

DECEPTION ISLAND
A poem for voices

FOREWORD

Who am I
Speaking in the dark?

George A Whitfield 1951-1953
Recollections
An Overseas Whaling Experience

G.Stock
May 19th-Sept 12th 1949
Hot Springs Observations, Deception Island

sprinkling stirring seasoning

Donald Hawkes 1961
The Geology of South Shetland Islands

sounds and syllables

D.J. George
April 22nd and 23rd 1953
Report on the Earth Tremor Experienced at Whaler's Bay

the sulphur of sentences

Edwin James Mickleburgh
Island at the Edge of the World

hot breath

Smith
G51/1/1.1

A.G. Lewis 1967
A School Introduction to Antarctica

British Antarctic Survey
The Archive

mine
a gift of words

Location:
The Antarctic Ocean

Nelson's Bellows

A bird beats into view.
It is a cormorant,
a wandering spirit.

*See how I mould the air with my wings
mixing time in my slipstream*

Basalt speaks - Of Earth's molten core, and rising heat, and rock
That melting bursts its bounds and hurtles up;
Of lava flow to stilling stone; /of augite

The Ocean replies - Watch me
split
your crystal structures
into
salted
syllables
and
force
my many tongues
to spittle
down
your fissured / side

There is a ship.
Hooded against the weather,
a man appears on deck,
listening.

a trespasser,

orchestrating voices.

He is a scientist,
travelling to the Antarctic

A young whale sings - When the call goes up, mother,
and the hunter's fixed on me,
when the harpoon cuts the water
with precise ferocity,

will you sing me home, mother,
deep into the sea?

The voice of a whaler - Sperm whale. 32 ft. Female.
First to Harper.

The whale continues

- And when my flesh is pierced, hunter,
and the barbs have opened out,
when my blood comes pulsing red
instead of water from my spout,

will you sing me home, hunter,
will you sing me free?

And when my lungs are pumped with air,
and my tongue hangs lolling out,
will you kill the shark, hunter,
that circles round about?

Or will you plant a numbered flag
into my glistening hide,
and let the shark consume my tongue,
whilst birds peck at my side?

O, trim my tail, and mark the fluke,
and tow me through the sea;
a carcass on the flensing plan
is all that I will be.

Hump back
breaches the waves;
sky shine on whaleskin.

The whaler is joined
by another

- There's a ramp called a skidway
runs through the centre of the ship
right up from sea level onto deck.
You can dissect the whales on board.

A tearing of metal,
as the grab is lowered
the whale hoisted.

- Flensers cut flesh
for insertion into kettles.

- The deck is a trap, a criss-cross of wires;
two steam driven saws
cut and drip and smoke.

- O, whaler, when you mount my back
and stand upon my head
and when you cut me open
believing I am dead,

- Boiler mouths gape and swallow.
Blubber and meat is steamed for oil.

- Will you feel some pity then
and sing me back to sea?

Hissing, clanking, slamming;
a cacophony of voices.

- After opening up, heat rises
like vapour.

- We found a foetus,
15 ft in length, maybe smaller.
Threw it overboard,

A mountain has vanished.

- even though everything going in the pit
adds to the final bonus.

- You take your life into your own hands
when you go to the mess for food,
dodging and weaving past the steam jets.

- Decks are awash with blood
slippery with guts.

In the bay, steam is rising
like ghosts from cinder scree
and shore water.

- I work the Vaps -
800 tons of water a day required
at maximum cooking -
so you can heat sea water,
condense it,
make it fresh.

- Sometimes we have 10 or 12 whales
moored alongside ship.
Birds everywhere.
Gulls, I think,
making a commotion.

The spirit again,
in the guise of a sheathbill.

Paddies.

She addresses
the scientist.

You'll know them as they stomp

*on the roof above your head,
though you can't hear me.*

Steadier now on his feet,
the manlevers open
the metal casing
of the camera,

- Did I tell you about that penguin?
Came up the slipway, got covered in oil.
They can't swim with oil on their feathers.
Someone cleaned him up and he swam off
right round the ship and back again.
Silly bugger.

centres rusting oil containers,
chimneys without smoke,
in the grid.

- There's a whale gone off at the side,
A few nice stenchies lying around,
I can tell you.

The whalers have all gone.

*Bodies in swimsuits wallow
in the future, on a black beach
where*

Steam rises from the springs to form cumulus

Now men are waiting
to unload the ship.
From pallets and barrels,
they cobble pontoons.

New arrivals converse with
those who have wintered over.

- Our mail
- There's anthracite, and diesel fuel
- My sister's had a child
- A flat pack hut
- a nephew
- spare parts for the machine
- My family's moved
- and food/ in cans
- John's lost his job
- she's married
- bacon rations, beef suet / condensed milk

An elephant seal watches,
alert amongst the debris.
Skuas circle.

- We use the old whaling station/
- margarine, lump sugar
after the earth tremors
- Hartley's jam

A voice
from the Archive

a resonance activated
by a sweep of wings
across the air.

-Long light shudder/
which set lamps swinging.

We'll load the scow.

A cat squats
by the meltwater gully.
Snow has drifted over machinery
rusting in the Digestor Shed;
sunlight through a broken roof
fires iron oxide
red.

*I bring you memory
from the future,
two black dots
on snow slopes,*

Scoria speaks.

- I am
cinder vitric vesicular
crunching sussurating
at the sea's
edge

travellers from Pendulum Cove

- Buenos dias! Hello!

*Let me bear you with them now
across the layers of ash and ice*

lava flows and

bedded agglomerate

My
memory
is petrified flow;
liquid rock spilling over
solid rock cracking, skin suffering /

a shattering of bombs

- The island is composed
of igneous and pyroclastic rocks.

- Steaming lakes of yellow and green
in a background of red and brown.

my kitchen of boiling cauldrons

- is a witch's landscape.

*Can you feel the rush of my feathers
like air across your skin?*

*Come,
let me propel you across the snow
to Pendulum Cove,*

- wine, sheep from Tierra del Fuego....
to say nothing of running water.
Bloody wonderful!

*set you down
amongst gathered men*

- All through summer the sheep live outside.

in the warmth of a hut,

- In winter, they're brought indoors.

let you break the new bread,

- Each month a sheep is killed for food.

sip the sweet wine.

- Suspecting something perhaps,
one just walked off.

Listen

- There's nowhere on this island
a sheep can find its food
it all arrives from home.

- Two months later,
it returned,
- thin, dull-eyed, hungry.

*You do not say
whether that sheep was saved,
but now
you sound the glacier with your skis,*

The glacier speaks

light outstretched arms and tentative fingers spin in my memory to
a fall melting freezing closer draw stiffen in a hold fast grip
tightlipped I grow to glacier in time so slow that each particulate of
gathered grit and falling ash each syllable of snow each breath of
air split and fractured in its passage becomes leviathan.

remembering advice

- Only ever ski down a slope
which you have first walked up
- It is easier to see crevasses from below.

*and I, high winged, nocturnal,
scribe the sky
and you return to base.*

Two men squat by the meltwater
running past empty oil containers.
They are rinsing photographic prints:
ramalina terebrata
neuropogon antarcticus.

These are your kind –

*Biologists
 recording samples
Geologists
 mapping rocks
Glaciologists
 recording ice
Ionosphericists
 gathering data
Meteorologists
 charting weather
Seismologists
 listening to the earth –*

and I

The Digester Shed, fallen sideways,
spills its workings:
pipes, cogs
and, amongst wood
scattered like bones,
chains are heaped,
intestinal.

Once more the voices
of the whalers can be heard.

- 1,955 whales in total. 100 blue,
1,400 fin, sperm.
- After the violent activity of these past few months
the bareness and silence is everywhere.

A FIDS man is cutting up
seal meat for dogs;

mosses and lichens
colonise the underscree;
are dried and packaged
to survive the journey.

I will patter my feet on the sea's surface,

Joining them,
the song of the young whale.

- And when my bones lie bleached and bare
on black volcanic sands

Whale baleen,
like grasses combed
by floodwater, greening.

rise on the thermals, swooping

- will you stand before me, traveller,
and open up your hands?

In the cold air,
steam from the springs appears
suspended, wraithlike.

between sea and rock

- They call it the whaling sickness
One poor boy hanged himself.
Missed the Opal, going home.

- Open up your heart, traveller,
and call me by my name,
- Someone told him he'd to stay behind.

- your words will warm these waiting bones,
- Such a small body.

your words will sing me home.

Having delivered its cargo,
the ship is leaving.
The man stands on deck,
prepares his camera.

*change feathers
in a dazzle of air*

Basalt speaks

- Dribble sodium and chlorine as you will;
I give you olivine and feldspar;
Take magnetite and haematite
for sulphate /
and magnesium

The Ocean replies.

- oceanus
moana
valtameri

I

hwaelweg
the ocean
am

- Hard this rock against your breaking waves.

Pock marked
by the rain's whip,
the dark sea
curls back its lips.