

The Book of Sharks

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ORIGINS

Before mountains rose from the water
and waves ground cliffs into sand,

before rocks rolled down to the shore
and became the first seals,

before that long-ago morning when a cloud
gave birth to seagulls—

white and gray like their mother,
riding the wind—

before storms taught Thunder to waterfalls
and the moon taught Quiet to the snow,

before people and questions
and the names of constellations

there were sharks,
a gliding answer orbiting below . . .

their eyes like pieces of the night brought nearer,
their teeth indifferent as the stars,

their purpose the same as the ocean's purpose:
to move, to arrive, to be full.



The oldest carving, though it's yet to be discovered,
is a shark.

Their teeth could be spear points.
Their teeth could be tools.

After bringing back salmon from the river mouth,
after cutting the hide from a seal—

that hide meaning boots through the winter,
a blanket—

somebody stopped to give thanks,
or hoped to turn stone into luck,

or saw lightning carving the sky,
or fashioned an image of the ocean out of love,

out of wanting to please someone.
With a shark's tooth, he shaped the unknowable

into something she could hold, some proof
as sleepless as sharks, abundant as rocks.

And death came fast enough then
that such love probably lasted

at least as long as gratitude lasted,
and longer than good luck.



Some say sharks are the ocean's anger at the sun
for keeping it caught on a line, on a hook

it can't remember biting,
so all its swimming is an endless

circling back.
In their story, the sun is a fisherman,

and the center of the sky is a boat,
and sharks shot forth

from all sudden directions to attack;
they'll take anything close enough.

Most who hold to this version are collectors,
combing the shoreline for teeth

or finding them in tide pools
by turning over crabs.

You'll know them in town by their necklaces
and the jagged bracelets they wear,

by the way they won't enter the ocean.
None of them think their measured streets are nets.



The best explanation I know was offered by a boy.
His father had died, and his mother couldn't hear.

He said, "Sharks are the ocean's way of talking.
Like talking with your hands."

I was just a boy then too.
We were levering boulders

off the cliff point,
watching each splash with satisfaction:

higher than the surf, spraying
halfway back to us.

He said, "Sometimes we just ignore the ocean,
but no one ignores a dorsal fin."

He walked ahead,
and I followed him

to a boulder too big for us to see around.
"If my dad were alive," he said, "he could push this in."



Divers know sharks share the water,
but they dive.

It's as close as they'll ever come to flying,
and the currents below are more likely to grab

and pull down.
The rest of us watch.

We wonder, *How can they do that,*
step out onto that final edge

then leap
and just keep dropping?

Back in town, they seem ordinary
except for the difference in their eyes—

looking under the surface of everything for rocks,
reading each wave of conversation—

some difference . . . horizon . . .
an *apartness* in their eyes.

Like it isn't sharks they watch out for.
Like it's people who normally attack.



Given their name, it should be obvious:
Blue sharks are blue . . .

even more than you'd think, though.
I've seen one rise to the surface, just appear

alongside the boat, its long nose
out of the water, its eye watching me.

It was June. Summer.
The glacier was calving into icebergs.

The wind had cold spots and warm spots.
The water had a shark—

only four feet long, I'd guess, and skinny as a cat,
but that shark was the bluest thing I'm ever going to see.



There is no body called *Carcharias* we point to in the sky.
They are not our heaven.

We don't pray, "Forgive us our trespasses."
Few of us praise.

But we could if we wanted to.
We could draw from star to star,

teach a son or a daughter, "Those three there together,
that's the fin.

Now follow my arm to that bright one . . .
the five nearby like a sideways V, they're the tail."

It wouldn't take a telescope, wouldn't take a boat,
just lifting a finger.

And each night we'd see that reminder
before we went to sleep.

