

Prologue

Kaya.

Writing such a word, Bobby Wabalanginy couldn't help but smile. Nobody ever done writ that before, he thought. Nobody ever writ *hello* or *yes* that way!

Roze a wail . . .

Bobby Wabalanginy wrote with damp chalk, brittle as weak bone. Bobby wrote on a thin piece of slate. Moving between languages, Bobby wrote on stone.

With a name like Bobby Wabalanginy he knew the difficulty of spelling.

Boby Wablngn wrote roze a wail.

But there was no whale. Bobby was imagining, remembering . . .

Rite wail.

Bobby already knew what it was to be up close beside a right whale. He was not much more than a baby when he first saw whales rolling between him and the islands: a

very close island, a big family of whales breathing easily, spouts sparkling in the sunlight, great black bodies glossy in the blue and sunlit sea. Bobby wanted to enter the water and swim out to them, but swaddled against his mother's body, his spirit could only call. Unlike that Bible man, Jonah, Bobby wasn't frightened because he carried a story deep inside himself, a story Menak gave him wrapped around the memory of a fiery, pulsing whale heart . . .

On a sunny day, walking a long arm of rock beside a calm ocean, you see the water suddenly bulging as a great bubble comes to the surface and oh! water streams from barnacled flesh and there is the vast back of a whale. You are enclosed in moist whale breath.

Barnacles stud the smooth dark skin, and crabs scurry across it. That black back must be slippery, treacherous like rock . . . But you see the hole in its back, the breath going in and out, and you think of all the blowholes along this coast; how a clever man can slip into them, fly inland one moment, back to ocean the next.

Always curious, always brave, you take one step and the whale is underfoot. Two steps more and you are sliding, sliding deep into a dark and breathing cave that resonates with whale song. Beside you beats a blood-filled heart so warm it could be fire.

Plunge your hands into that whale heart, lean into it and squeeze and let your voice join the whale's roar. Sing that song your father taught you as the whale dives, down, deep.

How dark it is beneath the sea, and looking

through the whale's eyes you see bubbles slide past
you like . . .

But there was none of that. Bobby was only imagining, only writing. Held in the sky on a rocky headland, Bobby drew chalk circles on slate, drew bubbles.

Bubbelz.

Roze a wail.

He erased the marks with the heel of his hand. It wasn't true, it was just an old story, and he couldn't even remember the proper song. There was no whale. And this was no sunny day. Instead, the wind plucked at Bobby's small shelter of brushwood and canvas, and rain spat on the walls. In the headland's lee immediately below him the sea was smooth, but a little further from land—a few boat lengths, no more—it was scuffed and agitated, and scribbles of foam spilled in a pattern he was still learning. Rain made sharp silver thorns, and then there was no sea, no sky and the world had compressed itself into a diagonally grained grey space before him.

Bobby heard the heavy tread, and Kongk Chaine thrust himself into the little hut. Hardly space for the two of them beneath this roof, these three flimsy walls. Bobby smelled tobacco and rum; if Kongk breathes in deep, stands up straight, this shelter'll explode. Chaine steamed with rain and body heat and ruddy health; water cascaded over the brim of his hat and gushed from his bristling beard.

You need a fire here, Bobby.

He looked out across the angry ocean as it reappeared, and at the rain racing away.

Nothing, huh?

They sat, each in the smell of the other, and despite

the warmth of the body beside him, Bobby felt the cold seeping into his bones. His fingers were chalk, but with loose and wrinkled skin. He drew on the wet slate with his finger.

Fine we kild a wail.

Chaine barked. Laughed. Bobby felt the man's arm around his back, the tough and calloused paw squeezing him.

I hope to kill myself a whale, my boy. More than one, come to that. More than one. But right now I wish for sunlight and a clear sky.

Bobby grinned and nodded. Dr Cross might be gone, but Geordie Chaine lived on, another new old man.

Hug.

Bobby wanted to be the first to sight whales, but he knew the Yankees or even Froggies would likely see them first, since they had sail and all. A tilting tip of mast and sail could point out a whale spout he'd not yet seen.

Bobby kept a sharp lookout. He wrote on slate and showed it to Kongk Chaine to read. No matter if weather-watching, whale-watching or writing, Bobby Wabalanginy was always ready to shout and come running soon as he saw what they all sought.

Fine, he wrote now. Again wishing, imagining.

Fine no wailz lumpy see.

He erased the word *fine*, and straightaway a crowd of water drops rushed across the crest behind him: tiny footsteps slapped leathery leaves, ran heavily across the granite and were drumming loud on the canvas all around them. Bobby shouted with surprise and joy, but even Chaine right beside him could not make out a word, could not hear his voice, only the pounding of tiny feet and

hands, and water gurgling, chuckling. The two of them looked at each other, mouthing unheard words as a thin sheet of water ran across the granite beneath their feet.

They were out of the rain, out of the worst of the wind in a pocket of shelter, but still the spit and fingers of wind touched them. Bobby's kangaroo-skin cloak and the oil and unguents rubbed into his skin kept him warm. Life tingled in his very fingertips.

A trail of silvery spikes ran across the sheltered water below their headland and disappeared into the wind-chopped sea beyond the island so close to shore. All along the southern coast the bellies of clouds were being dragged over just such rocky headlands and islands.

Chaine shivered, farted. Grumbling, he made his way carefully down the slope to the beach.

Bobby wrote straight from his mother and father's tongue to that of Chaine.

Kongk gon wailz cum.

There! Bobby saw a sail, a mast change its tilt, and then, sunlit among the grey and white tufts and tears of ocean, a spout of spray. Oh. Lotta spouts, a clump of silvery bushes blossoming in a great trunk of angled sunlight out there on the wind-patterned sea. For a moment he thought of sails, of a great fleet of ships rolling in from the horizon. But no, this was whales. Bobby, arms and legs windmilling down the sandy track, yelling out, yelling out, voice pricking men into action. No time just then, but he wrote it later.

Thar she bloze!

Bobby wrote and made it happen again and again in seasons to come, starting just here, now.

Kaya.