

# Whale Washed Ashore at Ancona

Linda Gregerson

*anonymous engraving, 1601*

Like a woman born inland  
whose only allotment of sea is a notion  
that starts in sand and never

comes home, this prodigy of flesh  
and blood, "drawn faithfully from nature,"  
will not find itself in nature, pure

and simple, again. The ear,  
for example. Where in mere ocean  
could a whale sprout ears? And where

but on this selvage between  
one ravelling realm and the next  
could an engraver be so bold?

The whale is public spectacle. (Ignore  
for a moment the man with the ax.)  
Merchants on horseback and boys with their dogs

find no such cause for holiday  
in many an entry of state.  
See how the ladies, appearing to shrink,

are led from either end of the beach  
for a view. The very waves exaggerate  
their likeness to ribbons and lace, as if

to give the reticent more heart.  
(And thus the ear. A touch  
of family for strangers to wear.)

Thriving on one bountiful heap, the happy  
promoters of science and trade  
are all this while resourcefully

engaged; a group at the tail fin  
with measuring line, the one who has climbed  
to the shoulder applying his ax,

a motley remainder with barrels  
and carts. The boundaries of gain  
and exuberance aren't quite clear.

Dispensing refreshment? Harvesting oil?  
The row of tents suggests some length  
of stay. But lest the dense embellishment

impugn an engraver's strict regard  
for history and visible fact, witness  
the mirror he chose to consult:

a Whale Washed Ashore in Holland,  
some three years the elder event.  
Same horses, same dogs, and, but

for the mirror inversion, identical  
watchers and workers and sickle  
of shore. The duplicate ear. The same

slight backwash beneath an abandon  
of jaw. So faithfulness, and nature  
in a fashion too. The tide

comes bearing a gift sometimes  
and faithfully leaves us a margin to work  
and washes the whole of it clean.