

鍾偉民：捕鯨人

The Whale Hunter

By Zhong Weimin

Translated by John and Esther Dent-Young

1.

The sun has not yet risen
my boat weighs anchor in the night
I've taken on a good supply of bait—
stars like silver fish-scales, piled on the gunwale
on the long, long curve of the beach
soft king-crab shells reflect the moonlight
the black waves wipe them out—a crowd of king-crabs,
some hermit-crabs, a few rock-oysters—
the enormous crescent moon's reflection
still a long curve of silvery white
the king-crab's six pairs of feet
have left no print
at the cold void centre of the night
I heave my great iron anchor up
I want to sail my boat far out
away from the coral-insect's shadowy tomb
even when waves assault the sky
what I hate is the rotten seaweed that fouls my hull in the shallows
and besides this the fisherman's real nightmare—
that his boat will suddenly turn to a painted one
stopped forever on a painted sea
of course no fisherman will fear the sea's breathing
fear his own breathing
still less will he allow his boat to become no more than
the day-land memory of a drunken sailor
recalling mouldy caviare
or smelly cheese

Zhong Weimin came to Hong Kong from Macau when he was ten years old, and in his late teens won three poetry prizes for Hong Kong youths. He is now recognized as one of Hong Kong's most promising young poets. "The Whale Hunter" was the poetry section winner in the "Seventh Hong Kong Youths Literary Awards".

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I want to sail my boat far out
with a moon hung on the mast-head
I hoist my blood-stained sail on high
and sun-dried fish-scales
spin earthward flashing one by one
I raise my head briskly and the mast-head moon
is perfect still and floats there lightly
I want to sail my boat far out
to the far reaches, even by night
the sea's wide wastes glimmer whitely
seaweed the colour of palace tiles—how many generations
has sea water flowed over whales' backs
like wind slipping by the tall mast?
on this rimless watery bed
we've mounted our watch, the whale and I
each is prepared to kill
yet we are the best of friends
twin brothers one might almost say
the whale trusts me
just like I trust the whale
while the dry land both for the whale
and for the whale-hunter
is a never-ending tragic song

2.

Although the sun's not risen yet
there's a gleam of light
the sea begins to breathe more heavily
the waking ocean spreads its arms
my little boat rocks on in its embrace
pitched in the mouth of a pale green yawn
I see the purple jellyfish's ambush in the waves
a school of sharks cutting the sea's surface
heralds the monsoon's rough approach
but I am a good helmsman
I am a fisherman
I want to sail my boat far out
the true fisherman will never be content
with shore-hugging puffers and tiny squid
the little boat is buffeted more roughly
the wind blows harder, the clouds pile up
I hear the waves as they slap the bows
the sticky wind smelling of salt

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blows through my coarse clothes, my sunbleached hair
my sail is about to split
thicker and thicker, black clouds wrap the boat
the wave's great hand reaches almost inside
I hear the waves whipping the gunwales

but in order to sail far out one bears all this
I slacken the sodden main sheet
to lower the sail, and let the towering mast
cut open the monsoon's breast
the dark green sea more and more churned to white
the mast-head swinging wildly
like a great fish-spear
the dark green sea whiter and whiter churning
whirling the little boat
whirling it in the white sea's seething hollows
but faintly I hear how the whale
is cheering me on
only the water of the sea's too white
whale! I will use your blood
to dye the white sea red

3.

The sun's about to rise
the storm has doused my mast-head light
and scattered my silver bait
the fish-spear's swinging now subsides
the white sea's frothing plain breaks out new green
my hair and clothes sticking to body and neck
the sail's in tatters, but I've more experience now
I raise the tattered, sodden sail again
and point my boat to the sunrise
the dark clouds dispersing before my eyes
open in the sky's centre an arch
with a clatter the sun's great brow breaks the surface
and a thousand million gilt iron horses
burst through the arch in a shattering charge
fire-darts whistle hissing past
the wind is scorching, the waves melt
my boat's on fire, my hair too
my gold-plated fisherman's sail
flaps overhead like a jangling bell
and the flaming eyes of the sail's whale ikon
shake as they stare at the flapping rim of the sea

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the fire-darts fly thicker and thicker
this hissing, whistling exhalation
burns both the whale-eyes on the sail and mine
our eyes are brimming with golden war thoughts
as we gaze towards the sun
gradually the sun breaks through
only the tall mast to ward off fire-darts
the sea blazes and burns
the ship's bow cleaves the fiery sounds
with my hand I ladle some liquid fire and drink
a golden fullness warms my veins
like wind playing in the halyards
I sense the marvellous reek of whale's blood
now gradually the sun climbs higher
a golden wind is blowing
flying fish with shimmering golden scales
in schools leap past the gunwales
a grey whale blows a sheaf of tiny rainbows
his mighty breath answers the boat ripping the waves
but this little fish is no true whale
as the whale and I both know
below the blood-red compass in the bow
a gold canal is laid
the whale awaits me behind the sun
red between rainbows the sun is rising
leaving the sea's flapping rim
above the gunwale big turtles raise their heads
to stare blankly at the sun
a thousand miles out among rainbows
slowly rising, slowly rising . . .

4.

the sun has climbed through half the sky
on the water creatures' boundless sombre prairie
the little boat is a vagrant goshawk
skimming an aerial blue plain. I imagine
a lone kite trailing a long white tail
a sky turned suddenly crystal blue
wind soft as a young sailor's palm
cloud-curls play about the mast-head
like a thousand seagulls
cloud debris gracefully drops on the bow
like young girls got up in white skirts

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picking clams at the sea's edge
the gentle breeze still blowing
enough to make you forget all—
the air grows quiet
I sit by the salt-caked mast and smoke
and stroke the slightly worn wood of the rail
in youth the sailors
would beat this rail and dance
I inhale now deeply
I don't care that the hoar-white brine crawls down my yellowed hair
I look at the scars on my legs and arms
in a sudden frenzy I spout wild words
remembering I am a fisherman
remembering my whale
I proudly raise my head to the sky and laugh
I walk to the bow
letting the air flow over my temples
as the sea slides over the whale's back
the air grows quieter and quieter
a sign that the final fight is near
though neither the whale nor I've
a means to know in advance who'll win
though shark's meat is anything but sweet
we've patience to endure
our fight will be more heroic than the sun's rising
I will use whale's blood
to daub a lasting sunrise
the air is even quieter now
we gaze ahead, the whale ikon and I
amid the bottomless, boundless gloomy blue
all that's heard is the whale-hunter's song
far off, far off, the whale's
and the whale-hunter's song

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Illustration taken from Zhong Weimin: *The Whaling Journey* (Hong Kong: New Harvest Press, 1983).

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HONG KONG
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VIEW OF THE QUEEN'S ROAD LOOKING OUT FROM THE CANTON BAZAAR,
20TH AUGUST, 1846
Lithograph by A. Maclure after a design by M. Bruce, architect