



THE BLUE WHALE

Royal Ontario Museum

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“Loaves and Fishes is hardly ever open.
Why bother opening when there is nothing to sell?
The sea fisheries were defunct several years ago; the few fish they have
are now from fish farms, and taste muddy.
The news says the coastal areas are being “rested”.
Sole I remember, and haddock, swordfish,
scallops, tuna; lobsters stuffed and
baked salmon, pink and fat, grilled in steaks.
Could they all be extinct, like the whales?””

Blue Whale Exhibit

Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto Canada

'Sentient Beings'

We are hearing those words a lot these days as we awaken to the situation regarding all life on the planet. Carlos Castaneda, an anthropologist turned shaman, penned that the earth itself was a sentient being and why not?

Is our planet not a living entity alive with power, that molten core, a magnetic field, electricity in our atmosphere, cool forests, steamy jungles, smooth lakes, snowy mountains, raging rivers, the vast oceans?

What better creature to enlighten us today that the largest sentient being on the planet, the blue whale (*Balaenoptera musculus*)

Recently in Toronto, I stepped into the Royal Ontario Museum's new exhibit- 'OUT OF THE DEPTHS: The Blue Whale Story' which opened officially just in time for March Break. No one puts on a show like a zoological display by the ROM.

The terrible lizards are still there, all our childhood favourites, the names we continue to recite with confidence: Tyrannosaurus Rex, Triceratops, Stegosaurus, Brontosaurus and the flying Pterodactyl but the Blue Whale, is still the largest animal to have ever lived on earth, larger than any of the known dinosaurs of the Mesozoic Era.

Argentinosaurus weighing up to an estimated ninety tonnes is comparable to an average sized blue whale.

This exhibit of a rare marine mammal has been in the making since 2014 when nine blue whales were sighted, caught in shifting pack ice at the mouth of the St. Lawrence River. While feeding on krill, the only food these mysterious giants eat, they surfaced to breathe and found themselves trapped under thick ice, a new phenomena at this location in these times of climate chaos.

The dwindling blue whale populations of the Western North Atlantic 'group' are reported to have been the largest of the 'Blues' in the earth's oceans, have yet to recover after one hundred and fifty years of whaling, hunted to *the brink of extinction*. To lose nine blue whales out of an estimated population of perhaps two hundred is a disaster and so caught the attention of our collective imagination and the world's media.

Drs. Mark Engstrom and Burton Lim with their team from the ROM waited patiently for reports to hear if any of the whales washed up on shore, these giants usually sink and finally two whales did appear in Rocky Harbour and Trout River Newfoundland, a month after being spotted. The exhibit is located in the depths of the museum, the story unfolding along a narrative path describes the retrieval and preparation of the bones of a twenty-three meter female blue whale but you will be in a hurry to be amazed, readying for the wow factor of your first encounter with something you will probably never see in real life from a tour ship or washed up on a beach.

A purple-blue light casts you underwater and recordings of whale vocalizations (tapping sounds) resonate from a moving backdrop, and a blue whale, captured on film (how did they do that??) appears out of the deep, fills the screen and disappears.

Everyone is unusually quiet.

A troop of small children, colour coded in red t-shirts, are hushed between the displays. The lighting, the sounds, the impact of the setting, this huge head with the small eye socket, we are all in the presence of something holy.

Then you realize that the skeleton of this animal, this Blue Whale, is of our time, they are out there now and we have done terrible things to them, the wow dissipates and my heart beats faster while I try to hold back the tears.

There is a lot to take in. After the initial shock of the scale and the sense of mass you feel from the 30 tonnes of bones that are cradled in a steel armature (no drill holes), the detailed connections as if holding rare jewels.

You are awestruck by the immense physicality of this creature.

A 'smart car', covered in vein graphics has been perched next to the whale's heart, having been sent to Germany to be plasticized by those 'Body World's' folks.

It is almost too much to bear, a fellow mammal, all the dissected organs and comparisons to our humble size *but deadly character*, their brain (better in some departments than ours) beseeches the question: "Are we really so different, living out our time on this planet?"

Those front 'arms' with all the jointed fingers, those tiny floating bones in the tail, called vestigial limbs, hind feet from fifty million years ago.

Dioramas chronicle the evolution from land dweller, a kind of wolf creature, is now also included in the skeletal displays having been found only recently in the mountains of Pakistan some twenty years ago. '*Pakicetus*' is the missing link to the mystery, connected by the similarity of a unique ear bone (!) illustrates that the earth was covered with water through eons of time and animals had to adapt to hunting for food in a watery landscape. The legends are true then, when the earth covered waters receded, they, on the branch from that 'Latin Tree of Life' by Linnaeus, the *Cetaceans* chose to remain in the ocean.

Before you leave and walk through a veil of ice you face atonement and view our past relationship with these giants. A woman's bust propped up in corset stays is the centerpiece of a showcase filled with 'whale products'. She is surrounded by an array of antique oil lamps, the only fuel to light our darkness just over one hundred years ago. I try to avert my eyes from the knives and bladed instruments; smooth wood handled harpoons, the ugly hooks. You will learn a new word: "flensing", to slice the flesh, blubber and skin, drawn off in regular strips from the body.

I happen upon this text:

"... harpoon *cannon* ... engines in reverse ... 28 hours ... exhaustion
... two men in a row boat."

Men who have dedicated their lives to the whales speak to us in the final video, about their close encounter, an existential exchange, man and whale meet eye to eye. They implore the visitors to join in and help.

Blue Whales have not been hunted for fifty years now as they were put on the endangered list in 1966. There are about 20,000 Blues still on the planet. We learn more every day how they contribute to the web of life, to the health of oceanic ecosystems. California coastlines, the Pacific North Eastern Group, tells us their population has recovered to 90% of pre-whaling days but good news posts are tempered by practicing Norwegian fleets still taking whales and the Japanese Antarctica fleet just returned with 100 Minke whales.

If you are in Toronto and want to experience 'something extreme', the Blue Whale will become a permanent exhibit at the ROM.

Rita Komendant
April 21, 2017



Rita and Whale



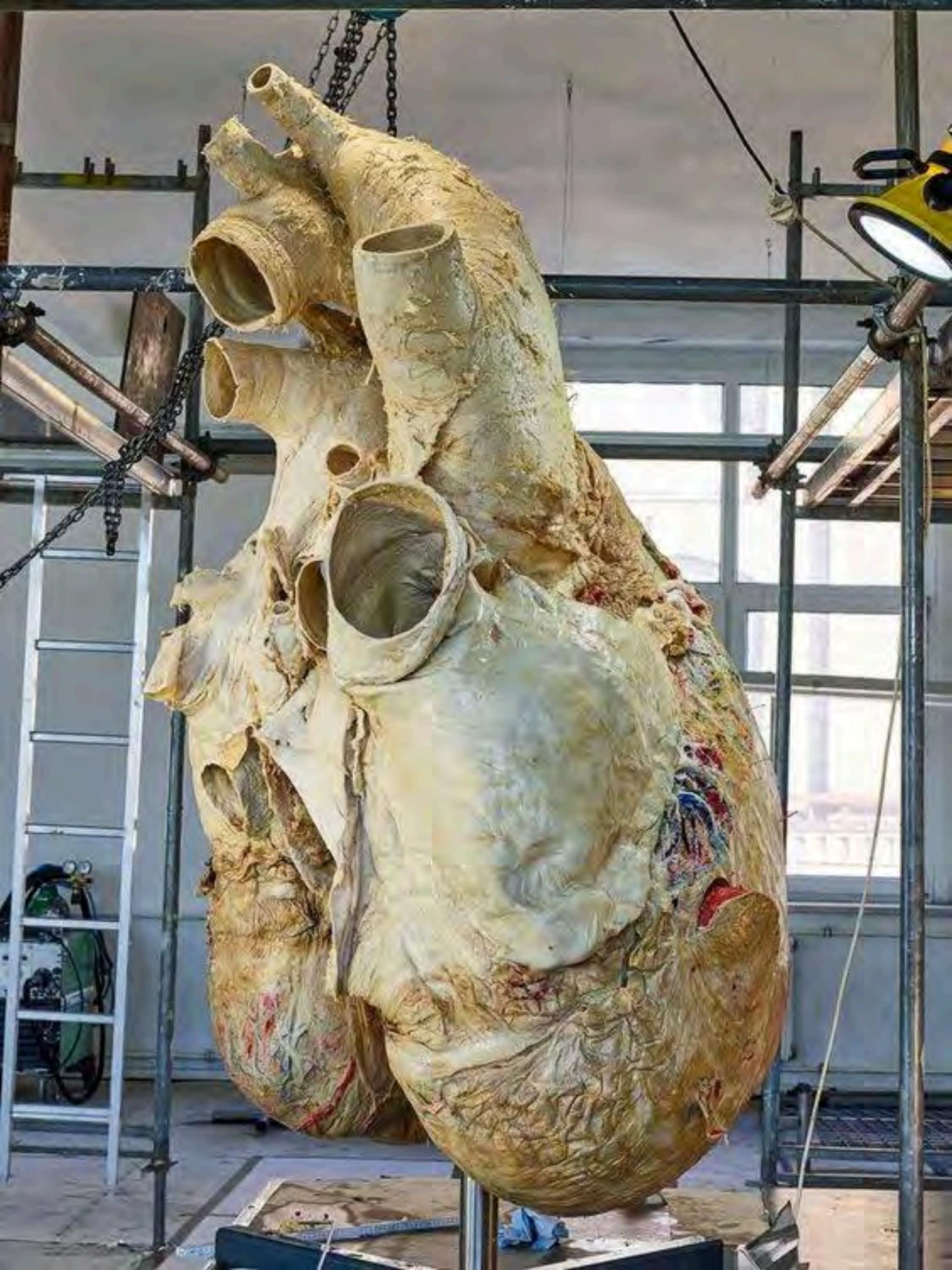
Whale Mouth



24 meter 90 tonne female Blue Whale*
recovered from Rocky Harbour, Newfoundland April 2014

Photo Credit: St. Catherines Standard

** the mouth bones of both recovered whales were found broken . . .*





. . . “Could they all be extinct, like the whales?
I’ve heard that rumour, passed on to me in soundless words, the lips
hardly moving, as we stood in line outside, waiting for the store to open,
lured by the picture of succulent white fillets in the window”.

(Atwood, 2017, P. 189).

