
ROBERTA KWOK

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In 1975, Bill Curtsinger took the first underwater photographs of the narwhal, a whale species called the unicorn of the sea because the males have a long, slender tusk. These rarely seen animals live in the deep waters of the High Arctic. About a decade after Curtsinger's expedition, a girl named Kristin Laidre saw one of the photographs in a library book.

HE IS TWENTY YEARS OLD when the letter arrives. A college student in Arizona. He has come west from the edge of the Pine Barrens in New Jersey, a sprawling forest of cranberries and tiger beetles and lady's slipper orchids, where he swam in a lake that seemed as wide as an ocean.

He knows how to use a gun, has shot deer and ducks. But Vietnam is no place for him. He joins the Navy, then talks his way into a photography unit. They send him to an underwater testing site off the Bahamas—the Tongue of the Ocean—where he dangles submerged above an abyss of water, the bottom thousands of feet away and invisible, snapping pictures of submarines as they glide by and poking whitetip sharks with a stick. He flies in a jet that takes off from an aircraft carrier near Puerto Rico. He volunteers to serve in Antarctica, where the sun does not set for the next four months, and watches for seals in a steel observation chamber below the ice.

Years later, he travels to the other end of the world and camps on a rocky beach in the Arctic. The hills are bare. He swims into the bay with his camera, and the green gloom is nothing but emptiness until the narwhal appears before him, as if someone has clicked Next on a slide projector. The tusk is not white as he expected, but black. There are more—chattering and cooing at him, pale flesh speckled like stones overgrown with dark moss. He is not afraid. He has thirty-six shots and he uses them all.

The word *narwhal* may have originated from the Old Norse words *nár* and *hvalr*, meaning “corpse whale.” Sailors saw the flesh of a drowned man. But the horns became the stuff of scepters, the cups of kings. Its full name is *Monodon monoceros*: one tooth, one horn.

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She knows the names of all the whales. She is perhaps ten years old, and her bedroom is covered with posters of them. It is the mid-1980s in upstate New York. When she goes to the library, past the card catalog to the very bottom shelf in the back, there it is—a giant sea-green book. She slides into an underwater world and sees the outstretched fins of a humpback, the dark, dripping curtain of a fluke. On one page is a mother narwhal with her calf, a mottled mermaid tail caught as they are turning away from the camera.

She lives in a town of dancers and opera singers. Things change. She becomes a ballerina, moves across the country after high school to join a company. Every day her body repeats the same movements in the same order. She plays a flower, a snowflake, a monster with the head of a fish.

Then her ankle is injured and nothing feels right, not even walking to the grocery store. Three surgeries and she accepts that it is over. She returns to the whales and flies one summer with other scientists to Ottawa and then to Resolute Bay and from there in a tiny bush plane to an island in the Canadian Arctic. They set their nets in the bay and wait. When a narwhal is caught, they jump into their boats and pin an electronic device to a ridge on the animal's back, the skin firm and cold.

She keeps going back. Hunters save the stomachs of dead narwhals for her and she cuts them open: slimy, reeking pink balloons. Beaks, bones, rocks. Out on the ice, her team drills a hole and lowers instruments into the water. Now she can hear their squeaks and grunts and buzzing and whistles. They are miles from anything, and she knows it is them.

The narwhal leaves the island and swims through a strait into Lancaster Sound and then into Baffin Bay, ahead of the creeping sea ice. It dives for halibut and squid. Every time it surfaces, the device on its back transmits signals to a satellite in outer space, an aluminum vessel sailing far above Earth.

He keeps taking photographs. An ancient shipwreck in the Aegean Sea, a worn sword, a ceramic cup fashioned after a ram's head. The folded billows of a jellyfish, elegant as an evening gown.

She flies high over the frozen ocean for what feels like forever and sees nothing but ice and cracks of black water. Then a shiny bead appears far below—it is coming up to breathe. "One narwhal," she says into the recorder, and waits for the next one.