

POETRY

Save the Whale Ball

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Is the Whale Ball worth saving? That is the real question.
What is to be said for and against it? Let us recall
the history and origin of the Whale Ball.
Old people - very old people - will perhaps remember
the Decade of Demise, when whale sightings thinned out
year by year, and the end could not be delayed.
Even whales pampered in oceanariums by every art
drooped and refused to mate. It was as if
some once promising species had beached
on a shelf of evolution they were not made to master.
So all that time their skeletons were gathered and stored,
in hundreds and in tens, and the last few. The world
agreed about them dead if not alive, no
whaling nation refused to subscribe to the monument.
Two generations of schoolchildren have yawned through
official films of the building of the Whale Ball,
but I have heard old men with sticks and bright eyes,
in sheltered housing and hospice, or sitting by the shore
thrill to the memory of that idealism
and that propitiation, that overplus of patience and skill,
that overkill, that gigantic hyperborean scrimshaw
perched on a scarp at Angmagssalik.
How many dozen trainloads of whalebone were compacted
and fused into a spherical mass where the World
Trade Center and the Sydney Opera House could be inserted
like mites in a cheese, and how many craftsmen and sculptors
fretted the sphere into a thousand ancient scenes

of hunt and storm, with frozen seas and drowning men,
and flukes that smacked the arctic air, again, in bone, in vain,
in galleries of unfalling spray, and how that ball
as if some Chinese ivory ball had taken root and grown
rose white and huge into the mists of Greenland
and in a ceremony was declared fit and whole,
the records tell. Better than any barrow
of Beowulf or Breca, it broods like a boulder
from the beginning of time, and those who have heard
blizzards whistle their music through it
have come back half crazed with wonder.
But the Whale Ball is crumbling; it is too far north;
its cracks are widening, and its carved kayaks
have joined real kayaks in the sound. Some say
all megalomania has its reward: the dinosaurs,
the whales, the Whale Ball. Some would like nature
to regain the scattered bones, and in its ruthless welter
slowly rub off all signs of man, and roll
those rounded fragments in the deep-wounded currents
where who knows what might not be made of the dead.
Some would re-cast it in stainless steel; others
would pulverize it for talismans.
Some say we should have saved whales instead.

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