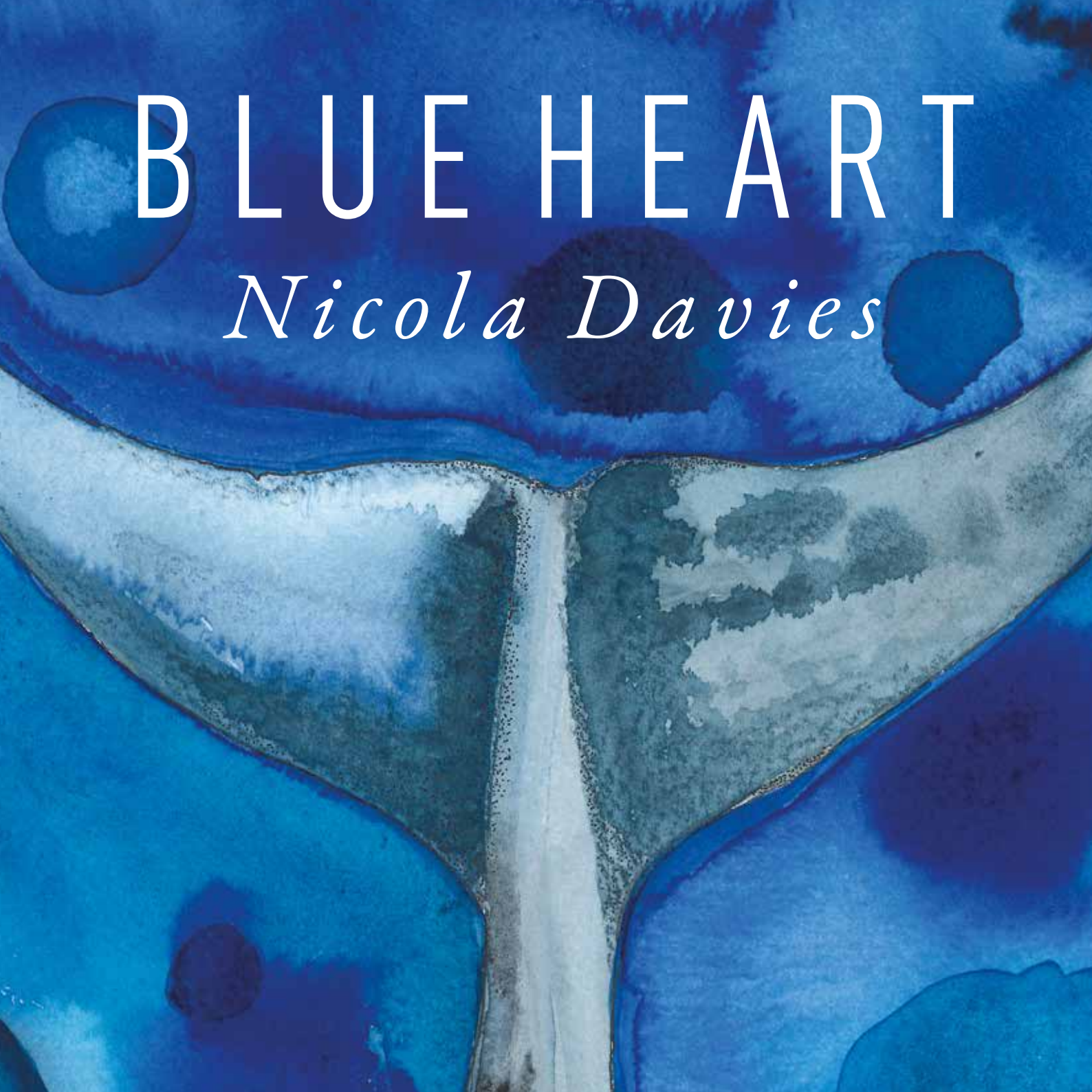
BLUE HEART
Nicola Davies

Blue Heart
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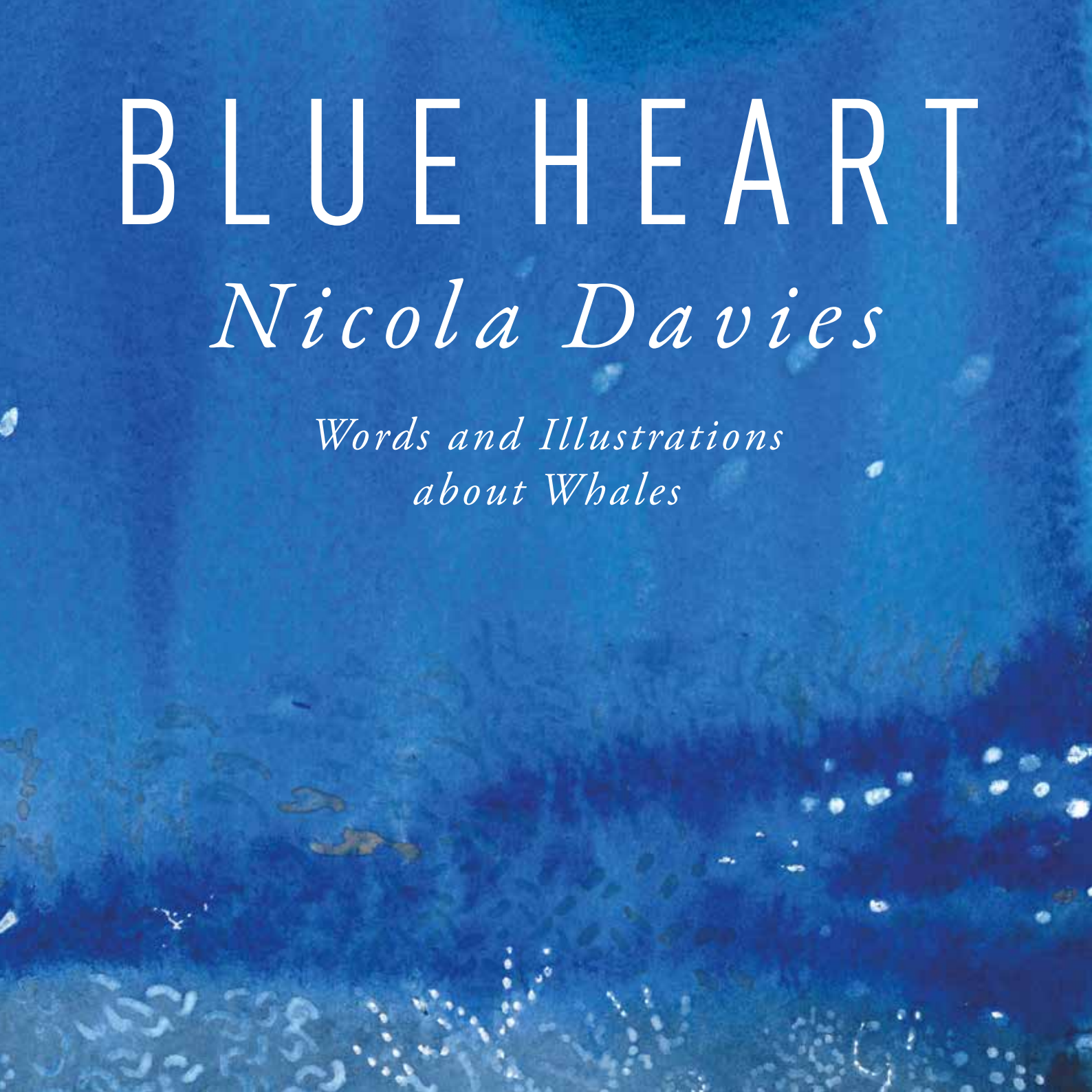

BLUE HEART
Nicola Davies
Words and Illustrations
about Whales

Blue Heart *Nicola Davies*

I've always adored the sea. I'd stay in the waves as a child until I was blue with cold and crinkly from immersion. And I've always loved animals, but growing up in the UK, birds are mostly what I saw, so birds became what I wanted to concentrate on when I went to Cambridge to study zoology.

This changed when I, quite literally, bumped into a young man who went on to be the foremost whale scientist of his generation, Hal Whitehead. Hal (now Professor Whitehead) was looking for a research assistant for a study of humpback whales off the coast of Newfoundland, and I got the job. I spent two summers watching humpbacks from cliffs and the decks of Hal's small boat, *Firenze*, and I was hooked. Thanks in large part to Hal and his wide network of colleagues, over the many years since I've spent time on other small boats, helping with studies of blue whales and sperm whales, in Sri Lanka, the Sea of Cortez in Mexico and in Dominica in the Caribbean. I've spent many days staring at the blue horizon all around looking for whale blows, balancing data sheets on my lap as shipmates shout observations and measurements about huge groups of sperm whales. I've got good at scooping whale poo and whale skin from the sea and at fixing humpback whale positions from a cliff using a surveyor's transit. I've never got good at being a sailor, however, as I've always been too busy being lost in the wonder of the ocean and being, forever, seasick. Outside of scientific studies, I've also seen whales in Alaska, South Africa, Spitzbergen, the Azores and here at home in Pembrokeshire, although here we see mostly smaller members of the cetacean clan, common dolphins and porpoises.

I've tried to share my passion for whales and the sea with the children and adults I've written for and worked with. My very first book for children, published over 25 years ago, was a picture book about blue whales. I must have paced out the length of a blue whale in hundreds of school halls across the UK and around the world. In 2023 I saw blue whales for the first time in more than a decade from the decks of a whale watching ship in the Azores – a mother and a baby looking exactly like the wonderful illustration (by Nick Malland) in that first book. It felt like a very special sort of completion. I have a sense of circles closing in my relationship to humpback whales too; they were my first whales, but although I've taught thousands of children how to make the basic sounds of humpback song, it took me until 2023 to write a book about it.

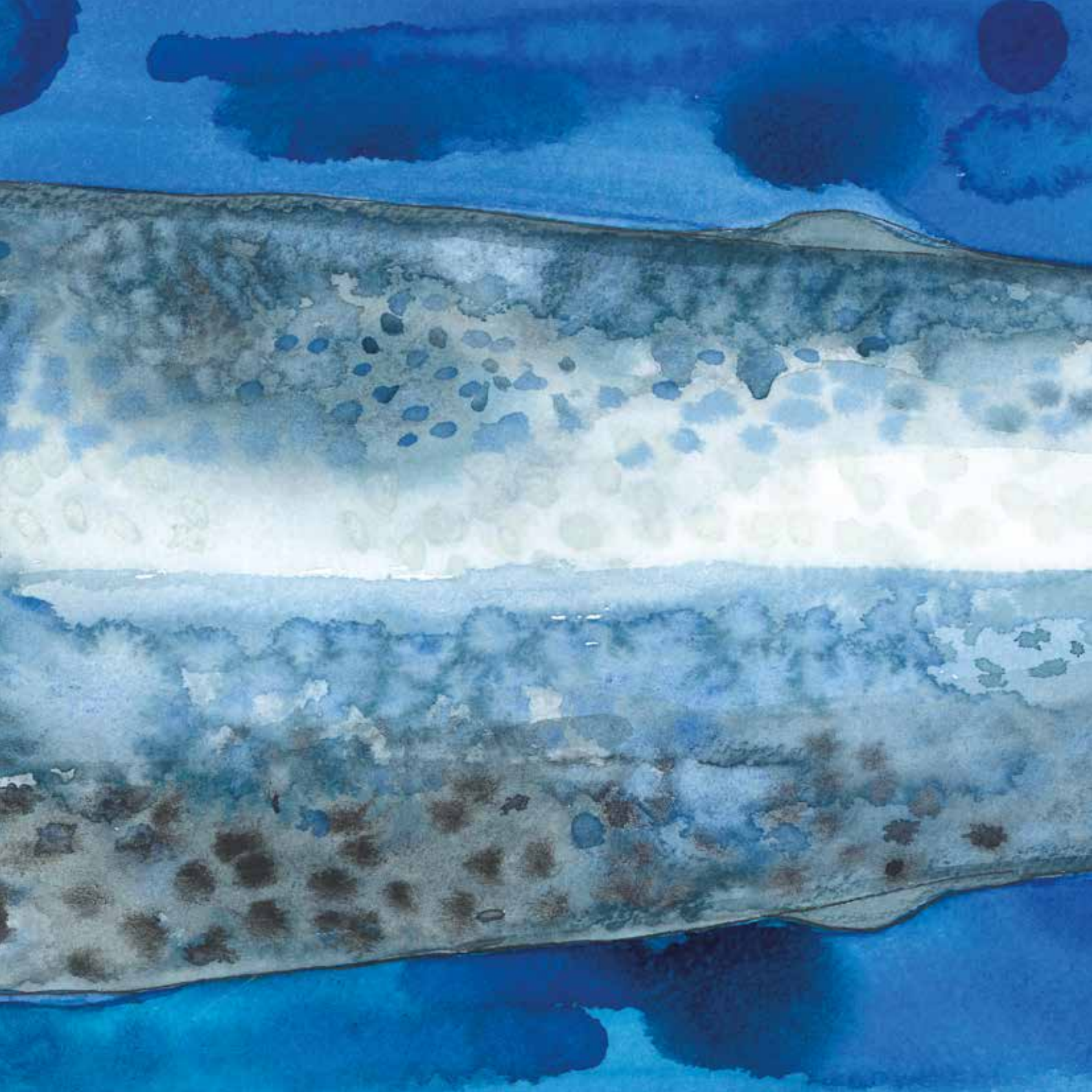
I've put whales into both non-fiction books and fantasy novels. This book isn't fantasy, but it isn't quite non-fiction either, although it will give you some factual information about whales. It is a celebration in pictures and poems of some of the species of whales I've seen and spent time with. It is a very personal collection, as although it reflects some of the biology of these wondrous creatures, it is mostly about my experiences of them, and the deep and lasting impression they have made on me. I suppose you could say it's an extended love letter.

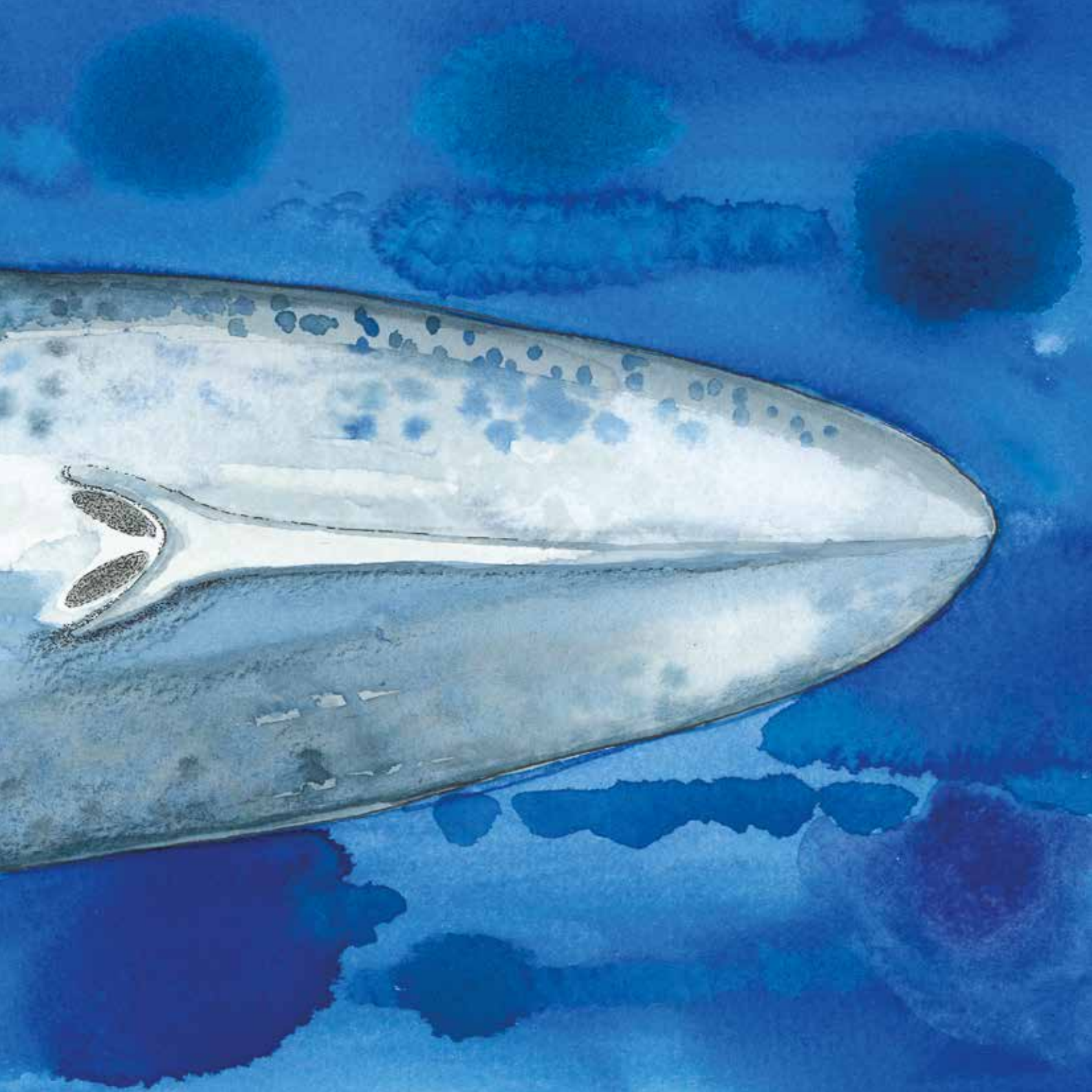
Whales are perhaps a hundred times less numerous now than they once were before humans began to hunt them. Even though large-scale commercial whaling has ended, whales face terrible threats from our activities, collisions with shipping, entanglement in fishing gear, pollution, climate change and the erosion of their food sources through overfishing. I know that I am incredibly lucky to have seen a whale at all and that it is an experience that a vanishingly tiny percentage of humanity can hope to have. But if we humans make the right decisions, in the

future whales might not be so hard to see as they are now. There is a growing recognition of the vital role that whales play in regulating the balance of our atmosphere, and as a result, our climate. They are nutrient recyclers, bringing nourishment from the depths to promote the growth of plant plankton in the sunlit upper reaches of the oceans that produce half of the oxygen in our atmosphere. They also store up carbon in their bodies and keep it locked in the depths of the sea when they die and sink to the bottom. Recent studies suggest that if we were to restore whale populations to what they were before humans began commercial whaling, whales could take 1.7 billion tons of CO2 from the atmosphere every year, equivalent to the emissions produced by all the cars in the USA.

But there is more to whales than 'ecosystem services'. Seeing a wild whale is an experience that touches every kind of heart. It reminds us that as human beings we share in the joy and wonder of the natural world and that we all belong here on this beautiful planet. I believe that the goal of mending our beleaguered Earth, through restoring whale populations and all wild ecosystems, in the sea and on the land, could unite humankind and allow us to become a better version of ourselves, compassionate to all life, caring of all our fellow beings.

Nicola Davies





Blue Whales

Blue whales are not only the biggest animals on earth now, they are the biggest animals that have ever lived.

Their huge size allows them to wander enormous distances in search of the dense patches of shrimp-like creatures and shoals of small fish on which they depend. But this vagabond lifestyle has a cost – it means that individuals are often separated by hundreds or thousands of miles of ocean, making it tricky when it comes to breeding season. Blue whales get round this by producing low humming sounds, a frequency perfect for long-distance propagation through the sea. Before humans made so much noise in the seas, a blue whale off Hawaii could probably say 'Hi' to a blue whale in the Ross Sea off Antarctica. When you hear this sound it is like a vast engine thrumming in the deep, a sound you feel in you body rather than hear with your ears. It conveys the sheer scale of the animal almost more than seeing its endlessly long back slipping through the water, or watching its great flukes rise up, then vanish.

Blue Heart

If you look at Earth from space it isn't green,
You can't see trees and grass from way up there,
Nor the paintbox brown of deserts that they put on maps;
The twinkly, sequin-scatter of our city lights fades out too,
The colour of our planet is just blue.

If you cut me open you'd see the usual stuff,
Red blood, white bone, the porridge grey of brain,
Thirty trillion cells in singing tangle, each cell a tiny sea,
A minute memory of the ocean where first it grew,
And in the middle of them all, my heart is blue.

One day perhaps we'll learn to play amongst the stars
To bathe in the phosphorescent glow of galaxies
And wander to the very edge of time.
But we'll never quite forget this life we knew,
Home always and forever will be blue.

How Big is a Blue Whale?

From the start I could quote the stats;
A body as long as three school buses,
The slow...
wait for it
wait for it
wait for it
BEAT
of a heart the size of a small car,
an aorta you could post a toddler down.
But I did not really really understand
that humongous, huge, enormous, vast
don't work for creatures more like landscape than like living thing.
Until
Until
the fluke lifted from the ocean, big as weather,
swept down,
casual as God-turning-over-in-bed-to-make-the-Himalayas,
and almost sank our boat.
Until
I heard the blow
like a door opening in a cathedral
or a stone dropping down into a cavern that could swallow Paris.
Then at last I knew
how big BIG BIG
a blue whale really is.

Respect the Invisible

Oxygen's invisible, but right now your body's busy with it:
the hidden space inside your lungs (bigger than your living room)
extracting it with every breath;
blood vessels, long enough to loop the world five times,
deliver it to every part.
You don't have to think about it.
It's all invisible to your conscious mind.

Whales are invisible too.
You don't see them in the ordinary world of living rooms.
They are off somewhere at the edges of imagination, almost fictional.
And yet your every breath connects you to a whale.
Whales fertilise the sunny upper reaches of the ocean
so the plants there – also almost invisible – flourish,
and make half the oxygen you breathe.

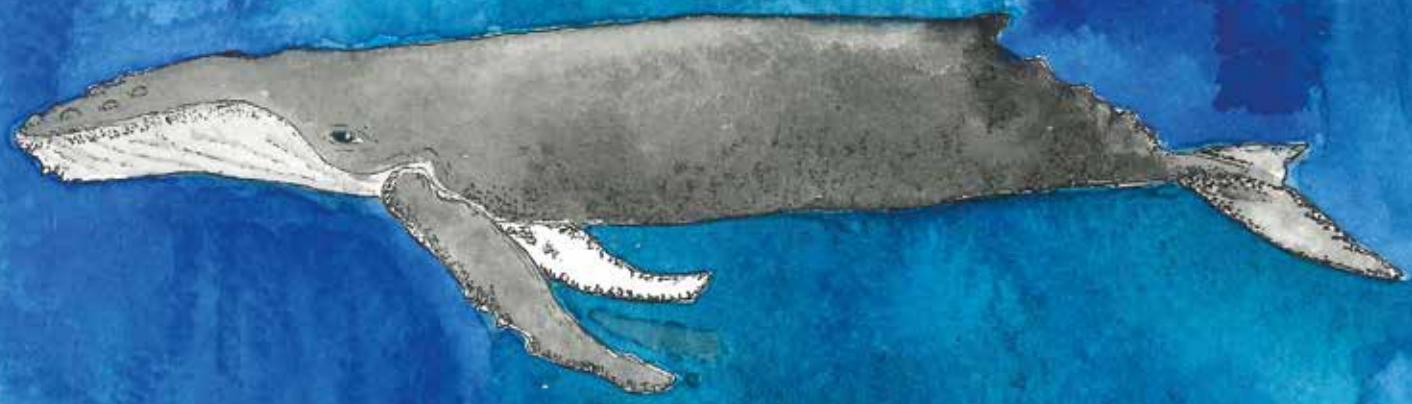
You should pay attention to things that are invisible
Especially the ones on which your life depends.

Not only does whale activity put oxygen into the atmosphere, it takes carbon dioxide out. Restoring whale populations to pre-whaling levels would be a powerful weapon against climate change.

BLUE HEART

Nicola Davies

Nicola Davies' life was changed when she went to study humpback whales in Canada. In the forty years since that day, they have never lost their magic for her and have led her on adventures around the world. This book is her love letter, in poems, memoir and illustrations, to the animals who stole her heart and to whom each one of us is connected through every breath we take.



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