

Harpoon

by Tina Barry

Chainsaws. Blubber spewing across ice. It took a day for the Eskimos' blades to near the center of an ancient whale. Lodged beside its silent heart, nearly missed, the secret of a harpoon. "Nfu" (hurt), one man said, tapping his chest.

Claire reads the newspaper account of the beached whale, her feet crossed and resting on a kitchen chair. The harpooning, historians estimated, happened around 1890, making the fish over 100 years old. Claire imagines it, eons after the wounding: massive as an ocean liner, sluicing through schools of smaller sea creatures, then hurtling high into the clouds, a blot of black against a cerulean sky. Returning to the surf, the whale's eyes flinch; for a moment it had forgotten.

The story brings thoughts of her father; she calls him Captain Ahab. She's joked to friends, lovers who drifted away, that if observed carefully, he's recognizable in the earliest images of misery: a hand shoving a young gladiator before the lion; the fire devouring a witch in Salem. And here he is. Again. His prongs still sharp against the whale's scarred heart.

