


2013

"A Culture"

James May

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Recommended Citation

May, James (2013) "'A Culture'," *Birmingham Poetry Review*: Vol. 40, Article 60.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/bpr/vol40/iss2013/60>

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"A Culture"

That's what the voiceover calls the family of orcas,
because over generations, through language and imitation,
they have preserved their methods for hunting stingrays.

Approaching its prey, the orca will turn upside down,
clasp the ray in its teeth and then right itself so the ray
is upside down, which triggers some evolutionary typo

that floods the ray's brain with serotonin, rendering it
completely calm before the orca leisurely halves the body.
It was the sort of image any book would lose to,

no less the sentence I was reading that declaimed *art
must be useful*. After commercials, another clip, this one
of a mother protecting her pup by using the same technique

on a great white. Murky shadows in frothing water,
noises from circling birds and bewildered tourists on boats.
For fifteen minutes she held the shark belly-up

a few feet below the surface so the water no longer rushed
across the gills. A slow suffocation, then flakes
of masticated tissue, the nutrient-rich liver consumed

and the body left for the gulls. The book
on the table for the night, Chelsea and I went to dinner
where I failed to make interesting or plausible

my idea about the orcas—how their language works
like those ancient and useful mnemonic poems about farming
and laws. *The end of writing*, Johnson said, *is to instruct*;

the end of poetry is to instruct by pleasing. We had no idea
what to order. Then our French waiter repeated Chelsea's question:
"What is the duck stuffed with? Madame,
the duck is stuffed with more duck."