Taking Her Back

Portuguese Presence &
the 38th Voyage of the Charles W. Morgan

poetry by
Cristina J. Baptista
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W. Morgan
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~Cristina J. Baptista~

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To the *Morgan*

Let me be your scrivener, thrusting ink on your sails.

No—
it *is* there, how sky slips between folds, writing its words in a history of secret languages, eternal stories that linger in air and,

by morning, are gone.

Let me record them, then now, with temptation and tempting pen, with my awe and with my wonder.

Let me fold myself amidst canvas and conspiracy to let silence do all the talking.
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Mizzenmast:
Looking Back

Time reverses things, drives them impossibly
against their opposites,
until they find a circle
and come back home.
Bellwethers

More than woman,
a ship is the greatest temptation.

Men came at the call,
clambered up the gangway,
each with his own story, strapped snug
to distant tongues, the cargo

of tales worth their weight in stones. She accepted
each without discerning difference.

They were all Adams, but instead of a Garden,
found a wilderness of water\(^1\)
and instead of forked-tongue speech
of the serpent, it was the splitting syllables

of a foreign language that caused fear
and confusion.

She swathed their feet in brine,
cleansed their flesh in beating sun signaling
off catharpins.
They were brought forth to the ribs

of the ship.
What kind of god holds so many bones,

a belly so strong and full?
She shrouded and laid them in their berths
like nesting dolls.
She, an Eve of ribs,

gifts and fruits
of so many Adams’ devotions.

Despite their knowledge,
the greatest fear loomed:
forgetting a word
in their own tongue.

Who knows how many languages are stolen, kept
beneath deck planks; and how many speak of hope

as if it is an alien thing.
A whaleship is all things impossible,
all water and fire,
life or death – there is no in-between,

---

\(^1\)The phrase “wilderness of water” comes from Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* (1851).
there is no comfort
for the deviled haloed men.

People, too, have “floating ribs.”
When do we become the things we do,

the places we live?
A whaleman is an incurable insomniac,
roaming the parameters, looking
for a gate out of this wilderness,

all the time knowing better. The way of getting around
a whaleship is simple:

stay where you are
until told otherwise.

Every voyage is a traipsing towards Styx,
the shaking hands with Charon, humming
to dissipate fear, chanteys to say
“we are coming.”

This ship is ribbed and heaving,
transporting
to all who dare to climb.
In the closing-up,

in the spaces of oakum and ash,
some wounds never heal—

others—
too well. Still, here, the single Eve,
to tempt with the cupping figure
of a heaving wooden body,

the tapered edge
of a bowsprit: a convincing, luring finger.
Men & the Morgan

Though we are dark,
the other men, at first,
keep a distance
as if we are the pale ghosts
who haunt the decks.

Sure as whales are hunted,
everyone is haunted,
every ship.

She hauls her body through the whale-road,
leaving white crests
and heavy brows in every port.

She drags her fingers, claws through sky,
each star a hole where mast has punctured—
letting the war in.

Like O lareira-gato,2 we leapt to the water
to find our gold,
everything promised to us by fathers
who told us tudo será melhor,3
who told us,
and we believed them.

---

2“O Lareira-gato,” or “The Hearth-Cat,” is a Portuguese folklore story akin to Cinderella.
3“everything will be better”
The Islanders

Every bit of dust out here
is shattered.

Men who board with volcanic ash from those purple ports\textsuperscript{4}
tucked into the folds of torn

shoes are soon without the earth
they call home.

Wind and water are both friend and foe,
the wash-clean forces

that unite and engage all men,
make them holy

and chafed. Every bit of dust
is a memory, a chant,

a morning fog that flutters
lighter than sails,

dispersing like a great breath,
a recognizable heave—a sigh.

\textsuperscript{4}Roman author, naturalist, and philosopher Gaius Plinius Secundus (AD 23 – August 25, AD 79), better known as Pliny the Elder, supposedly called what would later be Madeira the “Purple Islands.”
Beyond the Edge

As the sun drops slow,  
the sea opens its arms  
wide, shaping a basket  
to collect the fruit  
slices of light.

It’s the whales who swallow  
them first,  
on temptation sliding  
beyond the edge of look-outs,  
the sound beneath the main.

About 30 sperm whales  
clicking  
sounds like crews’ fingers  
snapping, or 100 pages  
of a 100 books

in some watery library  
being flipped quickly,  
taunting the 30 pairs of  
olive eyes  
that cannot read.
Whaleboats

Their lives dangle on davits
and require the work of many hands
to make the smooth transition,
the graceful yet swift fall

into place.
Uniformity is a conscious decision
to move as a single organism
striking out against Nature,

as it is with everyone, everywhere in life.
Every decision—even practiced ones—
means a risk.

Only the brave can manage,
only the foreign can understand.
They do not know the language,
cannot hear the warnings.
Boys

When a whaleboat bucks,
takes its sleigh ride,
there are no men for
at least a moment—
only boys
in a soapy bath
remembering how — once —
it was a game
to sink their boats,
unmanned, with no knots
or moving parts,
but run by a child who—
once—
felt himself a God,
larger than Neptune.
End of the Watch

After exchanges in strange tones,  
there is the lull  
that rolls, a delicacy, on tongues  
of wave and spark.

The sigh is too much—preventing  
immediate movement,  
a lifting of bones  
from the spot, the indecision  
of Hamlet and all men  
accustomed to impossibility—  
that is—accustomed to reality.

In every life, there is a decision to kill  
or not to kill  
the time that is offered, the way it is spent,  
the way it spends people.

They fold shrouds like altar cloths,  
pinching corners between  
pricked thumbs and knuckles from stitching—  
work that would make their fathers laugh.

Fine-tuning raw fingers surprise  
with delicate precision  
and firm yet fairy-wing touches  
like breeze itself—gentle on a cheek  
but plummeting through square rigging.  
Manual labor holds everything together  
as much as caulking and oakum,  
like clockwork  
of a broken time-piece,  
like the straight line  
of a crooked compass.  
Eventually,  
everything gets done  
in its own way.  
Eventually,  
everything stays alive.

The tryworks bubbles; hair bristles  
when too close. Somewhere just a pinpoint  
or grain of salt  
on the horizon
is the seed of hope and home,
rising slightly
and sinking beneath each crest.
They stamp in place, drift, look up
to ensure they do not hit their heads
on the booby hatch, and without much saying,
or saying much,
go under.
Coils

The motion, the hands, slightly cradling, and body, from the center of the hands, make when coiling rope like passing an object hand-over-hand is a snaking circlet, a sleeping serpent, a coil of plaited hair.
Moving, 1841

All water is a poetry,
a movement toward the unknown
question, in itself a stasis because everything seems uniform,
each wave so complex, yet as sinister
as the next.

What tells us
how far we’ve gone
is not a measure of time or space
but of the emotional range
our frames have frequented,

as if knotting in a chip log
twisting around each artery.
How we know we are not free
comes in how often our hands
are bound to lines.

Memory breed hyperbole,

lines of cantos and scripture
flooding fast to fill the space.
Little minds fall into the rut—
or blessing—of nostalgia.
But this can be our saving and savior,
a rush to preserve.

The only difference comes when a whale
rides in, bent like a question
mark, to the line of sight, when the look-out can shout
the urgent warning and command,
when men once more get to test their bones

and rise to the boats.
Every moment brings an aching for something
that matters, for a meaning
just beyond the self:

*Take what you get from the sea
and hope it gets you home.*
Eavesdroppers

These lanques name unholy things
after their holy book—
whale scraps become “bible leaves”
as if to sanctify the monster

as if this means salvation, too,
for what they call us,
as if we do not know:
the monster men,

eyes deep-set, brow bristling
with dry, black blood—
men
who cannot read

save the signs of hands,
the way light slivers and evaporates
at both ends of day
and the bodies of the dead.

Men who eavesdrop with bare feet
pressed against a battered stage,
memorizing the feeling
of salted grain, burning a heel.

We wait and pretend.
Every word learned cleaves
open a new world,
a cutting-in with tongue.
An *Estrella* Becomes a “Starr”

*for B. Starr of New Bedford, MA*

Like a blubber hook, the *cedilha*\(^5\)
catches strangeness and pulls it closer
in ebony language of islands and farms,
foreign fruits and peeling painted boats
propped on blocks and asleep like dreamers
who will never ride the sea.

The mincing is a brutish thing,
a knife testing vein and vowel,
each curve yielding to a life
overtaken because there is no one to understand
the protestation.

They shovel and scrape letters,
streamlining sounds, emptying the case,
until pretty pictures and familiar
names take shape—

all gods here are pale,
sometimes sore in the face and neck,
with dark lumps of clay wedged
beneath chipped fingernails

and dangling at the corner
of mouths,
after gnawing away
diacritics.

They rename, call it “Americanization,”
a patriotism that means nothing out here,

perverted baptism
perfected on salted water

like the kind that preserves boats’
keels, and fishes.

Everyone is hungry.

At night, the greenhands dream
of grandmothers drowning
*bacalhau*\(^6\)

---

\(^5\)The accent mark that looks like a tail or hook at the base of a letter, such as “ç.”
\(^6\)Cod-fish
with rough hands and red eyes

rimmed with a hundred questions
and a hundred rosary beads.

What greater loyalty is there
than desire
for one’s childhood tongue
and the food it once tasted?

They dream of eating the salted cod,
once beaten on rocks,
and dream of avós’ cooking,
how they can taste their grandmothers’ tears.
Broken Ribs

A vessel is an incurable liar 
with so many parts, 
every real thing leaving 
impression 
of something else.

This is what longing 
does. It misleads 
and alters, driving men 
if not home, 
crazy.
The language of whalemens 
is governed by euphemisms 
and truncations, 
slang unknown to landlubbers.

This language is a blending, 
all things melting, 
phrases become single words, 
single words become familiar, 
the hooking of two hearts 
in catharpins, 
second language of the sea.

Every thing crucial is unspoken, 
especially the strangeness, 
the greatest forging anonymity 
in all faces, in all mutual hands.

In Greek, “rib” means “roof over,” 
a shelter, as if from storms.
In Portuguese, “ribs” 
are costelas, evocative of castles, 
castelos, and a kingly nature. 
Of the ship, balizas, like a dance.

“Rib” also means “to crown, 
to wreath,” in victory or defeat.

Like a body taken away from 
execution, 
its garments divided, 
its body crowned in thorns, 
cross-trees are crucifixions — 
whose sacrifice is this?
Ours or whales’? Man or animal — 
when does one become the other?

It’s not just whales —
all men are tried out
beneath a baking sun,
rubbed raw and dry.
Purgatory

Think how desperate all men are at some point, to get to the end of the world, live atop something called deadwood,

to rest easy, aware that, as soon as they board, all men are ghosts.

They willingly pack themselves away in boxes, the way they lay to rest the dead, but with less ceremony.

Language is foreign, at first, to all aboard the floating continent and cemetery,

and every hand begins green, not with its moldering, but begins again.

A whaleship is where all men come to meet in the middle.

Time only slows when watching men turn backward, scramble upside down, clamber over futtocks with urgent limbs.

Men in the rigging hanging in limbo. How appropriate to find shrouds, at every corner.

I have seen purgatory — here on earth, on a whaleship.

None are so desperate as these blackened devils among white sheets, hovering over their Phlegethon.

And who will pay the toll? Our Silver Dollars are buried beneath each mast; the only way to pay the ferryman is to sink.
Perguntas que nunca fiz

1. Where is warmth on a whaleship? I doubt if any timbers are left even if we huddle around the tryworks.

Wood, wood everywhere, and not a log to burn.

“It is a lone Atlantic”
cold, the only consistent comfort, making the heat of huddled men wholesome as prayer.

2. What has the sea done to us? To God, we must be spiders willingly caught in our own webs, which we string through sawn branches after hackneying His Nature, decorated on occasion, until breezes take away the strength of flags and fronds and dance them on salted ledges; until the grave of skeletons kisses petals—

that is, the refuse we feed each ocean.

3. Is this madness? We may haul them behind boatloads, drag them lengths and depths: to be satisfied in this unquenching sea is a great thing.

But at night, I can’t stop thinking of the whales the sea holds in reserve.

7“questions never asked”
8From Moby-Dick : “and blindly plunged like fate into the lone Atlantic.”
Longing

Fado⁹ was made for men
like this—a steely sensitivity
where flood of tears
showed power
because tears are water
and water can rust
even the strongest of iron-willed men.

But water saves, too—stops the fire,
lurks in hidden goosepen—
brings the whales that mean life.

At night, you dream of kissing,
when all there is is ocean,
which, like a woman,
will pull you under,
pull you down,
drown you.

Kiss the sea,
the whales—
if you dare.

⁹traditional, sentimental Portuguese music
Watcher

I watch men find their legs,
remote limbs for years
taken for granted,

scoff because my farmer's form
makes me used to manual work
and not much sitting.

We are at the mercy of unseen gods who whisper
not little, and strong-arm the bold
to wrestle sails that whip
and whine; Zephyrs is in anger today,
and the bitterness tastes stale.

We ride upon a forest
of transmutable trees — wood everywhere, knotty pupils
plentiful and probing. Every so often,
a mate reaches a finger and puts an eye out
on purpose, as if to prevent
anyone from seeing
the horrors gathering in the tryworks.

Fare thee well, Morgan — Adeus;
we come
truly,
and truly come home, only once
or twice in our lifetimes,
and that is enough.
Força

No man is really equal in skin,
not even after the sun and wind
and salt
spray off the deck and sails.

Feelings here are soaked in brine,
a preservation process,
sweated through and out
and absorbed again.

It’s in his hands
that he finds sameness;
not cupped, but draped
in slim bands of ruddiness.

There is no man here—only men.
A collective—Phalanx
of similar parts thrusting
and hoisting, raising
and lowering. We are all parts of pulleys
and hovering shades of daytime
and night,
waiting for the end of motion
but never action.

Ropes and sails are indifferent.
Oakum leaks beneath all nails
equally,
as if plugging
up the holes
from which leaks difference.


\[^{10} \text{"power"} \]
A Magic Show in Three Acts

1. A whaleship is a floating magic show,  
a specter,  
a ghost.

Welcome to a sphere  
where everything looks like something else,  
is named something else,  
and is nothing like it promises to be.

Everything strong can weaken;  
even a bulwark is removable  
to let people pass.

If this is an illusion,  
we are members of the phantasmagoria,  
performers, fiends  
dancing around the fire,  
cresset shadow-markings  
creasing all faces,  
swallowing the flames in parched throats,

stoking and cutting, folding in  
bible leaves not for warmth  
but for the security:  
we bring purpose to our own lives.

2. The *Morgan* is ancient and relic,  
is odds and ends and replacement parts,  
is part from the earth, part of the sea —  
a displacement in tantalizing paralysis,  
a true Frankensteinian creature  
that roams.

This life is an unthreading  
of the canvas from its seams —  
an impossibility that holds all  
together,  
even the deepest hulls, the heaviest  
bulwarks:  
when pulled, the line erases  
everything, proving — once again —  
that we float on in deception,  
ourselves a vapor  
and no one feels the passing.

Now we are made to live
in riddles, in a home without a roof,
in a home without a floor.

Where else can men walk on water,
walk on ceilings?

We are men of nowhere, suspensions
that hang to rigging, pegged
beneath points of stars

that, like us,
are so far away,
they’re dead before we see them.

3.
Under the right conditions,
even we can look stately
in our coat of black.¹¹

If you want a ship to bend, wait
for a shading of the faces.

How incredible how one body
can have so many guises,
depending on the light.

¹¹Inspired by the line, “[s]utely she looks in her coat of black paint,” said about the Morgan in an article entitled “Busily Go the Hammers as Bark Morgan is Replaced.” From the Standard, May 8, 1925. Scrapbook #5 pages 109-110 from the New Bedford Whaling Museum Research Library holdings.
The Net of Earth

We are all woven fibers
or plugs of oakum; something hangs us and holds us
together, 
whether we like it or not.

Nautical knots are different than the binds
that tie—loosening only with coercion
and rarely without the gnawing of wind.
How life is an illusion

when it is lived anywhere but the sea.
Land is too dry to prove anything
aside from safety, with a harness,
and always with a net of earth.
Homesickness

At first, I imagined the coil of rope
my arms around my wife,
my mother;
braided hair whisked around my daughter’s head.

It was remainders
of every person who could say “love”
in my language.
My queridos murmured low, carried by wind.

After two weeks, those coils fattened
into sleeping serpents.
Knotted eyes in the hold
waited for me to drift asleep.

Soon, nothing is enough.
Soon, everything has been sucked dry
and desiccated.

Who needs the flakes of cod?
Who needs the slim slivers of oakum
to pack into the cracks?

Everything is a small misery
when the only things you want
are beyond reach and, after six months,
beyond memory.

I would prefer the wind dies down, return my love;
the blankets
grow fatter.
I would prefer my dreams of home, and more
than just the dreams.

In the daylight, I keep my eyes open,
thank Deus for tan skin that does not ripen
and peel like the red fruits of lanques.\(^{12}\)
I take the rope and, for a moment,
do not do as I am told,
pretend not to understand. I take
my time, forget the devils prying. I cradle
the hemp gently — like holding a waist,
handling a child.

\(^{12}\) “Yankees”
Writing Home

*on the predominant illiteracy of the Portuguese whalemens*

The shoulders are the first to tell you
your work is done; or, your work is not done.

When the stagger is caught in mid-rise
because the wind plays tricks

even though the sun is brighter than a Madonna—
the arms and muscles just above the blades

of narrow bone—slim and angled, almost burned
by sun if only the skin was not such a swarth—

that is the moment of reliance on how a body moves
like a keel with so little leeway, yet so much power,

plugged with wood, stuffed with wood, rocking
with wood, always. The stuff of a body

is always a skeleton of nature, a true self,
the listing beneath a weight almost too much to bear,

almost too familiar. At night, you roll
the joints, rub the shoulders. You light

a candle—the remains, really. You read the signals
in ashen curls, parenthetical fragments filling

a blank page against a painted wall. Then, stretching a hand,
you reach for the paper and become

a liar. Here, in half-dark, sitting in the broken belly,
you pretend for a moment that you can write home.
**Working**

A ship makes you feel useful,  
always having something to tend.

The look of rope like a row of woven threads  
for winter’s blanket,  
grained wood,  
the braid held in a hand, ribbon  
tied in the hair  
belonging to a girl—a daughter, a wife,  
a sweetheart,  

now—  
God knows where.

Every day ever increases  
the desire to return home.

A ship makes you feel tender,  
always having something that uses  
you, fully,  
from inside out.

But—I hate to tell you this—  
at the end of a voyage  
is a house where you are a stranger  
to the people there.
Deck Ballet

Looking aft in the hold

is like being inside
a wooden instrument
and its shaved contours,
feeling too small to play,

so it plays you.

Everything is a dance,
for the baleeiros,\textsuperscript{13}
even the cutting-in
is a sacred moment of union.

(If you mistake the shadow of a boat for a whale,

you are forgiven.

How often our desires govern
our senses, dumb us to speech,
make us bolt at once.)

Overhead, shrouds tune secret harmonies,
a half-dozen different harps.
Every whaleman has his preference
of tune – his signature move – a rhythm.

\textsuperscript{13}Portuguese for “whalemen.”
The Artists’ Canvas

The shrouds are beckoning canvas in need of paint.
They want desperately to smudge blood and grind tears into salt—
do sails weep when they sting? When they tear?
When they fray gentle and soft but sure?
They seem never to feel wind’s clamp or bite,
know only to follow directions beneath a firm hand.

Folded, tucked, put to rest,
they are children,
these white canvasses—
or innocent women left behind,
wrapping in their summer shawls as they wilt on the beach each afternoon,
one hand cupped to the forehead, scanning the nothing ahead.

We are the men who sully them, who introduce them
to the world, let it face them when open,
destroy them.

It will be a while before seeing the impish grins, or a coral painted cheek again, but the horizon will not disappoint,
will lend hues for us that feel real, to deceive our better senses and our canvassing eyes.
The Ritual

Fire is what hides the evidence, 
transforms a body, 
makes it new.

At home, family members 
would have lit candles, 
made altars 
look like well-fed tryworks, 
stood around lapping flames 
desperate to catch 
for another reason. In the end, 
fire is what celebrates death 
of whales 
and celebrates life, 
sustaining men in a cup, 
a hand 
curved around its fiery stigmata.
Some Rattling Thing

For nearly four years, some remain flexing, not a part willing to straighten.

A ship is a heaving creature, curling from its belly of steamed wood. It changes, rearranges the outline

of a man, makes him a stranger in his own bones, to his own body.

This is the ship’s revenge for her overworking, for the tearing of her try-works at the end of every voyage, tossing her womb overboard:

this is the ship’s way of making its mark—her own scrimshaw—tattooing the flesh and blood, the echoing bones of men in permanence.

When he returns, man is always changed—but no one predicts how

much remains unseen, a small rattling in the back of consciousness.
Degrees

You would think the sun
would bleach us like fossils,
the way the deck turns
lighter by degrees.
Instead, we blacken
into a secret
shade of night,
only in daylight.

Some decorate the bones
with dark, thin lines.
But we are solid,
a scrimshaw all over,
bleeding through from the inside,
coming to surface.

Even the whales seem white,
in the rising waves—even if only
instantaneous.

We remain
the only stubborn mysteries, deepening
by degrees
and betraying our green country
as if something is wrong;
that nature—like language, too—
is against us.
Mainmast:
The Haunting Between

This is a story of a Lazarus raised from a slumber of slow death—the rousing and arousing.
Leaving Again

*on the Morgan’s 38th Voyage launch on May 17, 2014*

1.
How beautiful yet bare, woman
with shorn hair,
Samson and Delilah both,
he\(^{14}\) without his power—a ship
without sails,
a whaler without her whaleboats.

But this one is still strong,
passing the bridge years after they insisted
she was dead. No ghost—
perhaps a parade of them
passing through a Styx,
paying the toll in human eyes that watch
from bank to bank.

We are living testaments to history. We saw
it happen.

I’m sure she thanks us for it,
loosing invisible topsheets
in salute.

2.
From a distance, houses
seem to grow topsails
and masts exit like smoke through chimneys:
the *Morgan* is impatient,
clouds draping her in temporary sails,
wind rustling imaginary shrouds.

All eyes are on her, bending
to her beams. The houses are extensions
of whaling ships, themselves possible
due to the industry.

A bowsprit is a desperate sight
always so eager, rigid,
to get ahead,
to be the first part
to touch-down,
to move-in,
to get anywhere,

\(^{14}\)Rather ironically, the Master of the second and third voyages was named Captain John D. Samson.
like the first finger
  to aim forward and strike
the words “land ahead”
or “there she blows!”
with the force of a shipsmith’s hammer

with the tear of the hurricaning winds,
with the desperation
of 70 hands
of half as many men.

Like the first finger,
as in Michelangelo’s fresco,
to nudge life awake from its despondency.

I feel the earth,
I feel the earth
leaving me behind —

the vessel throbs,
it starts to go
letting out the line

sails like shrouds
or pillows
depending on the mood,

absorbing every human emotion,
wiping away furtive tears.
I do not use mouths, not taste—
but ears and sight—the silent senses.

After all, the ocean call
was heard by an earless-ship,

and my ear is a conch shell
trapping every gentle scrape.

Though all may press
their ear to mine,

I hear a message
only for me.

They can take my bones
and rattle them—cast them

as ivory die—but—God
as my witness—I’ll never form

the words with lip or tongue,
I’ll never betray the sea,

her silent songs or secrets
meant only for seamen—

namely,
those left behind.

Just as Eve presented that first apple,
New Bedford offered her Morgan.

We still taste from her—not an apple tree,
but a forest of oak, of pine,

half dead—but—
half living.

Now is the time to ask
our million questions

and to make up the answers as we can.

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15From an oral history recording for “Faces of Whaling” on August 13, 1999, provided by the New Bedford Whaling Museum Research Library.
We have no one to tell us “yes” — true.

But, just the same, we have no one to tell us “no.”
Sutures

They have sutured their feelings to the sails,
where they leave a crooked stitch
imperceptible.

A ship is a good place to hide things
in plain sight; so large is this world,
no one sees anything

but the whales
and even they are no longer a matter—
just memory hanging between

synapses, curious eyes,
a rigged mind hooked
and stitched to the past.
On Earth & As It Is In Water

New shipsmiths, we forge ahead & beyond, memory like iron & clench like molten metal refusing to yield interlocking like catharpins, glorious & strong.

This is us rebuilding the try-works re-crafting history, brick by brick & we, too, have water beneath our feet—
because that is what keeps everything going, as it should.

Each time a sail is unfurled, I fear what may fall from its rolls,

the way the snugness breathes itself into being. With gulp & unraveling,

the rappel causes lump in the throat,

& powerlessness, paralysis — longing to keep on going.

She is motley more than crew, with sails stored like bodies. The *Morgan* got her second chance to live, something piebald,

one-fifth original & 1905 rigging & fluorescent life jackets in the vegetable bin— the color of highway cones— not even carrots.

We don’t call a toilet a toilet— it is a “modern convenience”—
as she creaks ahead &
we marvel
at how biology

only means something
when occurring in historical moments
once called impossible. She is

what we make of her,
but our bodies
move to her bursts
& spurts,
her desires to forge through sea,
to chase wind,
to charge hurricane
barriers.

Even a whaleship has her whimsies.

Everything goes back to a fear
of breaking,
of losing,
of loss.

We voyage
to retrieve “it,”
the whatever
& the everything,
to harpoon any
small thing that is left.
Transformations

A whaleship is home to opposites. Everything cleansing slaps
along the outsides of filth.
Everything raw exposed to sun caresses
everything wet still hung and draped over the try-works.
Every back breaking still a soft curve of resilience,
every slack rope easily pulled to form a tense bridge.
Every placid surface concealing mammoth monsters and the things they leave behind.
Every man’s temper joyful one day, murderous the next.
If you are comfortable, you are not truly a sailor;
if you are dry, do not speak of whales.
The Stolen Children

“Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild…”
~William Butler Yeats, “The Stolen Child” (1889)~

In full light, most things are lies
and all things are ghosts,
the eyes so often stretching
over pale contours
of barrels and berths,
twitching bodies
that kick like swaddled infants
or make the biting migration
of a shipworm

itself, a bantling creature.
Each night, the transformation
into small chrysalis,
then—emerging
onto the deck as full-color
butterfly—dark and red
at first. Then, still—

talons like harpoons,
rasping along like teredo
and the unheard, clacking
shell.

But—some never make it past
the second voyage,
the second port.

These men are stolen children
pursuing leafy islands,
mingling glances of decks, davits,
and dreams, rounding
out a ghostly life.
First Night

The coolness settles beneath the elbows
where the strain first lets in
gusting like wind through a door.

There are no doors in the fo’c’sle, but
legs swing on hinges
to squeeze into berths
plunged in darkness. It’s where
I heard the stories
of snores and crisp pages turning;

I wonder who felt what,
what my ancestors dreamt and read,
what I would find in a book

I needed to write. I left
the dreaming to others, tugging
down my sleeves like lines,

before I rolled over once,
on elbows,
and snapped out the light,

practiced holding my breath,
counting seconds in the dark, preparing
in case of a stove boat
as if it could still happen.

I won’t kid myself:
it does.

This time, it is a mental splitting
of past and present,
and me, hovering
in the haunting between.
The Cutting Stage

We stage all things
as a dramatic cutting.

Enter right with a blubber pike,
standing like a member of the royal
pageantry, a knight with a lance in hand,
ready to protect.

Boarding knife like a winged spear,
pike like a glaive.

For whose kingdom do we busy ourselves,
move like a choir orchestrated to swell
the scene?

The First Mate is Narrator,
and all fall-to, scuttling and climbing,
a descent from invisible rafters.

When we move to the cutting-in,
have we pushed the Act too far,
erased the climax of the hunt, the chase,
and the beauty of light on water?

Say what you will of us:
once, whalemen sliced the world, brightened faces,
ran factories and hung in closets.

They came closest to godliness
even from the middle of oceans.
Their is a planned Drama, a Tragedy.

Whaling is the play of patient men
and an indifferent sea
of dim faces.

Once, the audience would rouse to its feet
and stand in its ovation;
now, it stands wide-eyed, arms
to sides; eyes exchanging awkward glances.

No woman buoyed up beneath
from secret places,
tucked together in some baleen contraption.

Now, the world sees its evils,
forgets how to clap,
how to speak. Just as water draws reality nearer,
it washes away truth,
makes everything clean.
Combing the Waves

A whaleship is a tale
of sacrifice
of men leaving home
countries
of whales’ lives
of those at home, left
behind
of a nation risking
the absence of its men
and giving them over to sea,
hoping for commerce
for gain even
when there is loss.

You’d think this was
a burning bush,
all men a Moses,
and every whale’s bone
the worthy scrimshaw
on which to carve
commandments.
Homecoming

He who goes away to sea a boy
comes back a man,
if he comes back at all.
Sometimes, he comes back a man
shamed,
having lost his money to drink and game.
Sometimes he comes back a man
haunted—dreams entangled in unfurled and stuck
sails, limbs caught in rigging.
Sometimes he comes back a man
without limbs, or with skin peeling in clumps
down the back of the neck.
Sometimes he comes back a man
boxed

in metaphor—a cenotaph
flatly perched
on bethel walls
washed to match the whitecaps.

Sometimes, he returns an American man.

But when he comes back, however he looks,
when he sets foot on ground,
there is the chance no one has remembered,

for even the man gone to sea may have a family
lost on land.

Abandoned, dead. Letters lost somewhere, or never written.

So many cannot even write, and even so—
what to write to a dead man, anyway?

What does a dead man write?
Não nos deixeis cair em tentação

1.
Whalemen are privy to a secret thing, foul scents of unwashed men in their ragged states,

the smell of natural communion with the sea, the kill, and one another.

These are Unspeakables, unfit for any language, and so, held hostage by all.

2.
It’s impossible to keep the deck dry and feet are always moistened.

So, it is surprising the deck must still be wiped away and cleared, to free the remains of more water.

This is our holy foot-washing, a cleansing: lead us not into temptation.

On ships, no one walks to anything — they swing, they row, they climb. The lure comes without provocation, in a salted western wind.

3.
In Portugal, my father’s mother gave me the inheritance of chafed hands, palms spilt and raw from the scrub board with lines like unforgiving teeth

or ridges of baleen. The soap was whiter than the linen it meant to clean, as if a miracle could be enacted by transference — as if I, too, were the transference of culture.

4.
Though the smell is so overpowering, nothing ever lasts. Give it time, a good baking

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16“lead us not into temptation”—from “The Lord’s Prayer”
in midday sun, beneath a layer of sweat.

Give them time:
even devils in a Hell grow complacent
with the heat.

5.
What the devil? the women asked,
after the stories they half-regretted
begging to hear.

Men will abandon all sense of themselves,
even their masculinity,

to do on waves
what is “women’s work” on land.
And they will become not-men,

hunters (and hunted),
animals that stab and maul,
that hook and tear

in a way considered criminal and gruesome
were it done on earth
to someone, not a whale.

So much is different on the water,
with its shifting laws.

I suppose it’s true what my other grandmother
(mother’s mother) always said:
“water washes everything.”
Moody Secrets\textsuperscript{17}

Of course a ship is a "she" —
just look
at all her corseting, trimming. Trussed
up, dressed, dishabille sails. Note
how she reposes

until called by men
or creatures in murky water?

Note how no man notices her disarray or decay,
as he struts the top deck or repairs a hatch, looks ahead
or down,
not above?

They put wings at her back,
American ones, compensation
for whom they left behind,
because there wasn’t even a wooden lady
but a scroll billethead.

The Portuguese would have imagined
Our Lady,
Virgem Maria, would have prayed with dark
rosary beads between
their own sweaty beadings,
begging with profusion and apology

to the Holy Mother, to their mothers,
to the ocean.

A woman: draped until needed, withdrawn, pulled
from behind the curtain —

then, after proving herself, loved and stroked,
put into place — tidied after the massacre.

\textsuperscript{17}From Moby-Dick: “Like venerable moss-bearded Daniel Boone, he will have no one near him but Nature herself; and her he takes to wife in the wilderness of waters, and the best of wives she is, though she keeps so many moody secrets.”
The Undoing of What is Done

When they unsunk a ship from Manhattan's curve,
I marveled at how land can be afloat so long
and still people remain
so uncurious as to never seek
that penny in the hull.

The *Morgan*, too, is an unsunk treasure
with coins at the base of each mast,
unspent. Yet we probe not for coins,
but for the knowledge of where this umbilical
cord connects the lines, as if…
only a square-rigger knows.
Some days, after perching on many rails
and deciding not to fly,

I call home and wait for that brushing sound
between ears—in the moment
when there is only one,
and it is mine, in that instant
before someone hears you call.

A ship is like this,
especially this whaling vessel:
last one left, some unsung hero
of cobwebbing stature,

pressed in a paused moment,
tethered and tailored for a time,
hesitating. Waiting. Wondering—

not only
what to tell us, but
how to hear,
when we speak.

Now I know
how every beam of a whaleship,
when left tied at dusk,
creaks like busybody poets
working against arthritic hands,

refusing to allow the forgetting.
Visiting the Decks

To visit others, there is no walking across, no simple gait to lead one anywhere. Instead, it is mostly climbing and making a vertical dance to sway others to stay awake, swap a watch, swab a deck.

There is nothing normal about the way a ship moves and—so—the body, so inferior, must bend herself to the Morgan’s whims, must make accommodations, must obey.

You use arms more than legs to get across. You practice different muscles than the land-walker here, like Christ: you walk on water, but the baptism, too, comes all at once, every biblical moment in one fell, full swoop, every voyage a risk, a christening, a miracle— a holy experience from the beginning.

It’s nothing you didn’t know. But nothing you expected, either.
The Devil Must

"Ashes to ashes,
Dust to Dust,
if Mystic dont [sic] take her,
the Devil must."

~Leaders of the New Bedford Morgan Preservation Movement~

...have passed over this ship,
which must have paid its weight
in coins, to pass
Hades, to be unworthy
even for a visit, a minced
crossing,
a thin slip across, from one
bank to the next.

Oh, Whalemens!
An ocean is a transmutable fabric,
technicolor coat for whales. A ship
is an instrument
that does not sail straight, but trims lines
and cuts corners, zig-zagging
and pinking the water.

Do not submit to wind, but turn into it,
a half-formed comment on your lips,
ductile body, a profile; half-moon face
poised on low lines and shrouds.

To port once in Lethe
is to forget everything —
better that way,
beginning again with new men,
new eyes in new ports.

While the world rests, the ship
went on, unanchored
as she is always,
fleeing one thing
to get to another.
Tying Lines

There is so much

to lead an eye
through roving.

The knots of the deck
cross knots of the rope,
and fingers whistle

through manila and tar
and carry scent and senses
all looped around the coil

that holds all together
and constricts the moment
to bare necessity.
Wings & Sails

Though she flies like the monarch butterfly,  
so many fearing she wouldn’t last,  
I have found that you cannot catch a whaleship.  
There is no net large enough to pass her depth or height.

Not even the Mystic River could rise for her,  
instead, bowing mightily to her grace,  
letting her pass, though  
with empty belly and undraped limbs.

It is a holy ascension, to be lifted,  
as if walking upon water.  
When the monarch goes down in Summer,  
the Morgan sails North.

The butterflies call at the Açores, visit  
my ancestors; like the Morgan,  
they stop in these islands  
and refuel.

Wings and sails are only temporary,  
fleeting devices. One gives way to another,  
as each is beaten down with time.  
Nature always has its merciless, draining way.

So, we catch nothing, cut nothing  
with our words—  
or so we believe. Everything is a cleaving,  
a cutting-in to history.

But, what nets are these, words worth little  
to anyone alive then;  
what tools to excavate discoveries  
buried in some darkened hearts?

Never has life seemed so simple, America so plain,  
since before this infernal rage of torture—  
both man and whale,  
the hunter and the hunted—

which is which,  
we never did know.
They Crate the Creatures at Night

At night comes the cooling.
It falls
and folds
the way that sails are furled.

It rests upon the fever
settling in its slow haze
in the fo’c’sle.

This coolness creeps
in catlike motions.
But here, we are on water,
and no felines — so fearful —
no felines will come here.

That makes us
the animals,
crated creatures crammed in berths.
But every living thing belongs in cages,

at least temporarily.
How else to better know
the truth and beauty
of freedom?
Immigrant Hands

Despite all appearances
the sea is a rock in your shoe:
each time you adjust and shake
the entire body,
it rolls in another direction.

I imagine the hands—
how tough and swarthy,
although I dislike that word.
How emphasizing they are
of difference

until the calluses come.
Then—thanks to rope and sail,
heave and hold—
all men are the same
beneath the skin.

On a ship: rope and blister
are a marriage—
sacred, unbreakable bonds,
like man and whale.

And in the ear,
another unshakeable merger:
the sea is a grey noise
from which there is no unhearing.
Night in the Fo’c’sle

To go into the sea is to regress into a womb
and when you come out, you don’t come out right.

Something’s going on, inside the hollow wreck
of a mind almost blasted by war,

though there are no wounds. The shrapnel catches
‘neath your nails; weeds hang in your hair.

The moments lost because you caught up with the whales
who towed you farther from expectation.

Washing in the foam, like the bubbles in a bath;
you haven’t seen a brush in at least two years.

Someone’s calling out at least once a night;
you forever feel guilt that you never respond.

What could you say to a man as desperate as you?
What could you say that would tempt him to quiet?

More than death, you fear the eyes, how you find each
a mirror to judge you whole, to swallow you down.
What the Captain Kept

In 1864, the swinging berth was seduction
so Captain Landers could entice his wife
to follow, Odysseus turning
tables on the Siren. Other Masters,
less successful, crafted wives
from the woodwork,

pegged their quarters with secret
signals of the domestic sphere.
A large brass compass looming,
knobby protuberance
on the ceiling:

how many nights did a Captain imagine
its face,
or that of any clock,
her face, hovering
there before him?

Did she scare him the first time,
phantom of imagination
and too little sleep, too few whales?

Did he shudder
at the bald head,
sparse face? A magical act—
shrinking a man
never struck timid

by sea creatures or distant ports,
stove boats and split masts rummaged
by unchaste wind and its greedy fingers;
ever alarmed by tempestuous natives

who crowded his nerves,
sending boats from a yellow shore,
boats deep and secret—he could see no danger.

Yet struck cold by her
or his abandonment?
The gimbaled berth forces a body to move slow,
to climb effortful towards the point of departure,
or to flee from it.

Haunted as whales are hunted,
a man who did not dream
but nightmared of home,

wife with a black veil, becoming a black wave,
blaming him, swallowing him. The tears
incremental, but make up an ocean small
but potent enough to drown a grown man
with three children left at home —

how their teeth rattled when he crawled out,
bag slung behind,
unapologetic, looking no one in the face —

and a wife with fingers so thin
that the gold band on her left hand
now slips like the uneven keel
from knuckle bone to creases of loose-sail skin.

Who knows why a boat is a woman’s body,
but it is — pregnant with its secrets.

In fog, her memory shapes itself
into a figurehead where there is none,
and before long, the beauty is
a ghoul —
a voice the slap of thunder, sail, or wave;
a tone the creak of mast, keel, or ceiling.

Every footstep up the ladder is hers,
coming,
and never arriving.
Navigating

No part of Nature is spared;
even the stars are scraped for their secrets,
lines between a scrimshawing of sky —

the blackened bone.
The Praying Kind

Arched like cathedrals, a ship
is a holy place floating bottom
to top, stalagmites
dangling in a relic
that we touch and ache to hold

but cannot, even with both hands.

Tune the rigging—a harp of ladders
that bend in weight
of divine intervention—these
Heavenly arches that conceal the Hell.

Memory is the best cup,
itself a Grail of some other time to which
we never belonged.
When I am sinking in a moment,
I reach up like ballast

refusing to be held down.
38 Ways to Rename a Whaleship

1. Bobbing basket of Nature’s bounty,
2. holy relic, Moses among the bulrushes.
3. The yield of an ancient forest and
4. burial of three-thousand whales.
5. A flotation device saving drowning men; or
6. sheaves and pages of a thousand stories of drownings.
7. Ribs. Of men and beast and boats and bodies.
8. Defiance of words, siren of kennings,
9. storehouse of memory.
10. Tempter of fate and runaways.
11. Hoarder of oil and blood.
12. A body of bodies.
13. Our past, our present, our what-will-be.
15. Seer of corners no hands have touched, and
16. holder of eyes no sight can’t touch.
17. The Lucky One.
18. Dreamer—
19. hoarder of dreams.
20. Cutting tongue of ocean and language,
21. cleaver—tearing and drawing together.
22. A final temptation.
23. Memory-maker;
24. foreseer of everything, all at once. But says nothing.
25. Flyer, like the monarch butterfly, seeking Atlantic islands,
26. a foreigner in many ports.
27. The Last Resort for anathemas.
28. Place where many things are named after animals.
29. Place where many things are named after body parts.
30. Place where languages find a new Babel, blend all sounds.
31. Open-arms, and sundry curved limbs, beckoning;
32. a hesitance cleared with a gentle cough.
33. Dancer on the wind,
34. drifter of waters.
35. The remembered
36. groaning artifact—avuncular vessel.
37. This returner of the living—now,
38. another Lazarus.
The Stitching

They were men of punctured thumbs.

They’d hung herbs and rabbits, butchered on a line; they’d hung clothing and flags, hoisted high. This made the pretending an easier game, as if every sail was a salute to the Old Country.

At first, they could not consider what to do there, planted on this wooden body, standing with legs spread and feet curving in reckless fashion, bones poised for breaking. To handle ropes *com as mãos partidos,*\(^\text{18}\)

too, seemed too much—beyond a language.

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\(^{18}\)“with broken hands.”
Making Visible the Invisible

responding to M. Estellie Smith’s remark that the Portuguese are America’s “invisible minority”

The sociologist called us
an “invisible minority,”
as if you could puff through us, like smoke,
reduce our lives to ash.

The Cinderela story would be all cinders
with us, she implied, like roses
were black smudges and we had a garden full.
As if when we fill the try-works,
it is we who burn, bushels
at the bottom of cressets
huddling like some lost laurel,
outdated Olympian with fading torch.

Between the cover of a logbook—curved ridges
like shoulder blades—I found my ancestor
and the way he cut deep into the whale
unforgiving

and gesturing to a mate, lending
the strap and knife
as if these were warriors in the battle
for living like capitalists

in a time where the world ran deep
with another kind of oil.
This is our reincarnation,
a way of reclaiming
a life that has always
been in our blood.
Charades

A deceptive appearance:
men who scrimshawed
designs of women and children
did not always miss families.
Many missed their chances

for wives
and heirs—

and so, fueling wishes,
copied sketches in magazines,
found scraps,
the borrowed fragments

of someone else’s dream

taking shape on the borrowed
jaws
of some dark creature.

How is this borrowing
different than ours?
Recreating
a world not our own—
ultimate role-play and charade.

This entire Voyage is scrimshaw,
a scraped bone—

us adding more lines, curves,
and color.

Our desires to recreate
what was
are desperate coercions
to make ourselves
into other people,

like a tall person bending
below deck,
unnaturally,
sending broken shadows
across planked ceilings
and tumbling
towards the ghosts.
An (Almost) Alternative Ending

1. There was the possibility that, after you had served your purpose, they would dynamite you and remove your copper sheathing. Then, they’d bury the bones (like scheming dogs) to hide their shame.

It happened to the Thames—all that’s left is its spine and secrets, tree nails where fingers could not pry any further against Nature.

2. We rustled you from your hibernation, and you shook your shrouds like a wet dog eager for sport.

3. Where the men did not live, Nature—as she does—exerted herself and shone through with bare planks of dark wood, left unpainted, without a face like an over-rouged woman on poorly-lit ports’ back streets.

Temptation comes in many guises, but Nature always wins.

She left her mark—a hundred eyes burning through the ceiling, judging.

Everywhere, there is resilience in Nature, and in men.
New Voyagers

At least, we reach for everything,
expecting nothing in return

but stories—the way they’re loosed
from our bones, a gentle chafing

like the way cod fish bleaches in sunlight,
drying into a firm flakiness of concentrated taste.

I have skimmed no visions like this before,
all terrors flood out in the haze.

(If you mistake the shadow of a boat for a whale,
you are forgiven.
How often a whale’s eyelid becomes a canopy,
takes you under.)

Standing on the bow, without looking back,
at dawn muster: the only way to keep

moving. At last, we reach for nothing
and expect everything in return.
Some Mighty Hand\textsuperscript{19}

“There is no doubt the Morgan will outlive all the whalemen.”

~ “Whaler Morgan’s Last Voyage Made Yesterday,” Mercury Newspaper, May 8, 1925\textsuperscript{20} 

Despite all appearances, 
and greenness in our hands, 
so unaccustomed to governing 
a floating citadel 
where we are tucked and watching,

bowman, ready to spring, 
though no one calls us to action, 
we are not fickle children 
and will not leave you lying and dumped 
in curious heaps, appendages and shorn-hair-

like, rags to be burned, 
and chains to rust. Too often, 
we see ourselves in you — if not our past, 
our future. They curled you like fruit, scraping 
your body, twists of wood falling

in sweeps, rousing spirits — 
dredged men desperate for fruit 
after months of hardtack and tins. 
Everything is a repetition, 
a maneuver

a familiar unknown — 
the secret to patterns, like the cooper’s mallet 
in its tattoo of loneliness, 
making barrels to hold air 
and suspense. Always, there was someone 

to do the filling ahead of time, 
to prepare the body 
to be awakened. Pardon us — 
we are passing through, touching 
as we go.

And so, we come together, replace 
the pieces, and — as gods who rally, 
gods who spare the lives of suffering — 
become Some Mighty Hand,

\textsuperscript{19}When the Morgan underwent a restoration in 1925 to keep her “in the spirit of the whaling industry by retaining her ‘antique’ aspect,” one article noted how her “[a]nchor chains are lying dumped in curious heaps along the bow, as though tossed there by some mighty hand that has become tired playing with baubles and turned its attention to something else.” See the Standard’s article, “Busily Go the Hammers as Bark Morgan is Replaced,” May 8, 1925. Available in Scrapbook #5 pages 109-110 from the New Bedford Whaling Museum Research Library holdings.

and let you launch.

No things end on time. We keep hunting although those ships have sailed. Even knowing, no one has ever learned when to stop, when to give up, when to prevent the heaving from taking over.

I suppose this is worship: the continuance of things no longer accurate. I suppose this is our error: the things that make us human.
Arcing the Bridge

on watching the Morgan sail under her own power to New Bedford, June 25th

The brain does a funny thing, piecing
together what it sees and what it knows:
this is understanding

that we have found ways to be travelers
in time, to parse and tar our futures
so that they hold

fast, to rig, and climb—
to set foot on deck or place palm
on canvas.

Each hand tries to get over itself,
creating a stitching of fingers,
a human arcade.

We do not know what wonders
lie in the core of each stone
until we smash things open.

The ship, too, is the same—objects flushed
unsavorily, perhaps, cleaning the plumbing
and no one wants to admit to doing the job.

The pedestrian, benign, the ordinary and rubbish
are so fantastic in the light of hindsight.
A button, broken bone, a portion of pipe

—all are enchanted artifacts
able to keep men immortal.
We understand mostly that it is possible

to go back.
The Rules of Sailing, According to a Poet

To guide a ship, you must yield to rules stricter than those of sonnets,

must repeat motions only slightly different each time like the synchronized hum of a pantoum.

Feet may hobble in their metric systems, steeled against a bulwark curving like parentheses

and a long, blank-verse line in between, paved in even grains of planks.

Every motion counts, like each click of a haiku: only so many ways to point.

All arms are fixed, slowed like dull clocks, moving to the unheard villanelle.

But to speak of ships— it’s a different story, all a lumbering prose, a roaring shout,

a rambling tale and novel bound between two weather-beaten hands.
Lines

1. So often we run towards the arms of phantoms
   and find ourselves staring
   into faces so like our own,
   hands so like our own,

   only more weathered and wizened,
   more indicative of having been
   somewhere.

2. The irony of power lines
   reminding me of ship rigging
   and how, when the power cuts,
   this ship would keep on going.

   You tell me—what was superior,
   then or now?

   Once, there was a time
   when the only force we needed
   was man.

   But here’s the thing: you cannot cut any lines
   without the undoing
   of not just the ship, but the people.

3. The ship rigging is a web of power
   lines,
   charging the sky,

   plugging into clouds
   and sending its lightning.

   What we bring to life is the past,
   Frankensteinian creature that it is,

   suturing together history,
   a new world of experience.

   Every line of the rigging is a brushstroke
   sending a message from the past,

   every shroud an arching ladder
   to that mythic beanstalk,
   imperceptible,
   high above clouds.
Here is the gambler’s paradise;
here are the trimmed veins.

4.
Or we are some spiders
scrambling to take hold
of some sticky fly
in your web.

But we will never get out—
we entrap ourselves

willingly,
the stalked and stalking,
the stalkers of history,

to take every whisper and make it shout—
to give voice to voiceless things—
to voiceless people.

That is for
which we long:
the going,
the splicing together,
the getting stuck.
Relearning the Body

A ship is a place
to re-learn the body,
re-learn your lines

like when bones break
and, months later,
we are still strangers to ourselves,

struggling to move.

When the Morgan sets every sail
for the first time
in nearly 90 years,

it is relearning her ways,
finding her body
whole again.

For one moment,
I thought the sigh of relief
was mine. But it was hers

—slicing sheaves
of that same ancient water
under her own power.
The Deaths of Two Marias

Avó

With wood dark as your fingers
and nose from Alcanena’s glances
of sunlight in the olive trees,
the ship is hazel, too, like her eyes,
which are all I remember; and then,
your eyes
when mourning the loss of someone
and you refuse to let your children see.

Gramma

She tied her keys in a knotted handkerchief,
the way sailors tie knots to keep things snug
and secure. “I’ll never lose them,”
she insisted, patting her pocket, smiling
the way all grandmothers do
when they think grandchildren are watching,
every time, fumbling to loosen the knots,
“letting” me do it for her.
Sinking Further Back

To explain the way my mind works,
I must go back to the way my father's mind works,
and his father's, and his.

And then, when I get back enough, so far beyond
the rolling waves that luring froth of white
-cap is black — the depth of sea and sinking —

I will raise myself and hoist,
like an un-bellied boat belched
from the ocean,

and begin the process again, this time
plumbing the way my mother's mind works,
and her mother's, and so forth, the hook and retrieval,

until I arrive at the unanswerable,
slippery question of what it is like
not to move forward, but —

ever so willingly —
to go back, if only
to explain the way my mind works.
Connectivity

“If you bulldoze your heritage, you become just anywhere.”
~Sarah Delano, former president of the New Bedford, MA Waterfront Historic Area League (WHALE)~

My father may as well have been a whaleman.
In the 1970s, he fled
continental Portugal, home, the draft,

just as, a hundred years before,
islanders climbed aboard
whaleships, to escape conscription.

What is the greater war: on land or sea,
both a kind of tussle
with the self.

When I write, I have to accumulate
connotations and live with the surplus,
the storage.

A sail billows, sends me to summer,
when mother shook sheets
from the backyard clothesline,

and for that precious moment,
white cotton would swell
and I’d imagine sky was an over-ocean

and the grass was a watery leak
and I’d be floating, not standing,
on a shifting world —

female Tantalus,
captured between necessities and desires forever out of reach.
Every myth is about a low-hanging fruit;

every mythic man is half-god and half-mortal.
Everything is a poised figure
captured between winds.

The whaling spears arranged
like Ma’s crochet hooks broke me.
Her fingers moved nimbly, darting,

eyes unmoved from the loops.
She never had the patience to show me how.
She’d hold her arms

open like yards,
as easy to bend and comfort.
Instead, Papa taught me how to braid,
how to loom, how to weave
blankets by hand like his mother;
how to coil ropes.

I twisted my elbows around the lengths
of manila and yellow synthetic fibers.
I stretched my joints and limits,
testing Nature and her containment.
All this time, he was preparing me
for a voyage I never knew I’d take.

Then—imagine:
comparing my ear to a conch shell led me
to my father’s language (again),

and Portuguese etymology of the word, *concha,*
the meat in salads,
the sea.

How much of who we are
depends on the shadows
and the people we put there?

I know of tongues that rustle out
from sheets of plank-wood,
or tear through rigging like a bird shot

from a clear sky.

How much is our language a fusion,
a fixing of past and present forged
in some fiendish blaze we couldn’t face?

Caught in a net of words, a gathering
of tribes and totems,
there I was,

another navigator, like my ancestors
and theirs—in such a strong, hooked line—
before them.
What is Left

*based upon a dream experienced six months after the 38th Voyage*

I awoke to the creak of my boots, 
slung into the corner—

and no feet in them. 
So, I stumbled up the stairs.

The moon hung lower than normal, 
and I was frightened by the sound of stillness,

the way it crept upon the sails, whipped 
around the windlass, and then back

again, towards my creaking boots. 
There are some things on a ship that never cease
to amaze even the seasoned travelers. 
There are some things on a ship

that creak and stir and scare 
and scar you inside, where no one sees.

These are the things you tell in stories, to grandchildren who, 
one day, will ask you everything

about yourself. 
And though they pretend to listen, and pretend to know,

they will forget. 
But you will still keep on telling them,

in hopes that something will stick, something will creak 
something will lie

beneath the surface.

In the days when you were younger and adventurous, 
before bones would creak like broken timbers

or shattered masts in too many storms, 
you could climb,

you could tear through those shrouds, 
you could cling to the rigging and feel alive.

But your grandchildren and their children don’t 
even have a clue as to what it feels like
to throb along the water
and to do something of meaning.

So you keep telling those stories,
and you keep urging them to listen.

And at first, although the calling is their own, they stop
to wonder what it is you will say next.

All along, you’ve been scrimshawing beneath the surface
of their skin. And when you die, it is they who bleed out,

it is they who clutch and cling.
It is they who tear at themselves and worry

about what their future will be. That is when they notice
that within themselves is every etching

and every scribbling, every tattoo of your heritage.
The living legacy. The scrimshaw

is based upon blood and bone.

They clutch and scream in their dreams at night.
They listen for the whales. They know

the stories of their sea-captain fathers, their green-
hand uncles, their first-mate brethren.

They know the symbols; they know the signs. And even
when they cannot read them, somewhere

in their unconscious mind, they dislodge the notion
of a cutting in

the trimming, the shuffling of ideas.
In many years, long after they, too, are gone,

a child will rifle through a desk drawer or in a trunk,
covered in mold and dust. Gathering up the clasp,

he will lift the lid, and out comes that salted pine,
that scent

of travel. Out comes what is left
of you.
The Ship’s Surgeon

1. A broken mast can hang, trapped in tendons of line, a snapped ulna in a canvas shirt.

Each man knows how it feels to be the broken arm, the severed limb— to be cut from his body of home.

Rigging and shrouds falling— interlaced wrinkles— around the eyes. Each man becomes a ship— a body breaking from the outside in.

2. Lines like veins and arteries and men, Voyagers are caught in the bloodstream.

Overnight, I’ve become a surgeon who must know all the parts to examine a ship, its sails alone all familiar corpses, shrouds with names in foreign tags.

3. My body has the proper look for an 1840s painting of a whaleship, fully-trussed.

From a distance, no one can tell if the rigging is right, if the lines lead anywhere. An eye is willing to be deceived. From a distance, I am my flaws that nobody sees, a ship tearing up inconsequential, fixed waves.

Louis Le Breton studied medicine before he took up building ships
and occult demons
from the same substance (paint),
from the same tools (hands).

I packed pens instead of a scalpel, watched
how sails can inhale, the way
of lungs. I prepared for a full

operation. I prepared for the work
I would do on myself. Below,

knees creak in arthritic rhythms
punctuating an otherwise peaceful drift.

Me, with my ear pressed against the hold ceiling,
I listened for the sound of breathing.
Being Honest

It’s hard to recreate their voyages exactly—
three months is no comparison to three years,
and an accumulation of knowledge in the Morgan’s belly
is different than loading whale bones,
scooping guts,
and living in the stench—

how all things crescendoed in a scent
that burned.

I wonder what was the first thing to drive them
mad: the smell? A grey dimness of cold evenings?
The constancy of water
and not a woman’s love?

I wonder if we will ever know what secrets
lurked in their hearts, or what else they longed to hold
in hands so accustomed to spearing, hauling, darting, stitching,
and hoisting. Hands taught to grip, brace, set, reset, fold,
and forge. What else did they need
to live, rather than exist?

Now:
the tryworks are silent and still, dark and unscented:
pristine. So far from whales, they are a dollhouse miniature,
museum piece pressed beyond a glass case,
too inadequate for use.

Why, then—why is it I can feel it all?
Moving, 2014

The ship’s shadow over the water, slung like a giant hinge, slowly opened.

I watched the curvatures of things and how they dropped into place with solid sounds and little fanfare.

Every unhooking, and I played witness to the crucial intentions of others, to the way in which every elbow

led my eye across the stern or beyond the equal bend of davits, how even my mind, itself

a flaccid thing when out of place, gave the subtle yet audible thwap of an untethered cord, a loosened sail.

Did my ancestors know that, in the dark, I’d sit on deck, listening for them? Everything is a reduction:

shortening sails, hauling-in; even reducing memory to what we already know from stories. But this Voyage—it lets us add our own.

It lets us in.

So—we come, we board, we try it out.

We make this ship a sacred altar, and we worship history; we worship ourselves.
**Permanence**

If I can feel it in my body
mere months later,
those men’s bones must have petrified
into oak and pine
after three years of grinding
themselves into her body.

They must have pressed themselves
into the knots, given up knees
for hers—mirrors of the crooked bend.

Some things are never loosed—
like canvas on a ship sailed right
or the faith of whaler widows lighting
their lanterns in every square window.
Then there are the fractures
of femur and humerus,
of the tugged harpoon line,
of the drowning dark sleep that tempts
in a drowsy crest of blacker waves--the sweeping curl.
Writing Whales

I night, I am awake in my little nest, 
rehearsing lines of poetry more resembling prose, 
slowly falling fluid 
likes waves that brush against bow 
and break, sliding 
to the side, allowing 
something 
to enter.

Like books, ships were once trees. 
I can sail in a story 
I can float in the book 
I can whisk myself into the wind 
of words, the woods of oaken walls — 
the words — again, it's always the words — 
I cannot see are there, 
at the core of the keel, 
waiting for me to dig them out 
in a parsing, a splitting.

Loops and lines 
circles and edges 
a world of contrasts, 
of deep cuts — of stiches 
through crossed-Ts.

This is my Red Sea. This is my design. 
This is the word of a different language, 
not English or Portuguese. 
It is the language of water.

If we could read the ribs 
of a ship like tea leaves, 
I know they would give us every human emotion 
and the taste of salt.

At night, I dream of sentences 
and the punctuation — every one — 
a curling, beating whale.
A Hundred Other Shadowy Things

Mustered early, I rose
through the hatch,
but not before ensuring I was the last to leave.
Even still, I swear,
I could hear those older men—
feel their rhythm kept in line with my soles:
“‘it can’t be shadows’” 21
I fall into.

All hands were taken up
and cupped around danger,
no other hands for holding.

This is where it all happens—
coming in waves of shock,
and wonder.

Who knows how many languages we keep
under the boards, and how many spoke of love
as if it is a foreign thing.

21 In Moby-Dick, Ishmael, mustered early, sees his shipmates for the first time, declaring “‘it can’t be shadows.’” He learns soon that they are not men—it is an illusion and that is the way the mind plays tricks. This poem’s title, too, is taken from the same scene in Melville’s novel.
Impressions

After we have awoken,  
disturbed the dead,  
we lay them to rest.

Though no one reminds you of home,  
this ship never lets you forget  
how, every hook or beam or board,  
may have felt an ancestor’s soles  
press meaningfully.

No matter how gentle, how small  
are my hands,  
I take something with me,  
even things I can’t see.

I have often urged my fingers into corners,  
pushed wood and expected it  
to push back; then,  
pressed the tips to my mouth afterward.

I never understood what I was doing  
but—now I know:  
kissing the dead goodbye.
Looking Back

How simple it is to feel left behind —
not so simple to seek the things
left there—to actively engage
with only memory,
even that a fantastic transmutation
of romance and yearning.

How saturated these planks must have been
with desperate calls and prayers
in every language,
the roughness peeling away
with each Voyage, with every foot
falling in a heavy step

used to keep the balance.
The body is a betrayal,
just as the voice that commands
seems an enemy to understanding.
Everything expected of you
is new here, and strange—

but it is beautiful, too,
and momentous:
being left back is nothing less
than facing possibility because reality
is not yet discerned. Cling
to the innocence, the memory,

the hope that you make meaning here,
that prayers do not fall on deaf ears,
that all saints are multilingual
and that your ancestors, too,
sharing your blood and desire,
will also turn, looking towards you
—going back.
How We Make the Rigging of a Heart

Here is the one thing we cannot deny:
all bodies are made of so much water, even those first.
We may wonder if gods distrust land
and its static. In time, earth was broken. Who knows true origin? Now,
every part of what happened has been lost; no matter
what we repair or replace--what we patch
with loose tendrils of oakum and occasion--
the reality of that time can never mean more than memory.

Everything I believe is a choosing;
every thing I remember is no more mine
than his--that is, a borrowed image from some photograph.
A snatched line from some chantey.

Every mind carries a cargo of self-deception
with its casks filled to the brim. Once in a while,
someone sneaks a peek. Or, a leak springs
as if God's nudging finger was there all along

but would never plug up the holes
(into which we were meant to fall). One hundred
years ago, according to one log book,
some ancestor put down his mark. That's it--not

a name, but a mark. Not an “X,” really,
but some scribble, a childish scrawl.
If that first clay man and woman had written
their own identities into the earth,

every line would have looked like this.
Yellowed and sullied in questionable spirits
of black smoke, the book bore witness
to as much smoldering as dirty hands could take

without losing the semblance of hands.

And now, what do we do with knowledge?
Do we carry it indefinitely or litter our own lives
with more paper and circumstance? How conversation
has turned to gossip, I'll never know. And now,

disintegrated foreign words, watered
down to essential oils and inks,
paper this chambered heart. How a ship
has only three main compartments,

I'll never know. How can it ever pump
so much value into all it does
without that other ventricle or atrium?
Instead, all blood ties rest in the hold,

which is where they belong. After
all—isn't this all there is left, when time has fled?
The clutching, the clinging—
the hold.
**Prisms**

No light is ever made—it is only lent.

And no boat ever perishes—it is always mended
or replaced.

No sound sent on this ship has ever left the boards or beams,
have ever emitted fully, like a deep laugh,
from the belly. They are still being sent,
those sounds, and accumulated
by the cask-full. They are still spread thick between the planks
and tied like ropes wrapped around winch. The sonorous slumber
of a thousand silent sounds ebb and wait
for the shattering of a line, plunging of the weight,
the breaking of a mast.

The *Morgan* reveals all truths:

> we must anchor well,
> but sail freely even more;

> we must preserve and protect,
> but caution our recklessness on occasion;

> that our lives are not a construction
> but a maintenance.

We tumble out from odd places, like the cracks
of try-work bricks
the smiles of gap-toothed Captains’ children
the lens of deck prism light
and how it gives the impression that someone is home.

No light is ever new—it is only re-fused.
No light is ever made—it is only borrowed
like time, and water, and the bones of men.

What have they left us
but everything
we are today?
The Logbook

I found my ancestors buried between the two points of shoulder blades and the ebbing arc of spine.

How is it no one notices the body move unless it is an impossible act, a contortionist's trick or sleight of hand?

In 1841, the Morgan sailed from New Bedford and, for the first time, felt all life fall into her. How she caught and cradled is anyone's guess. But some 173 years later, after her hands have let go, we still find ourselves crawling aboard in search of the two points, one looking aft and one 'fore, both flung, in invisible rope, across the crooked spines of greenhands.
Three Points of Contact

1.
The whalenmen
of New England boarded
with their superstitions.
The Portuguese
brought religion—
another form of superstition.

On deck, it all blends.
Wind takes away words
chanted
in any language, as if
they all weigh the same,

fit in as many casks,
share value—
which is none
and everything men have left

of who they were
when it all began.

Here, all men are philosophers—
a ship, a floating pulpit
where all may worship,

even in their boots;
even in their bare feet.

All faith belongs to the sea,
to Neptune and a Christian God,
as Açoreans filled their pockets
with holy objects (or as I tucked away
a cast-iron whale in my pack,
100 years later), ageless
offerings to Espírito Santo.22

The more ships creak,
the more saints earn prayers,
mostly in cryptic languages
coarse as grain rubbed from wood
beneath salt sprays and coats of paint.

How many men sleep better
with the thought of bible leaves curling
in puzzling formations,
each one a potent symbol
of what’s to come?

22the Holy Spirit
Time is everything—
time and perspective.

They read these cuttings like talismans,
curled leaves in a teacup,
some primitive religion—urge haste
to the future
bringing them home.

All ships are a truth and testament,
the significance of which we never
until later.

I am as much a believer
in the lengths of men’s courage
as I am in their limits,
as I am in the strength of rope.

2.
For ten years, Odysseus struggled
back to Ithaca, another ten years
after War. Although whalemen did not disappear
for quite so long,
it is likely each wife was the same,
every child a shape-shifting Telemachus
slave to time and maturity,
each home an Ithaca, just beyond
a roll of a white wave,
a crowning sea,
a falling horizon
with sun
plunging into black.

When Odysseus drew home, it was disguised
as wandering beggar—Athena’s doing—
so to watch inconspicuously
every corner. Among strangers,
he wove stories of distraction
and delight, ignorant to what lay ahead:
suitors to slay, a sparing of his estranged wife,
a cleaning-house.

A scar betrayed him—the housekeeper,
washing his feet in that ageless sanctimony
as if the ocean’s water is insufficient,
as if its salt does not cleanse.
A whaleship has no women to clean up
the mess of corpses, as Odysseus commanded servants
after the contest of the bow.
At another bow stood men ordering
greenhands, the eager Portuguese,
hanging in their terror.

Was Penelope to blame because she married
a man whose name means “trouble”?
Were women of the Old Country responsible
for the swift-flight of their men
who sought more, whose names like
Carlos, Jose, Manuel
were shaved clean, a transformation,
an ungodly disguise of Carl, Joe, Manny?

How could they return to these strangers
whom they had not married,
not even their names?

For whalesmen,
each creature was an Odysseus, trouble incarnate—
long before Ahab’s cunningly intelligent whale.

How fitting that the mizzenmast is drawn
through the captain’s table,
like homely tree at the center
of Odysseus’ bedchamber,
the live olive trunk,
peace offering and proof
of remembrance.
All Voyagers become one,
all Voyages the same,
each journey with its own delays of sirens
and splendid visions.

Sometimes, the tempters are whales
and the chantey is a blend of salted lips
and watery chatter.

On deck,
each sail, wound tight, then—
abandoned—the silent yet snapping
unweaving of the tapestry
of that woman who waited.

3.
Every wife was to be a faithful Penelope;
even now, this could be my mother,
my father, gone
for years across an ocean,
bringing back no whales.

So, a whaleship is not an outdated myth
but a symbol and proof,
live as its oak, Odysseus' olive tree, everywhere
the chance to brush the sage,
burn the offerings,
to praise the family gods.

We keep pulling lines—

so much depends on the needle—
threading for sails,
stitching of woods,
--that of the compass

and the million lines read in a book
set for distraction; and the million ways
a family is forged through roots
sunk into the unaccustomed waters.

On land, they stitch the eyes of the dead,
prepare for no more weeping.
On ocean, the dead play witness
to all things held in store,

each mast a spire
of this sepulchral churchyard.

This ship is constantly at prayer,
with its crook knees—no wonder
it’s such a survivor, floating shrine
and its parish of whales.

All ships are a staggering light
towards which we fumble,
even if unknowing—
we’ll get there in the end.

All minds are a rigging waiting to connect.
Out here, we seek communion
with anything that moves.

And somewhere in our minds,
met between us,
the stories of The Bible
and of Homer

become one,

become the personal narrative that is,
of course,  
the story shared by all men

in two waves lost at sea,  
two pages folding together—  
making a third form,  
the holiest kiss.
**Saudade**

It must be lonely, being the last of your kind —
just as the foreign men were lonely,
on your planks,
when you felt
so surrounded

by life, by wind, by blood and water
that scrubbed your deck in salted manner.

Now, things are so different,
but the sons and daughters of your original companions
walk the gangway, climb the rigging,
fly aloft, stroke your ceiling,

and curl in your bunks,
their forms commas and parentheses,
addendums to history.

How the world has returned to you
through inheritance.

It is why we are all here,
still listening to wind run through canvas flashes
and whipped tails of manila rope. It's why we let
the smell of tar and oak lurk
just a little longer, inhaling deep

lurid juices and nostalgia. My people called it *saudade*:
I call it coming home.