THE WAKE OF THE WHALE

Hunter Societies in the Caribbean and North Atlantic

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INTRODUCTION

The Sea Bean

If you were a young Faroese boy living in the village of Nólsoy during the late sixteenth century, the scale of your world would be defined by the beaches and sea cliffs that ring your small North Atlantic island, also named Nólsoy. An island with one village; the village's name is the island's name. That's the scale. Too young to row, to fish, or to sign aboard a merchant vessel from the Danish trade monopoly, you would watch as your father occasionally rowed across the strait to sell the puffins that your older brothers had caught on the mountain or the wool that he had sheared from your family's flock of sheep.

This settlement across the water, at the time a village of barely more than a hundred, is called Tórshavn—literally "Thor's harbor," a safe haven for the Norse god of thunder and lightning. Despite its diminutive size, Tórshavn would long serve as both the internal cultural hub and the entrepôt for commerce from abroad to the Faroe Islands. One French traveler to the Faroes would later call Tórshavn "le Paris de l'archipel," equating its importance within the archipelago to that of his own beloved French capital.[1] Tórshavn

achieved this status due to the significance of a small peninsula jutting into the harbor that, since the Vikings first settled here in the ninth century, has been used as a meeting place, a space for discussion among village chiefs and landowners, a location where differences are resolved. This landform, called Tinganes—meaning "parliament peninsula"—sits obscured by the intervening hills, just out of your view. To a young boy whose childhood universe is constrained by the Nólsoy coastline, Tórshavn may as well have been *le Paris de France*.

Spending your days in the island's hills and beaches, chasing sheep, avoiding the dive-bombing skua birds, you watch for *huldufólk*—half hoping and half dreading catching a glimpse of these hidden people, like elves, who are said to inhabit the rocky places of the North Atlantic. You spend a lot of time on the beach. Since the medieval era, the Faroe Islands have been shackled with a series of colonial trade monopolies that will end only in 1856 when another Nólsoy native, Poul Poulsen (Paul, son of Paul), will fight to establish free commerce and, because of the pride he will bring to the island, come to be known simply as Nólsoyar Páll (Paul from Nólsoy). Under the monopoly, however, there remains one promising, yet unpredictable, way around the law: beachcombing. Denmark may tax everything coming in by ship, but the king has no jurisdiction over the tides.

The shores of the Faroe Islands are regularly littered with all manner of maritime debris. Items washed overboard from ships throughout the Atlantic, some valuable, but most worthless, arrive on Faroese beaches every day, completing their journeys of hundreds, sometimes thousands, of miles. With almost no native forests, the Faroese have long relied on beachcombing for timber, turning driftwood into boats, oars, farming implements, and houses with a skill for carpentry that belies their arboreal poverty.

One day, while walking along the beach, your mind wandering to thoughts of growing up and being able to leave the island, perhaps to see Tórshavn or even Copenhagen, you glimpse an object that at

first looks like an ordinary pebble, but its shape and color beg further inquiry. As a wave recedes, you stoop down and pick up the object, turning it over in your hand. Its surface is smooth in a way that resembles no stone you have seen before, and its color is a rich brown, like the oil-darkened wood handle of your father's whaling knife. Its shape is like a swollen heart, or perhaps a kidney. You know these organs well, despite your youth, from helping your father and brothers slaughter sheep. You've never seen a living tree in your life, but your Faroese upbringing is teaching you what's needed to be Faroese—nothing more.

The stone—*is it a stone?*—feels light in your hand, certainly light enough to float on water. You are still standing there, staring at the object when the next wave comes in, upsets your footing, and causes you to lose hold of whatever it is that you found. Frantically, you drop to your knees in the cold Atlantic swash, feeling through the foam until you have found it again. You quickly stuff it into your pocket for safekeeping and trot off toward home.

That evening, as your family gathers around the peat fire, your father smoking his pipe and your mother spinning wool into yarn, you retrieve the object from your pocket and show it to your sister and brothers. You show it to your father, whose eyes widen as he begins a tale that will eventually expand your view of the world far beyond Tórshavn and Copenhagen. *Vitunýra,* he calls your newfound treasure, and tells you, "If you keep it in your pocket, you'll never drown." Your father could not have known it then, but the object you hold in your hand actually has a sterling record of drowning avoidance, for it has made its own oceanic journey from farther away than you could ever imagine.[2]

The seed you now keep in your pocket as a talisman—for it is actually a seed—comes from a tropical plant that grows on the islands of the Caribbean Sea. This plant, identified by botanists as *Entada gigas,* is known by a variety of local names, "monkey-ladder" and "sea bean" among them. The former refers to the length of its pods, over two meters, each containing dozens of seeds like yours. The latter

speaks to the seed's propensity to drift long distances at sea and hints at its arrival on the beach at Nólsoy. Sometime, perhaps two or three years ago, a large monkey-ladder grew in the rich volcanic soil of some tropical island across the vast ocean that spreads out from your own island's shores. The pod split open, spilling its seeds onto the ground. Rain washed your seed into a gully, which led to a stream, which carried it to sea. Perhaps some indigenous Carib boatman, paddling his dugout, actually saw your very seed as it drifted farther from the coast. Perhaps his young daughter, about your age, tracked the seed with her eyes as it swirled in the small eddies of her father's paddle strokes. More likely it was a European colonist—the Carib population would already have been decimated by then—who gave your seed only the briefest of glances, for gold does not float. From the coast of this newly conquered island, it wound its way into the flow of that great oceanic river that Benjamin Franklin would first chart in the eighteenth century, based upon his shipboard conversations with merchants and whalers: the Gulf Stream.

The Gulf Stream begins in the warm waters of the Caribbean, moves northward, and nestles against the coastline of Florida from Key West to Jacksonville. It continues on, up the east coast of North America, where it grows ever more distant from land as it gains latitude, carrying its cargo of warm tropical water—and whatever else happens to be brought along by the current. The stream, like most rivers, meanders. At Cape Hatteras it comes as close as twenty kilometers offshore. By Cape Cod it can be more than 150 kilometers out. The Gulf Stream is the reason deep-water, pelagic fish can be found just offshore from the Florida Keys; why New Jersey fishermen catch tropical yellowfin tuna; why Iceland is green and Greenland is icy; and, as this warm current drifts across the cold North Atlantic toward Europe, why palm trees grow in Scotland. Upstate New York and the French Riviera sit at nearly the same latitude. Where would you rather spend the winter?

The Gulf Stream is also why sea beans wash up on Faroese shores with enough frequency to have worked their way into the local folk-

lore. Over the years, as you ask around, you occasionally encounter another person who has found a vitunýra. In some odd coincidence of current patterns and shoreline shapes, more have washed up on your home island, Nólsoy, than on any of the other sixteen inhabited islands in the archipelago. You've carried yours in your pocket since the day you found it. You grow up and become a sailor. Seafaring takes you well beyond Nólsoy's harbor, into Tórshavn, across to Copenhagen, to the green fields of Iceland and the ice-bound shores of Greenland. You have worked aboard a fishing ship, a wooden schooner owned by a Dane and piloted by a Basque, taking cod in the Denmark Strait. You've taken your place along the gunwale of a small wooden dory as part of a flotilla, rowing like mad to drive a pod of fleeing pilot whales into a fjord of a neighboring island. You've never drowned. It must be working.

The endpoints of the course followed by your sea bean serve as the settings for this book. These faraway places, the North Atlantic and the southern Caribbean, are connected in more ways than might immediately be obvious. The similarity that I focus on here, and which I have studied for the past decade, is the use of small cetaceans—a category that includes whales, dolphins, and porpoises—as a source of food for human consumption. The main target species in each location is the pilot whale. Residents of the Faroe Islands and St. Vincent & the Grenadines, an archipelagic country in the southern Caribbean, hunt and consume basically the same whales, "cousin" species of the genus *Globicephala.* The Vincentians hunt whales in a way that is familiar to anyone who has read *Moby-Dick:* they venture out to sea in small boats, harpoon individual whales, and tow them back to the shore. The Faroese, on the other hand, whale in a most unusual way. Using flotillas of several dozen boats, they drive entire pods of whales ashore and kill them with specially designed lances. Each of these artisanal whaling operations takes hundreds of small cetaceans every year for food.

Artisanal whaling is a term used to distinguish the forms of whaling practiced in the Faroe Islands, St. Vincent, and other places

around the world from commercial whaling, which involves large fleets from Japan, Iceland, and Norway, hunting large whales from massive and technologically advanced factory ships. Artisanal whaling is also distinct from *aboriginal subsistence whaling,* which is a technical term used by the International Whaling Commission to designate operations that have been given an exemption from the worldwide moratorium on commercial whaling of protected species, owing to their provision of food to meet the needs—either nutritional or cultural—of recognized aboriginal groups. Randall Reeves, a prominent marine mammal scholar, has characterized artisanal whaling as being centered around "localized family-based operations" and involving "a substantial investment of manual labour . . . traditional skills, and techniques." These are not necessarily noncommercial operations, though. Reeves continues to explain that in artisanal whaling operations, while "products are generally consumed at the household or village level," surpluses can also be sold in "local or regional markets."[3]

The term *whaling operation* also requires explaining. Following the landmark "taxonomy of world whaling" created by Reeves and another marine mammal scientist, Tim Smith, I will use the term to refer to a specific group of people taking cetaceans at a specific time and place.[4] Scientists often use the term *take* instead of *hunt* or *catch* when discussing whaling. The reason for this is that some forms of whaling don't involve actual hunting or catching; we'll discuss the diverse methods later. The global history of whaling is broad and interconnected, with many discrete operations. The bold idea that a human could take a whale—kill it and manage to deliver its carcass to shore—has arisen independently many times throughout history. Techniques and technologies of whaling have also been shared and diffused from one culture to another. While neither the Faroese nor the Vincentians invented whaling, or even the methods of whaling they currently employ, together these distant and disparate operations represent relicts of what was once a much more common way to produce food and resources.

Why, when whaling operations have ceased in many of the places throughout the Atlantic and around the world where they once existed, have those based in the Faroe Islands and St. Vincent continued? What is it about the histories, geographies, cultures, economies, and cuisines of these vastly different places that maintains their use of the pilot whale as a food source? How have the Vincentians and Faroese managed to maintain seemingly sustainable take levels, despite significant increases in both human population and available technology? And how will they deal with emerging environmental crises that scientists are just beginning to understand?

To answer these questions, I knew I would need to conduct a broad and interdisciplinary study of the cultures, conflicts, and conservation strategies that occur in each of these places. I decided to spend a lot of time in both St. Vincent and the Faroe Islands. I made some short visits but also lived in each for months at a time. I went back year after year, not merely as an observer but rather as a participant-observer: trying, as much as possible, to understand what life—of which whaling was just a part—is like there. During my travels, I sought to understand what has allowed whaling to continue in these two places. I was especially interested to learn how each group had managed independently to maintain an apparently sustainable use of the whales, especially in the days before the science of conservation biology, before the techniques of genetic analysis and satellite tracking, and before the advent of the modern environmentalist movement.

Whaling has occurred in St. Vincent for more than a century and in the Faroes for much longer, maybe a millennium.[5] Before anyone had ever heard the slogan "Save the whales," the Vincentians and the Faroese knew that their next meal might depend upon saving some of the whales for later. While they lacked the scientific language to explain the concepts of local extinctions, the importance of robust genetic diversity, and the patterns of regional migration in a population of large marine predators, these early whalers, separated by an ocean, developed their own locally appropriate

methods of conservation. These methods became hidden, embedded within the culture, and were not seen as overtly existing for the purpose of conservation. Because of this hiddenness, these "culturally embedded conservation strategies," as I call them, were rarely questioned; they evolved through the generations, and—in what is perhaps most interesting to conservationists today—like the magic of the sea bean, they seem to have worked . . . so far.

Today, whales are sighted off the Faroes almost every year, mostly in the summer, and some portion of them are driven ashore, killed, processed, and consumed. Caribbean whalers in small, hand-built vessels set out almost every day from the one whaling village on St. Vincent to take small cetaceans for food and small-scale local trade. Relying primarily on their culturally embedded conservation strategies, each society has kept its traditions, adapting to changing conditions when necessary, and seems to have reached an equilibrium with its local cetacean populations. How have both whaling cultures maintained this balance? Why have others throughout history failed to do so? What lessons can we—the overwhelming majority of us who do not think of whales as food—learn from their successes, challenges, and failures? What can we apply to our own interactions with the natural environment and use of its resources? And, perhaps most important, what happens to these traditional practices in the face of massive and rapid global environmental change?

Both the Vincentians and the Faroese now find themselves confronting an environmental threat, the scale and nature of which may be more than their culturally embedded conservation strategies can handle. Industrial pollutants, particularly mercury emitted from the world's coal-fired power plants, but other toxic substances as well, are deposited in the ocean through precipitation or runoff and sink to the bottom, where they are ingested by microscopic organisms living in the benthic, or sea-floor, environment. From there, these pollutants work their way up the marine food web and, through the process known as biomagnification, are concentrated most highly in the bodies of top marine predators: sharks, large fish, and marine mam-

mals including the whales and dolphins that the Faroese and Vincentians hunt for food. Humans who consume these animals take their place at the top of the food web and expose themselves to the highest concentrations of all. The Gulf Stream, along with the entire system of global ocean currents, distributes the pollutants around the world, so mercury emitted in China, India, Europe, or the United States can end its journey in the flesh of a pilot whale harpooned off St. Vincent or driven onto a Faroese beach.

Additionally, as new technologies facilitate instantaneous global communication, more and more people are becoming aware of these whaling operations without necessarily understanding the cultural and historical contexts in which they occur. Bloody photographs are circulated through both traditional and social media, provoking disgust and anger—often at the expense of comprehension—among their viewers. Protests have erupted, more so in the Faroe Islands than in the Caribbean, and calls to stop the practice of artisanal whaling through legislation, treaties, boycotts, or simply by force reverberate across the internet.

Can knowledge and understanding travel across an ocean of cultural diversity, charting a course like that of a sea bean? Would greater understanding on both sides of the whaling debate temper the controversy? Does education hold the answer to the issue of mercury contamination and other forms of global environmental degradation? Or are the problems too far gone and the Vincentians and Faroese should simply abandon whales and dolphins as a traditional food source? What is the future for the people of the Faroe Islands and St. Vincent, who rely on cetaceans for their livelihood, their cultural identity, and—in some cases—their next meal? It would be hard to answer these questions in a straight line. There is no one set of scientific data that can definitively address the complex ethical, ecological, cultural, and health issues related to whaling. To study a topic like this, we must follow a meandering intellectual current, winding like the Gulf Stream as it flows from St. Vincent to the Faroe Islands.

It is with humble understanding of the variety of intense human emotions that can be stirred during a fair and inclusive discussion of whaling that I begin this book. Nearly thirty years ago, Finn Lynge, a Greenlandic sociologist and policymaker, advised against attempting to minimize the emotional element of the whaling debate and instead advocated welcoming it into the conversation.[6] Lynge's advice still seems difficult to apply today. Science and emotion are uneasy partners in inquiry. My approach here is similar to that with which Ernest Hemingway opened his treatise on bullfighting, *Death in the Afternoon:* "I suppose, from a modern moral point of view, that is, a Christian point of view, the whole bullfight is indefensible; there is certainly much cruelty, there is always danger, either sought or unlooked for, and there is always death, and I should not try to defend it now, only to tell honestly the things I have found true about it. To do this I must be altogether frank, or try to be, and if those who read this decide with disgust that it is written by some one who lacks their, the readers', fineness of feeling I can only plead that this may be true. But whoever reads this can only truly make such a judgment when he, or she, has seen the things that are spoken of and knows truly what their reactions would be."[7] In the same vein, the late neurosurgeon Paul Kalanithi wrote in his memoir that "direct experience of life-and-death questions [is] essential to generating substantial moral opinions about them."[8] Neither of these statements diminishes the role of judgment—what Kalanithi calls "moral opinion." There is a place for it, even in academic, scientific research. Rather, it's an ordering: experience first, opinion second. All too often—with whaling, sure, but with countless other issues in life as well—we form our opinions without the benefit of experience.

I have "seen the things that are spoken of" here and have had "direct experience" with the whales and whaling communities about which I write. Thus, meeting both Hemingway's and Kalanithi's requirements, I feel that it's right to have formed "substantial moral opinions" about the questions of whaling—though perhaps, to be honest, still with a foreign observer's never-complete understanding.

We'll get there, to my own opinions, for whatever they're worth. Before then, the majority of this book is about the experience of research, the data and memories that this experience created, and, as much as possible, a compilation and critique of the most relevant literature—the science and stories of others who were as intrigued by these hunter societies as I am.

I must be, in Hemingway's words, "altogether frank," and so I will present not only empirical findings but also subjective reflections on what it was like to do this research. I'll introduce the characters I met and tell stories about the adventures and misadventures that led to the understanding I now have of Faroese and Vincentian whaling. Some of the narrative and images may be disturbing, especially to readers who—like me—love the natural world in general, the ocean more specifically, and whales and dolphins with an affection most particular of all. For these sensitive readers, I have included the occasional non-whaling-related story—not only to offer a break from the hunt, but to present a humanizing view of the Faroese and Vincentian people. Yes, they kill whales. But that isn't all they do. With that one glaring exception—which, I acknowledge, may be insurmountable to some readers—the lives of those with whom I spent time in their whaling communities looked a lot like my own, once the façades of language, ethnicity, economics, and geography were breached.

In fact, my own hands are not clean. The participatory nature of the fieldwork that led to this book required that I be present to assist in the process of whaling in both locations. To one who equates whaling with murder, I was an accomplice. To the whalers themselves, I was merely an assistant, at best a semi-inept sharer in the labor, at worst a body in the way. In both field sites, more than once, I traveled uncomfortably back to my lodgings after whaling, dried blood and salt residue staining my skin, the smell of the butchery lingering around me, wafting from my clothes and from my hair. I never personally killed a whale, although at times I wanted to. Not for the macabre experience, like some big-game trophy hunter, but to put a suffering cetacean out of its misery when the process of dying—coldly

measured by my stopwatch during the time-to-death portion of my research—seemed to drag on forever.

From the perspective of the whalers, I was also a beneficiary of their labor. Early in the research planning process I decided that I would eat the food that whaling produced. This decision was a triumph of curiosity over apprehension but also yielded a practical outcome. By eating whale meat and blubber with the people I would meet in the Faroe Islands and St. Vincent I was able to connect with them in a way that abstention would have made difficult. Of course, by eating whale meat I also gave up my pretense of objectivity—if any such thing ever actually existed in academic research.

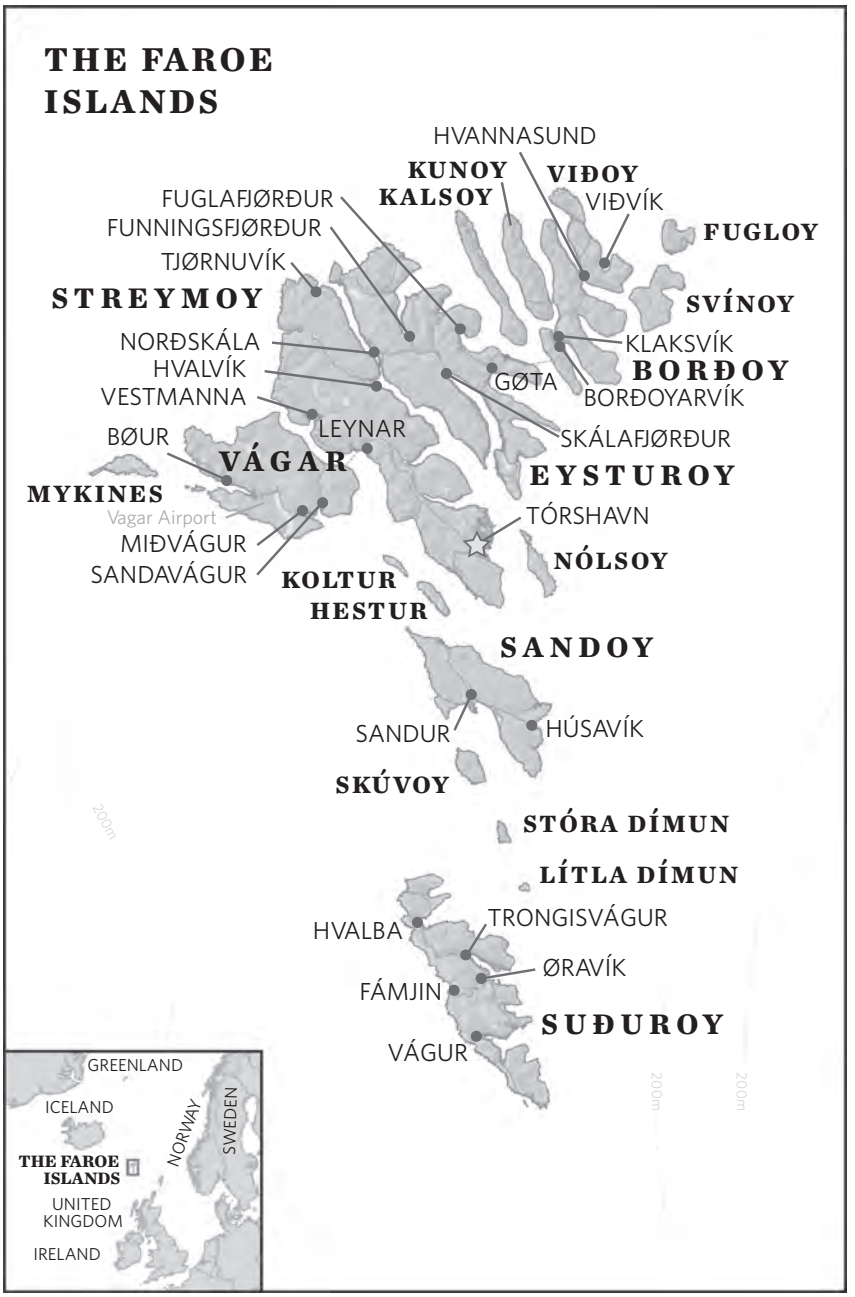
Because I cannot lay claim to objectivity, I don't set out to argue for the rightness or wrongness of whaling in the Faroe Islands and St. Vincent. Rather, as an academic geographer and environmental scientist, my goal is to understand and learn from and about our diverse uses of the natural environment. I apply the techniques of my discipline, borrowing heavily from the repertoires of the anthropologist and the ethnographer. Whaling is but one example of the complex interdependent relationship between humans and what we call "nature." It's neither the most important nor the most ubiquitous example of this relationship but one that ignites passions—in favor or against—far beyond the scope of its actual practice.

Whales and dolphins are "charismatic megafauna," meaning they are large and have endeared themselves to many people. Most cetaceans are perceived correctly as being intelligent, social, and ecologically important. Their killing is controversial within the cultures of most developed nations. Faroese whaling has attracted protests, boycotts, and direct intervention. The fact that the Vincentians haven't had the same experience speaks more to the obscurity of their whaling activities than to some judicious approval on the world stage. Certainly there is a need for conversations about how—and even whether—Faroese and Vincentian whaling should continue. But the arguments being aired today on social media and reality television

about Faroese whaling, while largely excluding Faroese voices, promise little in terms of productive outcomes.

My greatest fear in writing this book is that it will expose the as yet little-known whaling operations of the Caribbean to unjust international opposition, the likes of which the Faroese have grown well accustomed to. I discussed this concern with Samuel Hazelwood, the greatest living whaler in St. Vincent, who allayed my fears with a simple admonition to "just tell the truth. I'm not ashamed of what I do." Samuel, thank you; I've done my best.

At a moment when whaling is a major point of contention between the Faroese and the rest of the world, and when it could become so at any time for the Vincentians, what I write is of course not meant to be the final word on the matter. I only set out—following Hazelwood's instruction and Hemingway's example—to make it true. I write this book to present the reality of whaling as I have come to know it.



The Faroe Islands, with all approved whaling bays labeled. Cartography by Alison de Graff Ollivierre, Tombolo Maps & Design. *Data sources:* Open Street Map, Umhvørvisstovan, and the University of Minnesota Polar Geospatial Center.

1

The Most Exciting Word in Faroese

Grindaboð. Pronounced "GRIN-da-boa." Try saying it a few times: *GRIN-da-boa. GRIN-da-boa. GRIN-da-boa.* The first time I was on Faroese radio, the interviewer asked me to repeat this word just after he started recording. I first thought that the audio engineer needed to check the sound levels and that maybe he was using this word as the Faroese equivalent of "check one two." Or that maybe he figured it would be funny to hear such a pure, iconic Faroese word pronounced with my American accent. Like an American hearing a British person say, "Howdy, partner." When the interview played later, though, during the twelve o'clock news hour—one of two times per day (the other being six in the evening) when every Faroese conversation pauses, radios are turned up, and listeners look askance at anyone who dares interrupt—I knew the actual reason: it was an attention-grabber. Like "Fire!" in a crowded theater. The American anthropologist Jonathan Wylie has called *grindaboð* "the most exciting word in Faroese."[1] If you want to command the attention of any Faroese person within earshot, say—no, shout—"Grindaboð!"

The word is composed of two parts: *grind,* meaning "a pod of pilot whales," and *boð,* meaning "message." *Grindaboð* literally means "pilot whale message" and is used to announce the message that pilot whales have been sighted and there is going to be a whale drive. The radio interview began with a looped recording of my voice saying—chanting, rather—"Grindaboð! Grindaboð! Grindaboð!" People listened.

In Faroese, *hvalur* means "whale." Because there are many different kinds of whale, the term *grindahvalur* is used to specify the long-finned pilot whale, known to scientists as *Globicephala melas* since first being identified as a unique species by the Scottish physician Thomas Stewart Traill in 1809.[2] The long-finned pilot whale is a small, toothed cetacean, not a large baleen whale. It would more accurately be described as a large species of dolphin; after all, its taxonomic family is *Delphinidae.* The genus *Globicephala* comprises two species: *G. melas* and *G. macrorhynchus,* the long-finned and short-finned pilot whales, respectively. There are morphological differences between the two species, the most obvious of which is the eponymous fin length—up to 30 percent of the body length in *G. melas,* but maxing out at 19 percent in *G. macrorhynchus.*[3] While individual whales of the two species may be difficult to distinguish at sea, the need rarely arises because they inhabit nearly separate ranges. The only pilot whales in Faroese waters are long-finned. In the Caribbean, the only pilot whales are short-finned. Both kinds of pilot whales travel in pods, which are made up of a few dozen to several hundred individuals. Pilot whales of both species are recognized by their jet-black skin and bulbous foreheads. The former characteristic led to one of their common names, blackfish, used throughout the Caribbean and along the eastern coast of North America. The latter feature is the reason Newfoundlanders refer to pilot whales as "potheads." The most common English name, pilot whale, is likely a reference to the whale's behavior: congregating together in large pods and traveling together behind a leader, or pilot.