

The Whale of Penlan Tork

EARNSHAW, Steve <<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1048-8022>>

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The Whale of Penlan Tork

Steven Earnshaw

On the Air

We climbed the poles to discuss the whale of Penlan Tork, recently discovered off the coast of Patagonia, languishing in kelp forests.

Chorus: O mighty pillars!

Simon: Welcome.

The shadow government settled itself into the lotus position, curious. Across the tops of minarets and church steeples they thought they could make out sailing ships and the horizon, make out the sun's descent from the heavens. There was a dutiful wish that all they saw and thought would blend into one, sky, windows, ocean, prayers. We asked Simon what he knew of the journey to Patagonia. The saint mapped a route to the lower part of the globe along the third Christian highway – here you would be taken in by the Order of Beppo, there the hospitality would be from the House of Alessius, here there was some dispute amongst the brethren over Deuteronomy, and in the next port you would find a codification of Jewish slavery laws agreed by disparate Hebraic fellows.

Simon: Our minds are open. The chosen will set sail from Devonport.

Chorus: O mighty pillars!

Was the test Simon's for us? Was the test the traditional one, to remain with Simon on the pillars working in the shadow of the usurpers, who had been there since 425, or to understand Tork's legacy?

Simon: Who will travel from Devonport to Patagonia?

Chorus: What's the purpose?

Simon: A quest!

Chorus: Yes, but for what?

Simon: The whale of Penlan Tork.

Chorus: We have no authority.

Simon: Perhaps we need the approval of the Government, perhaps not. Who is to say?

Azure blackens. There is no resolution. Staying on the pillars is everything. We know this, and yet we cannot match Simon's dedication, so we go inside the pillars to the poles, descend and return home, redundant firemen. It occurs to us that anyone who embarks on the journey will need a commitment as great as Simon's, yet if we cannot even remain on the pillars for months, let alone years, as Simon has shown the way, how can any one of us make the journey to the Patagonian kelp forests. Our geography is poor, our knowledge of the natural world is poor, our understanding of Tork's legacy is slight. It is not helped by Simon using his own names for places. We have discovered that one of the names he uses refers to the island of St Jago, and another to Bahia in the Brazils, but on this projection of discovery it would take decades to decode or translate Simon's world into ours. Yet we

know we must persevere: Devonport, St Jago, Bahia. These are real and provide reference points of sorts, dots on the surface to be joined by the ones who voyage South. Or is it East?

Our noses bleed. Another test.

Back on the pillars, bloodied rags in hand, we seek to comfort each other and to vie with each other for Simon's good opinion. He will observe the strength of our nose bleeds, the tickle with grass in the nostrils. Is this how Simon will choose? We think it is.

Chorus: Simon, do we need to know Tork's legacy? Should we mention the others from history, like J...

Simon: No! No mention of others, only Tork. Yes, you should know his legacy. No, it will not help to know this.

Chorus: But when we meet the whale of Penlan Tork and speak, what do we need to know?

Simon: I am no oracle, I cannot say in advance. One thing I will say: this is the *Whale* of Penlan Tork, it is *not Penlan Tork*. No one shall know Penlan Tork.

It's not great when Simon adopts the oracular tone, it strikes a note which we are suspicious of. It is the false Simon that emerges sometimes. We attempt to clean our noses. Simon has not noticed the way we cheat our way into his good books by using the special grass to make our noses bleed.

The Voyage

Simon did away with all formalities, chose a group of fortunates at random, the strength of our nose bleeds had no bearing on the decision, and we set sail from Devonport. There are six of us – me, Gary, Martin, Pag, HH, qjd8f-ylll* – plus the sailors manning the ship. We were the entire Chorus. Simon is alone. Gary thinks the masts are like the platforms we've left behind.

Gary: O! Mighty pillars.

In the uncertain weather Gary's tight curly black hair and stock body and face are animated, and he is in his forties. Of all of us he was the least committed to staying on the pillars, finding neither joy within nor without, and so his choice for the voyage quest proves the randomness of Simon. Gary mentions something about the lack of women, for he has a lusty appetite, he says.

The sailors overhear him and a delegate forbids him to mention women, they are bad luck at sea. Some of us have wives and sweethearts back home, which makes it difficult for us to stay on the pillars or to come away, so we are not happy with this reminder. Martin tells him cessation. I like Martin, all redness – hair, face, attitude, in his thirties – and would like to say the things he says, not just think them, and would like to be him, keeping a bit of who I am. Simon has given us no clues as to how to cope with the women missing from our lives, or the women we will encounter on our travels.

Gary: Sirens!

The sailors tell him to get real and we descend to our shockingly cramped cabins. I still have not mastered the hammock, I am useless at sea and throw up all the time. As much as I stand next to The Great Red One nothing changes me, I am useless, his character does not rub off on me and if anything anxiety increases the closer we move to the Equator. Martin leaps into his hammock while I struggle. It was easier to ascend the poles and stay on the platforms and now it is dawning on me that we are ill-prepared for the voyage and ill-prepared to meet the whale, and begin to blame Simon. Although I expressed my worry earlier on that we wouldn't know how to deal with the peculiar cetacean when we were face-to-face it hasn't sunk in to any of the others and still we press ahead towards the Equator as if all is well.

The immediate worry is the heat. We are approaching the Equator, and the sailors have indicated that there are rituals to be observed when we cross it. Coupled with the heat, which isn't too bad at the minute, and the horror of Equator rituals, my anxiety increases, and I still haven't found my sea-legs, and the other five have found theirs. Gary is surprisingly adept at being on the ship and ascends the masts for fun, from the crow's nest staring into the sun with hooded eyes to where sea and sky join forces. There is a fascination for the natural world in him so that he could be possessed by Darwin's ghost, or perhaps he sees himself as Captain Fitzroy, he does like to talk about the weather and is often right in his forecasts. Or perhaps he's just Gary, and we should leave it at that, at his own estimation, the black-haired one, travelling down to Rio.

Days in to the journey and I am still helped into my hammock like a small child. It seems incredible that I was able to ascend a pole to the platform. I wonder how Simon is faring without us.

To mark crossing the Equator the sailors ... called it 'Neptunes' ... had learnt that we came from pillars, ascended and descended poles ... for their fun, used this information, made us ... now we know they do not respect us ... must persist 'until we reach the whale of Penlan Tork', which is now our mantra ... have mastered the hammock but am unable to walk or sit ... the hammock is my refuge. Pag and the others seem unaffected. It can only be me.

My Report.

Dear Sirs,

Here is the elemental voyage: *heat; indolence; lassitude; abundance of flora and fauna; the tropics; quarterdeck; homesickness/revolting/slavery; pockets full of 'sins, sins'; sounding the depths; fathoms; anchored for the night; islands/rocks/insects/plants; midshipmen; quarter master; flying fish on deck; a crab sticking to a fish causing it indescribable pain; wrecks; Commanding Officer; having to kill the poultry with stones for dinner; exhaustion/fatigue/hunger; mandeika/cassada – a food, but can also produce a poison; effect of walking on mimosa; 'Returned by the old route to Campos Novos; the ride was very tiresome, passing over a heavy & scorching sand. Chirping sand' – according to Darwin, who shadows us - what's 'chirping sand', Charles, what?; foremast; main shrouds and forestay; Admiral; cutlasses; high and violent surf; pass ports; men dressed in white – a flock of wild fowl; 'The Admiral sung out "A Raking shot has cut our fore-shrouds"'. This was only pretend*

though, in preparation for a real war. There is no devil in this land' and Darwin has departed once more. We are on our own.

End of My Report

After the equator and the Brazils it starts to get cold, and we worry about frozen wastes and the feeling of home.

Simon, Alone

Was I wrong to reject the chance to rule, albeit with conditions? On reflection, I am never wrong. The joint ownership of power would have left me entangled in the thickets of bus pass legislation with no perceptible improvement in the people's lot. This is not why I believe in power. For Simon it is all or nothing. I would rather be on high in the wild air than trapped into a power-sharing arrangement in which my credibility, built up over decades of platform intransigence, remains solid. Now that the six of my Attylites have departed and my experiment with a shadow oligarchy has failed I return to Simon.

As soon as the six leave Simon realises the awful truth that he prefers to be in the shadow government to actual government and his ideas for ruling the country have become ever more fantastic and removed from reality. As Simon predicted to himself on many occasions, as more and more climbed the poles to reach him, as the shadow oligarchy of two or three became less focussed, and as more ideas came into his head than could be dealt with in any single day or given period, until there were the six on the poles and he had his favourites, he liked being the head of a shadow government that could monitor the doings of the

government and suggest better policies and strategies for the ideal world. He became ever more fantastic in following through his own shadow agenda, since the trajectories of both governments, close enough in the beginning, had diverged more and more widely. What started out as plausible virtuality had now to be considered as twisted and wholly untoward. The new advantage lay in a hinterland perfection of flaws as execution of the real world repeatedly found itself nosed up against wrinkles, lumps, lacunae, bolts from the blue, unforeseen circumstances and inexplicable happenings which no amount of legislation and policy initiatives could apprehend. Inertia, misplaced sentiment and downright idiocy ensured that everything carried on and those in their everyday habitations noticed little change, or big changes crept up on them which they unknowingly assimilated, providing the occasion for a wry smile. Simon's world was self-sustaining in its rightness. Predicted erreoneosity could be turned to advantage or slain, and Simon was all-powerful in this realm. Infrastructure, the public sector, health care, jobs, foreign policy, nothing discomposed Simon's gathering of the well-meaning. Himself, governance, thought shapes, all firm and fair. Oligarchy dished out the just desserts.

At what cost? The incumbents point to shaky calculations, and it is true, economics is not Simon's strong point. There are gaps that I cannot plug. I have tried. The mystic qjd8f-yllll* has been enlisted to plug away and offer a more credible economic policy. He talks of deep space, the sound of 'om', the pervasive universal consciousness.

And now I understand what is required is a risky change to more sober modelling. The shadow government must be allowed to rule *as a shadow government* with the full authority of the 'real' government. Only when the Ideal Form takes hold in the real way will

true progress in all spheres be effected. This I authentically believe. The question remains in rigorous analysis, does such a radical break with previous models of governance require permission from the current government, or can I (we?) enact usurpation? Perhaps, perhaps not, I remain anxious and undecided. If the six return from Patagonia, successful or not, I will tell them to prepare for government in no uncertain terms. This is what qjd8f-yllll* has divined. I will tell them that shadows can work, for there is no shadow without substance, we are both substance and shadow, real and ideal. The proper government shines no light on itself, has no complement, we are our own created shadows, we are not the property and function of the proper government. I hate the proper government. It has done nothing but use blunt instruments – design, science, manufacture, a Gradgrindean education – and has left the purity of abstraction to rot with me. I await the return of the six and will move on from there.

What if qjd8f-yllll* is wrong? The others, Pag included, have full credentials. qjd8f-yllll* has cast some kind of spell on me I am sure. It is to be hoped that he is good at heart and will prove a constant friend to the others on the voyage. This is devoutly to be wished.

Simon: O! Chorus. Help!

Pag, sycophant to the last, is the one I miss most.

Simon: qjd8f-yllll*! Should I abandon you? Will you abandon me?

I am of a mind now to attempt an assault on the government without either the permission of the government, and, what has no precedent, the support of the six. Is this rash, after decades of patience? Fah! Patience for what? I am at the end of my patience, sat up here, looking out onto the emptiness of platforms, flat mundane roofs and roofs shaped to religious design. Simon meditates. So much to bring into the one – the others, myself, the voyage, ideas about government, the lids on the tops of buildings, inside the buildings, my Ideals battling against Real objects and against ideas which are made reality.

qjd8f-yllll* has taught me how to properly meditate. Before I allowed him on board I meditated in an amateurishly intense way to make solid all my perceptions of the world. qjd8f-yllll* has shown me how to combine perceptions of the world, the shadow government, Ideal, and me, into one. Perhaps I was a bad student for even now I cannot make all these things coalesce, I cannot make all these things me. I blame qjd8f-yllll* at the end of each day, it is my mantra, and that is why I banned him with good reason, although inside there are qualms, I confess.

When my hatred for qjd8f-yllll* rises I calm myself with the image of Pag, rotund Pag, deferential, telling me of my greatness, his derisory beard. He is good to hear and reassures. Sometimes, looking back, Pag's boosts to my ego were what most kept Simon going.

Azure blackens. Tomorrow the government will make more overtures to me, will want to use my credibility to give credibility to some new fiscal measures which will prove unpopular. I have told them that if they can make their way up the poles I will parlay and replace the fiscal with the monetary, leading them up the garden path of their own limited

understanding. My answer at the end of each day must always then be 'no. Return to year zero. Things with intrinsic value. Things in themselves. No mediated equivalences'. I thank qjd8f-yllll* for this insight.

It was a surprise, the gentle questions about the whale of Penlan Tork, the attempt on the part of this government to talk about nothing else with me. In other circumstances this would have been absolutely fine, and we could have chatted about it over dinner or cocktails, or whatever passes for politeness these days, I am so out of touch being so pure of spirit. Yes, we could have discussed the creature and possible connections with the history of popular music. I would have disowned the idea that I have any specialist knowledge and would talk merely as an enthusiast. I could not see what the government wanted out of me. I raised the issue of usurpation, shooting myself in the foot, and the issue of recombination of all that there is in the world inside each of our heads, for the good of all, and explained my Ideal economy of things in themselves, all to no avail. They would speak of nothing except the whale of Penlan Tork, and I can do nothing except remember that qjd8f-yllll* had predicted just such a scenario. I needed Pag, his oleaginous puffing of Simon, for I indeed then would have had more courage. It reminded me of the time when I had attempted to persuade the government to Reform, to allow only those with a concern in the country to vote. Idlers have no investment in the common wealth so I do not see that they should have a say in the running of the common wealth. Pag approved; qjd8f-yllll* attempted to dissuade; the government rudely declined to consider a change in voting regulations. Even if I am resigned to remaining in the Shadow Government, which I am very far from doing, that

I can command a nation is everything, and I can do everything for them. Hang on...the Sky is on Fire; a terrible storm interrupts my thoughts of Reform with the plasma of a million candles shaped into a great red moving ball in the heavens; the shocking light dazzles from the steeples and minarets, burnishes them, strikes the souls at the back of my eyes.

Pag did agree with me before he left, rounder than ever, as if the slope of his belly was casting his head backwards and making that slope too, much too big for a man in his mid-thirties, very pleasant, amiable, and awe-struck, that despotism was clearly more attractive than the cancer of democracy where nothing changed and the poor stayed poor and the rich stayed rich, or, let's face it, the promise of oligarchy. Pag agreed that I would make a good despot. I nodded in agreement. qjd8f-yllll* shook his head slowly and urged me to meditate, where I would find the impossibility of integrating despotism with all the aforementioned items that constitute the universe. 'Every thing is everything' he said, 'and *that* is democratic. A despot always becomes despotic, not more benign. Why not a theocracy?'. At last, at last! qjd8f-yllll*'s persuasion had stumbled blinking into our world. And so, for Simon, never had despotism looked so attractive in the face of such nonsense. 'Democracy discriminates against the minority' I said, 'to no good effect. Only a despot can ensure consistency and fairness.' In this I am right. Hence, I have sent off the others to experience a ship and a whale of note.

The Whale

The chorus concluded that the whale of Penlan Tork had chosen the kelp forests off Patagonia so that it could rest without effort – the kelp formed an interesting bed. There

was no communication between the chorus and the whale, unless the whale was to sing on frequencies we could not hear. It is possible said Pag that he talks to Simon and no-one else, that at this minute he is relaying back information about us. Pag was downcast at his usurpation. Either the whale of Penlan Tork is not what it seems, or it is all that it seems.

Is it that the whale was content, had fulfilled its early promise as a young whale? Or is it, was it, by resting in thickets of kelp, slowly finding a pleasurable death?

The whale had ably disentangled itself from all social contact, obsessed with the generation of music use that can only be derived from long, thin metal strips, like typewriter letter-arms elongated to five or six feet, and each one a full note representation in itself, no, not a note only, a full harmony extended beyond an untempered thirteenth. This was the secret of a musical success, finally, and the whale can communicate it around the sea-globe in some approximation to the music it imagined creating.

The one man who would understand all this was Penlan Tork, a whale from way back.

qjd8f-yllll* heard the whale speak in what is the background pop harmony of Penlan Tork, saying 'qjd8f-yllll*'s shadow has mastered the unwieldy long thin metal harmony strips singing to qjd8f-yllll*.

The whale of Penlan Tork bore no resemblance to anything yet encountered, a counterbalance of blades and bladders. Beneath us the reef will still not yield its elongated

metal harmony strips. Our elongated musical lives can only echo or shadow the original depth. I wanted to ask the whale about Berlin before reunification.

The Career of the Idea of Penlan Tork

Our sixed-out whale falls to the bottom of the ocean, dying downwards, each packet of memory quantum dying per foot descent. It will take a hundred years for blades the size of sheet metal to pass themselves on to the blades below. The sea-otters nuzzle Penlan and take in some of his ideas about nutrients, for the whale is not yet decomposed to nutrients. Yet, everything is lost, all greatness is bloated.

Once on the ocean's reef the whale of Penlan Tork can begin decomposition in earnest amongst the kelp holdfasts, can be colonized, can be everything. The idea of Penlan Tork moves forward from the coast of South America. Always the actor, he seeks ballast. Can the idea fuse with the idea? This kelp is named after Penlan and is one-hundred-and-fifty feet long, filled with an ache for new sources of light. The kelp needs this to be photographed from below, above, within, conscious of its largesse in holding whales that avoid killer whales. Can this kelp too be known as great now that the whale of Penlan Tork decomposes? The sea-otters nuzzle Penlan, do not notice Penlan Tork and his vocation.

THE END