

**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 19<sup>th</sup>-Sept 12<sup>th</sup> 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 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> 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 Digestor 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.