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Two Poems

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Cambridge Street and Quincy

“Puget Sound’s killer whales continue decline”:
the news this morning, nearly summer’s last,

can’t possibly be news. On the continent’s right
side I’m no more useless to the overgrown

penguins, and no less, than I would be at home, not far
from Orcas Island. Horcasitas, Viceroy of Mexico,

was the namesake, books say. But who cares? I hear
that old, cropped *nombre* and every time think

of cold-blooded whales, the harbour seals
they eat, and tottering ferries full of snappers

waiting for their moment. I recline
with the *Globe* and Geoffrey Hill, becoffeed,

benumbed. Near Vatnajökull, magma
simmers, cascades. The great eruption looms.

When we drown in ash, when the orcas throw
in the towel, then I’ll be impressed. At dinner I meet

someone whose friendly neighbour in childhood
was the Ant, Spilotro, Tough Tony. We chat mobsters,

murders, movies, how gambling in Nevada
isn’t what it used to be. Small talk, tall fish

tales. But the other week on the MV
Chelan — the Salish name is said to mean

“deep water” (good fortune for a boat: may
all channels be deep, all bays protected)

— I watched a single white-sided dolphin stake
everything on its arc into light, its splash

and vanishing. Two orca deaths this year.
No calves since 2012. What good is gazing?

In the Memorial Transept, 2500 miles
away, the rows of Union dead, cavalcades

of starched, upright, four-square monikers,
look across the suitably heavy air

to counterparts on the opposite wall,
and down at pods of craning tourists.

I stepped from the *Chelan's* ramp onto the dock,
back to our uncivil, unkind domain — not sleepy

Anacortes and its marine supply store, which I love,
but the dry thoroughfares, the chatter, the rush

that admit little of underwater life
or the parenthesis of the beaked, birdlike whale

that breaks from below. Come September,
come the new day, the sun, I'm sure, will

be out over Orcas. The dust in the vault's
humid murk is lit up against the stained glass.

The wooden door thumps a tentative yes.

Contra Naturam

Do not send poems involving birds, wings, feathers or flight.
— *Instructions for submitting poetry to a literary journal*

Have we lost all sense of how to behave when we fly?
— *Newspaper headline*

Turbulence. The airflow's agitation
persists but is not constant.
Mountains may be to blame,
or vertical currents of air, or jet

streams, or strong winds. The seat-
belt sign is illuminated
at the captain's discretion. Reduce speed.
Change altitude. Consult pilot reports

and hope for the best. The men in hats
do what they can up front. In 32F
you wait it out. It's not natural,
flying like this, but your Aeroplan

points multiply like idiomatic
rabbits. Wingless, otherwise marooned,
unfeathered, inept as the kakapo, you
surrender midair to conditions and providence,

time and design. On the ground it is
the same. Your venerable oxygen
processing machinery steams
from overuse. Ocular contraptions

wear out; perambulation gear
is fated for the Salvation Army.
It's a miracle you're here at all.
Sit back, relax, read the laminated

instructions for not dying. This chop
has lasted for hours, is old as the hills.
Consider the tranquil, unsullied
waxen bag. Ponder cooler creatures

somewhere between the brink of existence
and the threshold of extinction: the snoring
rail, a panda with a quiff, a reckless
cougar with a Kawasaki motorcycle,

the hexapus, the rare dodecapus,
bookish krill. On the ocean floor
phosphorescence turns spelunking fish
into reading lights. Your seat drops

a foot. A porpoise's poise charms no
suitors. The antelope's lope wins no
races. A turkey's key turns in no
lock. A parrot's rot spreads to no

fruit. Animal lessons, like the cockpit
and drinks cart, lie just out of reach.
In the extremely unlikely event
that you make it, thank the unassuming

birds, whose behaviour is beyond
reproach. Oh God. O gods! O
cormorants, skimmers, cranes, how
do you weather us, endure our mimicry?

NICHOLAS BRADLEY lives in Victoria, British Columbia.