everywhere: “In the ocean, in the river. I didn’t do any lakes or ponds—no stagnant, no still.” She was always in motion, but sometimes restrained: “It was always me struggling against all obstacles to get to water. Even when I was in there, sometimes it was crowded with people. People

were stopping me from getting to the water.”

The dream with 52 was different. She could feel the different layers of water—different temperatures, different pressure levels:

We were traveling at speeds that were, I don’t know, maybe 100 miles per hour? You don’t even see anything when you’re traveling that fast. What you see—it’s not that you see it, you just feel it there. I don’t know—you just throw something out, and then something comes back, so you know there’s something there. You could feel it all over your body. When I woke up, I was moved by it, all I could do was just lay there and think: *What was that? What was that?*

She couldn’t make sense of it. She kept drawing him anyway. She kept drawing him *because*. Never reaching water kept the journeys alive. Not seeing the whale kept him infinite. His elusive form echoed her insistence on motion: *no stagnant, no still*. She told me that she hopes that they never find him—whoever *they* might be. “I hope they don’t,” she said. “I pray they don’t. I like to believe that I’ll see him in my dreams.”





Hast thou seen the white whale? The hunt for an elusive whale is—of course—the most famous narrative in the history of American literature. The whiteness of Moby Dick is “a dumb blankness, full of meaning,” full of many meanings: divinity or its absence, primal power or its refusal, the possibility of revenge or the possibility of annihilation. “Of all these things the Albino whale was the symbol,” Ishmael explains. “Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt?”

No one has ever conducted a physical search for 52 Blue. An entrepreneur named Dietmar Petutschnig is currently prowling the South Pacific in a small sailboat, but his hunt for the whale seems more metaphorical, a kind of personal branding. Dietmar calls himself skipper and whalefinder and is joined by a co-captain and a chef, along with a little spaniel named Vienna Linz who is billed as security, angler, and crew morale officer. When I spoke to him on the phone while his boat was docked in Vanuatu, Dietmar was reluctant to do an interview but wanted to offer me a job working for him as a freelance editor. “We are still in the middle of our discovery,” he’d written earlier. “We do hope the whale will go out of fashion.”

If anyone actually finds 52, it will probably be Josh Zeman, a filmmaker currently working on a documentary called *52: The Search for the Loneliest Whale in the World*. Zeman had been hoping to conduct his actual search this fall, planning to take a research vessel into the Pacific for 50 days, but his funding fell through two weeks after it was announced by his producer, actor Adrian Grenier, at the Cannes Film Festival in May.

Zeman first heard the story of 52 at an artist’s colony in the summer of 2012, and it struck him immediately. He was in the aftermath of a breakup. He’s been working on the project ever since; he described his relationship to the movie as “Ahabian.” But figuring out how to make the trip work “is fucking complicated,” he told me. The plan was to have a research vessel staffed with five scientists and three crew, using sonar and old migration routes to locate 52. Joe George told Zeman his search

was like looking for a needle in a haystack. Daher used the same phrase. The search would “take a lot of coordination,” she told him. The data was more than a decade old. But she encouraged him all the same.

I asked Zeman what he made of folks who didn’t want the whale found at all—who preferred it mysterious, elusive, unknown. He said he felt like this resistance to finding 52 was actually a way of speaking *for* him—obstructing the possibility of interspecies communication, making him more precious. Zeman doesn’t want to follow the whale, he explained, or find him a mate. He just wants to make contact: “Do we want to help him? No. Do we want to say hi? Sure.”

One of the themes of Zeman’s film is modern loneliness, that people are particularly responsive to the story of 52 in the digital era—when the Internet promises connectivity but can actually deliver us even deeper into isolation. Ironically enough, the film’s Facebook page has become an effective epicenter for the 52 Hertz community: It’s where people post their responses to the story of the whale, register their sympathy, report their desires. “This story touched me so deeply,” wrote a woman named Pamela. “I wish we could all help and play whale songs for him.” She wanted to know why “we can build laptops and smart phones but we cannot figure out a way to get this whale some companionship?”

Some posts struck a different chord. Catherine was actually a little sick of all the “mawkish sadness” at this “anthropomorphized meme,” and wasn’t afraid to say so, though another user responded immediately to her post. “52 Hertz isn’t a myth or a meme,” she shot back. “He’s real, and I think we’re all damn curious about him.”

Most of the posts converge on two themes: helping 52 and feeling bad for 52. A woman named Denise posted one message—“find 52 hertz”—over and over and over again one morning: at 8:09, 8:11, 8:14, 8:14 (a second time), and 8:16. A woman named Jen wrote, only once: “Just want to give it a hug.”

•
sixteen

It was late spring the second time I visited Leonora up at Riverbank Park. The air was full of promise and possibility, balmy without making you feel trapped under the armpit of an entire city. Leonora told me she didn't get a garden plot after all. Her allergies had gotten so bad she didn't even bother entering the lottery; she wouldn't have been able to use the plot anyway. She told me she thinks about me whenever she sees a robin. I told her that two weeks after we saw that robin I'd met the man I wanted to spend my life with. It wasn't three days, but still. It was something. We headed straight to the community snack bar, got our dollar coffees, and sat in the corner, in the shadow of a wall of lockers.

During our conversation that day, I started to understand better that Leonora's connection to 52 wasn't just a product of recovering from a particular medical trauma, struggling for language or self-sufficiency, but an accumulation of feelings from decades earlier—her youth, her childhood. Even when we weren't talking about the whale, we were talking about the whale. It was under everything. Her whole life suggested what he might mean to her.

*The whale had
become the mascot
and fuel of her
own reinvention.*

She thought of her medical crisis in similar terms: as an accumulation, the intestinal blockage as an

accretion of traumas from all across her life, experiences she endured but never let herself cry or talk about. They cluttered her insides and finally made her ill.

The whale offered another kind of gathering: a vessel in which a lifetime's worth of longings might reside. Even while I struggled to make sense of Leonora's fixation on signs and voices, her desire to find the patterns woven through her life felt deeply intuitive—the search for a logic that might structure everything.

At the snack bar, she shared a new angle of resonance with 52: the possibility of extinction. The whale might be the last of his kind, she told me—that was part of how she understood him—and in a way, she will be the last of hers: She doesn't have any kids. She said she hated how people think of this as a kind of insufficiency—an absence. She thought of her artwork as the closest thing she had to progeny.



Leonora on extinction.

After the snack bar filled up with a flock of boys, we moved someplace quieter, a long hallway with cinderblock walls where the art would be displayed for her class's final exhibition. In the quiet of that hallway, she told me about the darker years that followed her coma recovery. She was questioning her own purpose: What did her life mean? She wasn't working. She started living on disability and workman's comp.

I was aware that any cynic could have a field day with her brand of New Age mysticism, but the more I heard about her life, everything that led up to her encounter with the story of 52 Blue, the more I started to respect the incredible gravity of what she'd built him up to be—and what she'd rebuilt *herself* to be, under the sign of his story. He had become the mascot and fuel of her own reinvention.

I remembered all the ways she had described her coma and its aftermath—"resurrection," "rebirth," "second birth"—and couldn't help thinking it was no accident that she used these words, that we kept coming back to the subject of babies, having them or not having them, that "birth" was such a big part of how she thought about all this. *I bled for years*. And at the end of all that blood, when she

came back from death, she gave birth to herself.

seventeen

“I just don’t know what it is, the fascination with this whale,” Joe George told me, sitting at his dining room table. “To me it’s just science.”

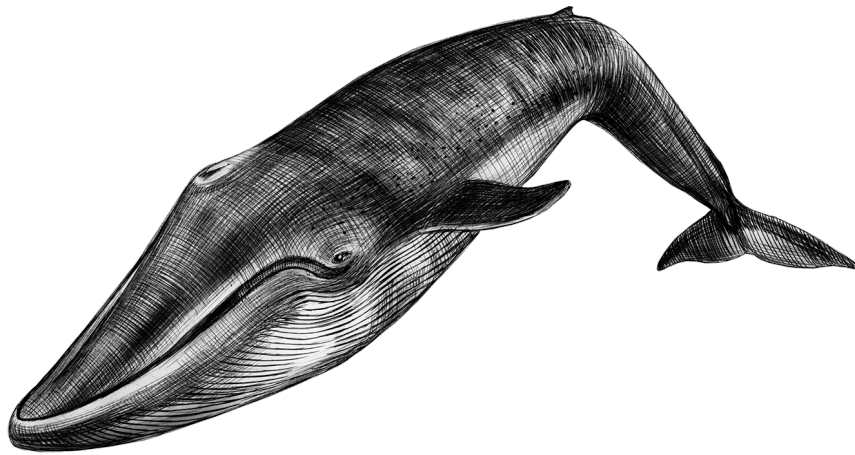
Which made it even more charming, the tray of cookies that sat between us—all shaped like whales, with frosted tails, various pastel shades of green and pink and periwinkle, and “52” written in matching shades of icing. Joe’s daughter had made them for us. He was pleased to offer them but also seemed a bit sheepish; they were complicit in the whimsy of a phenomenon he couldn’t quite wrap his mind around.

It felt odd, he told me, to have funding for the whale tracking cut so suddenly and unequivocally—to feel like no one cared about what they were doing—and then to see his whale resurface so many years later in such a strange, refracted form. Suddenly *everyone* cared, but for reasons that didn’t really make sense to Joe—a man more worried about doing a job right than mining it for metaphor. *To me it’s just science.* And it wasn’t just science—it was *great* science. The singular signal made the whale a godsend.

Joe told me that at a certain point, the whale called 52 Hertz stopped coming in at 52 hertz. The last time they tracked him, his call was more like 49.6 hertz. It could have been age—a kind of delayed puberty—or else a function of size, his growing form pulling his vocalizations down into lower frequencies.

There’s something nice in the idea that an elusive animal might stop flashing its old calling card—that the physical creature wouldn’t even match the statistics of its own mythology. We have tuned our hearts to a signal that no longer exists. Which means there is no way to find what we’ve been looking for, only—perhaps—to find what that thing has become.

"
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the fascination with this whale.
To me, it's just science."



eighteen

I went back to Riverbank for the art show. It was early summer, a day of celebration: art hanging on the cinderblock walls, dance and music classes performing in the gym. Leonora was taking photos, wearing lavender pants and a pink scrunchie, rolling around the shopping cart in which she'd carried all her paintings. The beginning keyboard class played "When the Saints Go Marching In" under giant beige industrial fans.

Leonora took me to the hallway, where at last I got to see her vision of 52: a whale painted in flat acrylics, flying over a rainbow, over an ocean. The decoupage figure of a woman was riding him—or flying with him—and Leonora said it was a photograph of herself, taken years ago, though she obscured the face so it wouldn't just be *her*. The woman's head was ducked low in the painting, down to the whale, as if she were listening to something he was saying. "Someone asked me, 'Is the whale kissing you?'" Leonora told me. "And I said, 'Maybe he is.'"

A park employee walked by—a young Latina woman wearing the green shirt of park staff—and Leonora explained to her, without apology or introduction: "This is 52 Hertz. Just how I imagined him." As if everyone would know the whale, or should—as if the project of imagining his distant body should be familiar to us all.

Leonora didn't seem perturbed by how much the whale meant—all those vectors, some of them contradictory. "He's everything and anything," she told me. "Anything you want him to be. He's the dream you could never attain. He's the million-dollar lottery. He's Shangri-la. He's all these things that you aspire to. He's God, even. How do you know that he wasn't sent here to heal us, and his song is a healing song?"

Sometimes we need to be heard so badly we hear ourselves in every song the world sings, every single noise it makes: *I will start screaming now and I will not stop*. Maybe desire and demand are just the same song played at different frequencies. Maybe every song is a healing song if we hear it in the right mood—on the heels of the right seven weeks, or the worst ones, the ones lost to

us forever.

On our way out, Leonora carefully wrapped the whale in paper and packed him into her shopping cart. When we parted ways at the park bus stop, she handed me a FedEx envelope, cut and folded and taped to make a small flat package. Just a little something, she said. I pulled out a small painting of a robin—red breast, tiny claws, a single beady eye. It was the robin we'd seen together, the one she'd taken as an omen and came to believe was my totem. She said the red on his breast meant: *activation*.

I thought: *This return ticket came with conditions*. I thought of the man I'd met after I saw that robin, the man I knew I wanted to marry. I felt the contagion of magical thinking: Life becomes a series of omens. I wanted them to imply the presence of some organizing spirit, or at least compose a story.

"*Vaya con Dios*," Leonora told me. "You should have a baby someday."



nineteen

“The material is degraded before the spiritual,” Emerson wrote. He thought we’d “transferred nature into the mind, and left matter like an outcast corpse.” *He’s everything and anything. Anything you want him to be.*

The actual body of 52 Blue has become the outcast corpse, the matter left over once our machinations are done. There is some violence in this alchemy, and also some beauty. Emerson understood both sides of that dilemma:

“Every spirit builds itself a house, and beyond its house a world; and beyond its world, a heaven. Know then, that the world exists for you. For you is the phenomenon perfect. What we are, that only can we see.”

52 Blue suggests not just one single whale as metaphor for loneliness, but metaphor *itself* as salve for loneliness. Metaphor always connects two disparate points; it suggests that no pathos exists in isolation, no plight exists apart from the plights of others. Many fans of 52 were lonely even before their lives gave this loneliness a reason: David was lonely in his stable marriage; Zee was lonely before his breakup and after it. Loneliness seeks out metaphors not just for definition but for the companionship of resonance, the promise of kinship in comparison. Now there’s an entire coterie gathered around this kinship—people trained to the same pulse of a minivan-sized heart.

You might say it’s a community formed around an empty center. When we pour our sympathy onto 52 Blue, we aren’t feeling for a whale; we’re only feeling for what we’ve built in his likeness. But that feeling still exists. It still matters. It mattered enough to help a woman come back from seven weeks at the edge of death.

At one point during our conversation on Whidbey Island, I mentioned Leonora to Joe George. At first I wasn’t even sure he’d heard me, but near the end of our visit, he turned to me and said. “That woman you mentioned, the one who was in the coma.” He paused. I nodded. “That’s really something,” he said.

Joe was right when he said that the whale is just a whale. And so was Leonora when she said the whale is everything. Happiness is a kind of truth. Feeling is a kind of fact. What if we grant the whale his whale-ness, grant him furlough from our metaphoric employ, but still grant the contours of his second self—the one we’ve made—and admit what he’s done for us? *That’s really something.* If we let the whale cleave in two—into his actual form and the apparition of what we needed him to become—then we let these twins swim apart. We free each figure from the other’s shadow. We watch them cut two paths across the sea.