

Catharine Lucas

BOY NOT SEEING WHALES

Point Lobos, Monterey Coast

—There's one! See the smoke signal?

—I see it! There's another! There's two! See those, Charley?

His sister is faking, mom and dad acting crazy.

There are no whales.

Charley is seven and knows his whales: huge and black and barnacled, with flukes. He did a report. They leap, that's breaching—how could he miss a black giant flying?

So far, today: sea lions, slugs on dun-colored rocks; you wait hours for one to move. Otters are better, rumpling their faces with little hands, tumbling under a sloshy wave. But he had otters at the Aquarium. Up close.

They promised him whales.

Small indignant shoulder blades tighten against their fakey glee. Arms fling off defeat, propel him along the cliff. Out of earshot he brakes. Squares off to stare down the empty sea. He can prove it: NO WHALES HERE.

Two women pass, one explaining.

—What we see is spume from the blowhole.

The spout? People come just to watch a whale breathe out?

Then, he sees:

pale gray, pencil thin, a dash of chalk on slate, swiped away by the wind's quick fist.

He might doubt the one, but his whale is lolling, and she blows twice again before she sounds, as if she senses him, slows to salute his urgent and familiar longing.