

LAURENCE LIEBERMAN

Granddad and the Humpbacks

Granddad Robert
Melville Simmons was first
mate on a big U.S. whaling vessel
for three years . . . Later he shot a humpbacked
whale in Bequia's offshore waters (it was Spring,
nineteen-thirty-six), firing his rifle
from the bow
of a modest-sized fish sloop,
catching his two fellow deck crew
by surprise—
they doubting his resolve to put rude impulsive
first skirmish with local Leviathan
Humpback to wayward test.
Three shots fired,

third struck home—
missing the basking whale's
heart by a few meters, but deep wound
stunned him to a brief halt, which allowed
their near approach. Rifle froze, on reloading.
In his rush Simmons crammed that barrel
too tight—the charge
blew up in his clutch, sea wind
luckily tossing powder spray & shrapnel
widely askew,
just clear of his face, while his chief mate flung
their one antique harpoon, nailing
twenty-five-foot beauty.
And it took that

whole afternoon
for the muscly trio to drag

& beach their amazing prey: she came
 back twice from false death to yank the craft
 half-submerged, but lacked power to sound down deep.
 They held steady until she tired, then
 slowly drew
 her huge carcass ashore . . .
 Earliest milestone in Bequia's whale-
 kill saga! Rob
 Simmons, forefather to the Isle's first generation
 of whale-hunt buccaneers, soon renounced
 guns for the harpoon and pristine
 razor-sharp lance

 he'd fashioned
 and honed himself (new-minted
 lance, over time, bore his name: patent
 licensed by his family for one hundred years).
 But apprentice whalers, *trigger-happy roustabouts*,
 often resisted his wise tutelage
 on the sly,
 making the daybreak coastal
 harbors their firing range. *A pitiable
 mess of whale
 chasers* . . . They toted any coarse handguns: pistol,
 revolver, or old army muskets—castoff
 rifles: at best, grazing whale
 fin or tail, and

 scaring off
 those few prize Humpback beauties
 of the prime season . . . Granddad Rob coaxed
 Nolly, age six, to join him and some thirty-odd
 tagalong *watchers*, all early risers, for a hillcrest
 hike. They wended & weaved through prickly
 brush to a bald
 clearing with stark lucid view
 over fine pair of sailboats converging
 from two sides
 on a lone basking mound of liveflesh blackly ashimmer.
 Pop Simmons—as his young cronies dubbed

him—drew three extra sets
of telescopic

glasses from deep
shoulder-slung pouch, passing them,
one by one, to his fellow beholders.
He bid the *blokes* to take turns. Circulate
that trio of *ocular aids* . . . But saved the keen-lensed
binoculars for himself and Nolly
propped on his left
knee, as they sat on a flat
cliff rock. And he traded the glasses
with the child,
when the zings and crackles of gunfire rang out. Oh,
Granddad roared his disdain, his heckles
so shrill on the air, raw shooters
must hear it—

to no avail . . .
Shell-fire blossomed smoke plumes
unchecked. Pop took three deep puffs on fat
Cubana cigar. Ejected bursts of sputum overhead
like sperm whale's bubbly spout, his spit-line narrow
as a blowtorch. Then railed and grumbled.
Soul of chicken
farmers, that crew should be chasing
poultry, gamecocks—not Leviathans! He waxed
finical. Sloops
were angled false, came on too quick, rash scareaway
tactics . . . Whaling art laid down strict code.
No guns! Harpoon, or our surgical
piercing lance.