Poems Written on the 38th Voyage of the Charles W. Morgan
Elizabeth L. Schultz

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Poems Written on the 38th
Voyage of the Charles W. Morgan

MIDNIGHT: BLUBBER ROOM
The ship’s maw, once filled
with bones and blubber,
oozing and rotting, a dense
and oily stench, waiting to be
digested and boiled in the try-
pots on deck, now smells of
land and trees just trimmed
and planed. By day, the ship’s
diurnal commotion, its clicks
and clatter, echo here. Lined
with compact sailors’ chests,
hawsers coiled and piled like
tidy intestines, and spare
anchors, this low, confined
space hums and chortles like
a shoreline’s contented bovine.

But walking through
the blubber room at midnight,
the ship’s ribs outlined
in shadow by one light
swaying, I am Ishmael,
sleepless, far from land and
listening to the sea’s gargle
against the ship, the tremors
of whales reverberating
through hull and keel.

QUEEQUEG’S GHOST
Not in sight: my bosom
companion, that tall man,
speaking English with
an island lilt, his head
tattooed in purple and
yellow squares, his legs
in green frogs, and on his
back a mystical treatise
on the art of attaining truth.

You could not mistake him. He signed his papers with a clam's name and dotted his I's with a harpoon tossed the ship's length. There's just a whisper of him when the wind comes in over the transom.

Once his coffin life-buoy saved me, but in this new story, I depend on orange life-preservers and the quick thinking of strangers.

This crowd is European, salty, but blanched, no islanders among them. They've met their whales in tracts, encyclopedias, as well as speedy Zodias. But Queequeg wrestled with his in the ocean's bowels and faced them eye-to-eye as newborns, coiled and pearly.

GIRLS IN THE RIGGING
Starbuck remembered his Mary, and Stubb his old mother. We knew the blacksmith was doing penance for the suffering he'd laid on his sad wife. But girls weren't a palpable presence on the Pequod though we might have longed for them at night and while squeezing spermaceti. Though we watched the amorous ways of whales, no sweet Polynesian maids ever swam out to greet us. It was all under covers on the Pequod.
But Clara Tinkham’s bedroom cozies right up to the captain’s quarters on the Morgan. She could be seen fanning herself with soft sea breezes on her sofa. Other captains brought their wives, who earned their way, assisting with the navigation and medication, but the Morgan, restored, has girls flying from the rigging—a Cirque du Soleil—lowering whale boats, mounting the masthead, taking Flask’s place as Mate, federating the whale ship, at last, along its keel.

Crewmember Joee Patterson working on the bowsprit of the Charles W. Morgan. Photo courtesy of Matthew Porter.
THE MORGAN ON STELLWAGEN BANK

We sailed amidst them,
out on Stellwagen Bank,
the old ship, no longer
armed with barbs or tricked
out with lances, but newly
rigged, spreading fresh
canvas on all masts, rising
up, up, upon the waves,
joyous and reborn and soaring.

We met them on their
playground, a minke first,
arched and glistening,
forerunner for the humpbacks,
who frolicked in a pod,
splashing, somersaulting,
making waves, their fins,
long white angels’ wings,
gyrating, beating upward
out of the sea, before diving
down, down, their signature
tails following them, curved
and hovering, heart-shaped,
shimmering, before dissolving
into depths, the flukes now
phantasmagoric shadows,
leaving shearwaters and terns,
circling like visible echoes
above their churning,
while we leaned out
on the ship’s rail, intent
on a second coming,
awed by such exuberance,
yearning for forgiveness.

HOLY SHIT!

Once on Stellwagen, I saw
a sperm whale breach. She
threw herself high against
the sky, glistening grey, and
our boat swayed in her
churning. At the railing,
we applauded our diva divine,
gasping when she crashed
back into the sea, showering us, pelting us with salt water crystals, encircling us with shit, streaming, steaming, with turds, spinning, swirling. Who had ever seen such fabulous flatulence? Our cruiser became rimmed in pungent brown, our vision excremental.

Decades later, once more on Stellwagen, I met a marine fecalogist, whose studies claimed such cetological fecal plumes, swelling and smelling, spreading through crisp, blue waters, such flocculant feces, ripe with itinerant micro-organisms, composted the ocean, recreating, resurrecting.

No Victorian, if sex and religion were at stake, Ishmael cleansed his story of all potty talk, though he would have listened, rapt, to such a scientist, observing vital connections everywhere.

THE AUTHENTIC SHIP
Though I am deep inland, the grass off the highway, the only sea, lifting wave on wave to its long horizon, ships move toward that line. They sail through surging water, spindrift flying. Lifted on swells, they dip, sliding down breakers, dissolving into heaving turquoise water. Details of rigging and plank, captain and crew are liquefied.
But because I’ve trod
the Morgan’s deck,
watched her 19 sails unfurl,
explored her blubber room,
because I know her live oak
keel steadies her, she becomes
precise in word and paint.
With the barbaric Pequod,
Ryder’s moonlit vessels,
Turner’s whale ships,
spewing gore into a blood
red dawn, she looms and
moves across the canvas
of my mind, sails billowing.

—Elizabeth Schultz
University of Kansas