To Pelorus Jack

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Abstract

From 1871 to 1912, Pelorus Jack, a large porpoise, guided ships through the treacherous waters of French Pass, just off the coast of New Zealand. Prior to 1871 the unpredictable currents and jagged underwater rocks in the pass had been responsible for heavy losses of both ships and men...
To Pelorus Jack

By John C. N. Smith

From 1871 to 1912, Pelorus Jack, a large porpoise, guided ships through the treacherous waters of French Pass, just off the coast of New Zealand. Prior to 1871 the unpredictable currents and jagged underwater rocks in the pass had been responsible for heavy losses of both ships and men. During his forty years of service Pelorus Jack never lost a ship. A statue has been erected to his memory on the beach at Wellington, New Zealand.

Solitary creature there amid the
Frenzied seas, rejoicing at this
New-found friend, perhaps you didn’t
See the glint of steel, the sleek harpoon.

You steered them past the razor rocks,
The ragged reefs, and they (benevolent
Beings that they were) decided
Condescendingly to spare your life.

Had no one told you that your brothers
Fed insipid lamps, and scented robes for
Senile queens? And yet you led them
Past the razor rocks and ragged reefs.
But more significant, you stayed.  
What kept you there in such a barren  
Place, when deeper seas and warmer  
Climes made promises of better times?

And what profound philosophy could  
Prompt you to forgive that bloody  
Wound they gave you for your sole  
Reward?  What renders hatred impotent?

You waited there to guide the clumsy  
Ships when they returned.  How was it  
You had learned what men untiringly  
Have spurned?  Who was your tutor?

Was it Buddha, Christ, or Gandhi?  
Or did you hear more subtle sermons  
Preached by rolling waves beneath an  
Endless sea of stars?

Did the oceans offer soothing words,  
And fill your head with consolations?  
What idle threats or covenants  
Are made by threshing waves?

And with your task completed were  
You borne to heaven on the wings of  
Larks, or did you go unnoticed  
To receive a burial by sharks?

And finally, Pelorus Jack, if fish  
Could speak and men could hear,  
What question would I need to  
Ask, what truth remain unclear?