ISHMAEL ON THE MORGAN

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LOOMINGS

I've read the book so often its phrases pave my speech and pierce my dreams. It made clear that men can be demons and whales miracles.

And I’ve sailed several seas and spotted whales enough to fill a cetologist's log. I’ve learned that respect is what I owe old Ocean.

Yet, for nights before the Morgan sailed, I slept with knotted hands and restless feet, paced a deck crowded with ungraspable phantoms.

I had visions of the ship, swathed, wreathed in mists, fog horns bleating, a whited sepulcher. I lost faith in its solid futtocks of black locust.

At noon I heard an old friend’s big laughter in a sushi shack. But he’d become a shrunken vestige of himself, reminding me of responsibilities ashore.

I vomited up my lobster roll, and convinced I was fated for this voyage, hoisted my carpet bag, prepared to meet my mates from all the earth’s occupations.

At last, on the Morgan’s wide deck, and dazzled, I stumbled over a skylight and knocked my head on a hatch. But clicking off my cell phone, I let the masts point me heavenward, and the wonder-world sprang open.
THE DOUBLOON

The moon springs free of the ship’s elaborate rigging before the night sky nails it down. Secured among the stars, it glows back down on us, leaving behind its shadow, its doppelganger, the anchor ball, black sphere floating high in the rigging, signifying the *Morgan* is snug on the hook in Provincetown harbor.

As the moon climbs, topping the mizzenmast, the cry goes up to lower the anchor ball and weigh the anchor. And so, hand over hand, and hand over hand, heaving, hauling, the windlass grinding, the anchors rise with their burden of chains, and the *Morgan*, released from dry rot and wrecking ball, plunges forward, lured by the moon, the gold doubloon, into the tumultuous dark, deepening over the sea.
Sailing off the grid, the Pequod and the old Morgan kept themselves well-lit. Barrels of crude filled their hulls. Tracing over his charts in search of one whale, Ahab could well afford to burn the midnight oil, while the Morgan’s masters struck it rich for decades, blessed with greasy luck.

Larger, harsher harpoons, electrified to run all night, still plunder the deep heart of earth and sea to light the world, and so now as the dark Morgan lies at anchor, drenched in moonlight, her motherboard winks in astral patterns of red, blue, and green. Lights switch on, off in a high-tech web of safety, comfort, friends, all that's kind to our mortalities.
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 deep down here. Lined with compact sailors’ chests, hawsers coiled and piled like tidy intestines, and spare anchors, this low, confined space hums and chortles like 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 reverberate through hull and keel.
ODE TO THE KEEL

Up from the keel, rose the ship, ribs and futtocks tight, deck and masts, thews and sinews, intricate rigging and billowing sails. The keel, the spine, the trunk, steadies the hull, curves to embrace the parts into a whole, keeping the cradle afloat.

Saturated by sea salt, slicing across waves, over backs of whales and turtles, tempered by oceans and tempests, flexing, ready for a White Whale to thunder into the ship. Outlasting ribs and futtocks, deck and masts, rigging and sails, this keel remains, impervious, guiding the Morgan forward through space and time.
THE LAYERED SHIP

The whale ship has its little lower layers. In the foretop, on mild days, I touched heaven and measured the earth’s curvature. I hung there, close to dissolving into clouds. The deck, below a jungle of boxes, bales, and our cavorting crew of isolatoes, was purgatorial.

I became acquainted with blubber room and fo’c’s’le, hot and hellish, crawling with rats and roaches, but further down, the ship’s miasmic depths, dank and dark, freighted with a ballast of casks, filled first with salt horse, then with whale oil, I avoided. Here Queequeg caught his graveyard fever.

Steel bar and concrete now ballast the Morgan, keep her balanced and true. The captain claims, “Her cargo is knowledge.” I stay on the open deck where the search is ongoing.
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 Zodiacs. But Queequeg wrestled with his in the ocean’s bowels and faced them as newborns, coiled and pearly.
SEA SICKNESS

The _Pequod’s_ planks and ceiling kept the lid on our insanity. We were always at a boiling point, a ship of fools, isolatoes, made desperate by a commitment to perpetual slaughter, by a commander seeking vengeance on a fellow being. We did nothing to stop him.

Another whaleship—take the _Morgan_—could give a youth of hollow look and sallow complexion bright eyes and a tawny skin. Robust in mind and body, he would soon be springing up the rigging, working with comrades to lower the boats, rowing in harmony, and singing out for the joy of whales.

Queequeg, that good man, took ill, had a coffin built to size, stretched out inside, ready to join the constellations. By chance, remembering a necessary task at shore, he cured himself and lived until he took his long, last dive with all my _Pequod_ comrades.

On board the _Morgan_, I, hollow-eyed and sallow, waxing green about the gills, was slipped crystallized ginger and soda crackers. Hence, I survived to revel with a full crew of whale devotees to go on telling the _Morgan_’s tale.
THE CAPTAIN’S VITA

Ahab’s Vita had certain lacunae. How did he get his name, and who knew precisely how he came by that scar that seared him like lightning? What’s certain were his navigational skills. He lorded it over compass and line. He sailed the Pequod through tempest and typhoon. He traced his way to Moby Dick, one whale in the whole wide ocean though I still wonder if Moby Dick did not find him. He regarded his crew as his arms and legs. His sleep was tormented.

Captain Kip Files has no secrets. His Vita is online, his passions implied on Facebook. They include windjamming off the coast of Maine, the Morgan’s taking a graceful tack, whales come to romp round the old ship. I could ask him any question, including what his fears might be. He anguishes over the safety of each person on his ships. He keeps his fun meter well-oiled and is a friend, committed to joint-stock companies. When his bed's too short, and the captain's velvet settee too hard, he spreads out a sleeping bag behind the helm and sleeps, charmed.
AT THE HELM

The *Pequod* had it both ways, steered by wheel and tiller, as if Melville knew both so well he couldn’t choose. What mattered was the man at the helm, whether he could look away from the try-pots’ mesmerizing fire and accept the first hint of a twitching tiller, the nudge of a bounding wheel.

Under the hurricane roof, the *Morgan*’s wheel stands, a sturdy circumference. Its masters took no chances. Its spin is taut, its shincracker oiled, alert to kick a dozing or a mesmerized helmsman. Someone taking a trick at the *Morgan*’s helm tries to keep a steady gaze down, down the long deck, beyond the binnacle, past Clara Tinkham’s pavilion, through the riggings’ cross hatching and a gaggle of voyagers, leaps over the windlass to track *Sirius*, a bear of a tug, wallowing to port, to starboard in rough seas, hauling, guiding the *Morgan* forward.

Stand by, then, to test the wheel’s play, spin it a finger at a time, let wind riffle through, aware of the shincracker, greasing, snaking its way back and forth, close to your feet. While unseen, the rudder swerves, determines the course, and abaft the wake spreads, fanning out to dissolve into the sea and erase the easygoing shoreline, while far forward the tug is discharged, and the bow takes the sea’s white cannibal bone in its teeth as it always has, and the *Morgan* seems to sail free of human design.
THE CARPENTER’S BENCH

Athwartships, half-way between foremast and mainmast, we congregate at the carpenter's bench, the Morgan’s scuttlebutt, magnet for conversation. Among coffee cups, sketchpads, binoculars, and logs, I sit cross-legged on top, a place more social than the masthead. Here crew consorts with scientists, voyagers with senators. I eavesdrop, missing the Morgan's chickens, who once cackled beneath the bench, and the Pequod’s omnitooled carpenter with his wheezing humor.
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. We watched
the amorous ways of whales,
but 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 navigation and
medication, but the Morgan
restored has girls flying
from the rigging—a Cirque
de Soleil—lowering whale
boats, mounting the masthead,
taking Flask’s place as Mate.
federating the whale ship,
at last, along one keel.
ON DECK

No one notices the relics of slaughter, fluke posts, hawser holes, the cutting stage where Leviathan was hung from the side and hoisted up in pieces, where flesh was severed from the bones, where whale steak might be had for dinner. The fiery try-works, where blubber was rendered into the oil that ran empires, are overlooked as obsolete antiques or photographed for analysis. On deck, no longer awash in gore and entrails, men, once engaged in a bloody butchery of a business, now ponder the whole ocean's salvation.
Days, years passed, and though all we had was time, we had no time. No time for sea shell valentines, little time for scrimshaw. We heaved and hauled, coiled lines, spliced lines, climbed rigging, set sails, stowed down, cleared up. We sang. We squabbled and brawled, played the bones, the tambourine. We wove mats, squeezed spermaceti. We whispered, but had no time for easy conversation. The fo’c’s’le was an echo chamber. Not even the shady hurricane deck was private. Hour by hour, we sharpened our harpoons and went out again to murder whales.

Time passed, and the world turned from hunting whales. Now while the crew continues heaving, hauling, some of us pluck tunes on a waldzither, sketch the action, set up a tripod, make a video, measure the sea’s currents, photo fluke posts, consider the sextant’s logic, begin a poem. We pause, go eye-to-eye with a dead-eye, caress a belaying pin, fondle a line coiled in ballantine rings. We stand in the mizzen mast’s shadow, gazing up at stories of sails. On her 38th Voyage, at last there is time to create a valentine for the Morgan.
THE SHIPBOARD TABLE

The *Pequod* was a cannibal craft, trimmed with the teeth of the creatures it slaughtered. Old Fleece, the black cook on board, could deliver a sermon on the ways that men, like sharks, might devour their own. At the dining table there, conviviality was not in order: at the head of the table, Ahab sucked on revenge, and Flask remained a poor, butterless man.

On the *Morgan*, Juls, the cook, unacquainted with Fleece and ravenous sharks, favored us with flavors, flattered us with comfort food: fried chicken, spaghetti, fruit salads, breads, and four kinds of brownies. She laid a board of plenty and understood the significance of sweetness. At mealtimes, we spread ourselves throughout the ship, devouring cinnamon rolls under the hurricane deck, eclairs by the try-works. We had a bounty of butter.
For days, whalers sailed without sight of land, endless ocean, barren horizon. They were their own company, always a mixed bag of humanity, plus an occasional albatross.

On the old *Morgan*, they gammed when they could, sharing news of home, weather, and fresh water. They stopped on islands, lovely and strange, once or twice meeting with men more fierce than whales. But given the nail the White Whale had driven into Ahab’s heart, we didn’t dawdle on the *Pequod*, though nine times we met ships with whom we might have had a chat, genial or not.

The *Morgan* now seems made for socializing. Regal, yet, she absorbs gawking visitors at each stop and sails on, surrounded, as she goes, by a retinue of small craft, agog by her tall masts, immaculate sails, the golden eagle emblazoned on her transom, her bow sprit leading. The tug boat, *Sirius*, is her advance guard. The *Mystic Whaler* comes alongside with pancakes for breakfast, fried chicken
for lunch. The luxury cruiser, 
Rena, blazing white, circles casually, and all around, whale-watching boats nuzzle close, eager to take direction from the Morgan: ancestor, spirit.
THE MASTHEAD

“It had been over 90 years since a sailor stood in the hoops of the Charles W. Morgan under sail, and that afternoon, about a quarter point to the southeast, I spotted a spout.”

Ryan Leighton, Morgan stowaway

Some of us once spent months, high up in the topgallant crosstrees, watching the waves and the world go by, looking for a passing whale and holding on for fear of slipping into that deep, blue bottomless soul spread out below.

And still we climb up, up and up, harnessed now by law and a clip for safety. We scramble up, yard by yard, to free the sails, and the horizon curves around us as the sails fill and billow. Landlubbers and voyagers, keen to test themselves follow, repressing terror with three points attached to line, to spar as actions below dwindle.

And the stowaway, as once did I, takes his stand by the main royal sail. He breathes in the sky, fixes his eye on the flexing sea, and looks for the shadow, a glowing phosphorescence to rise through spindrift, shedding froth and foam, crying out at last, jubilant, to the world, waiting below, “She blows! Thar she blows!”
THE WHALE BOAT

A barque, three-masted, rigged fore and aft, the *Morgan* was not unusual in her day. But for the whale boats. Carried on her beams, they swung like casual hammocks from their davits, distinguishing her and her whale ship cousins.

These whale boats, at their ease, as the ship sailed hither, thither, the instant whales were sighted, turned killing machines. They sliced through oceans, keeping pace with racing whales, designed so a man could stand and balance himself while throwing his deadly dart. The boats, then, became the dray horses of this murderous business, with men bent to row, dragging behind the massive, bleeding corpses to be butchered and boiled into oil.

The whale boats remain at their ease on the *Morgan*, distinguished in our day in all ways from all other ships, as she meanders the New England coast this blithe summer. The killing is done now. No one has use for the clumsy cleat. But still whale boats are lowered, their crews assembled, brother and sister, bosom friends, joshing. Together, they feel the whales rub the keel. They lift their oars in salute. They row in the sparkling day with no chance of losing the ship in night’s hopeless despair. Should Pip go overboard, they will rescue him, an orange life-jacket holding him aloft in the sea’s rolling green. Always rowing for dear life, they row now for joy.
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,
shining, 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 fecalologist, whose studies claimed such cetological fecal plumes, swelling and smelling, spreading through crisp, blue waters, such flocculant feces, ripe with itinerant microorganisms, composted the ocean, recreating, resurrecting.

No Victorian, but if sex and religion were at stake, I cleansed my story of overt potty talk, though I would have listened, rapt, to such a scientist, observing vital connections everywhere.
At the end, the *Morgan* sailed for home, ready to recycle sludge from her heads and trash bins, leaving only her wake fanning out behind, dissolving into spindrift across the shifting sea.

She glided over the ocean floor, as faulty as the earth’s, with seismic plates shifting, mountains maneuvering. I imagined middens, immense mausoleums, containing the remains of armadas, the graves of mosasauruses and spiny sharks. I conjured jungles, spewing fecund figs and fronds from abyssal canyons, while strewn across this wavering oceanic landscape, I saw whalefalls toppled like semis along expressways.

The *Pequod*’s splintered spars and shredded sails drifted down through this sea like plankton, coming at last to rest and rot. Ahab’s rage softened, disintegrated into nutrients, and Starbuck’s passivity was energized into glittering diatoms. While the *Morgan* emptied her waste into new cells and soil on land, vortices of pelagic plastic gyrate unceasingly above the *Pequod*’s iron try-pots, now rusted into coral, where clown fish circumnavigate.
ISHMAEL’S WHALE

Studying cetology, I swam through libraries, sailed the seven seas. I witnessed the whale in his flurry and knew full well, “The sperm whale tolerates no nonsense.” I contested, “The whale is a fish,” but also that whales mate more hominum* and bleed and suckle their babes.

I rejoice now learning humpbacks sing, learning sperm whales send sonar out through their long jawbones, visualizing giant squid lurking behind oceanic mountains. I mourn Tilikum's abuses and humiliations. On the Morgan, I converse with Roman, DiMonti, and Safina,** and when the cry goes out from the masthead, I see whales and whale ship dance together.

My whale isn’t Starbuck’s “dumb beast,” acting from blind instinct. Not Bildad and Peleg’s commodity, equal to 150 barrels of oil. Not Ahab’s malicious monster. To the end of the tale, my whale swims free among seas, among stars, flesh of our flesh, carbon of our carbon, ever ungraspable.

*More hominum, Latin, in the manner of humans, a phrase used by Melville in Moby-Dick, Chapter 87, “The Grand Armada,” to indicate that whales mate as do humans, stomach to stomach.

** Joe Roman, Anne DiMonti, Carl Safina, well-known cetologists and oceanographers, on board the Charles W. Morgan when for the first-time in ninety years, whales were spotted from the ship’s masthead.
LIFTING THE SHROUD

It was a mild, mild day,
a convergence of forms,
of movement, of sound,
beyond narrative, beyond linearity,
the Morgan arriving, her sails,
layered wings unfolding, opening,
a flock of white birds, pivoting
together on her masts, humpbacks’
fins rotating, swirling white
banners, up from azure depths,
whales suffusing, blowing off
steam, a whale boat rowing
in harmony, out from the ship,
the boat steerer calling, reach,
catch, and pull, oars sweeping
together, a chorus line, tapping
the backs of whales, whales
rubbing the boats’ keels, bubble-netting, people applauding, terns
and shearwaters, pirouetting,
ruffling the air, flashes of foam,
alighting, riding waves, white
clouds, white sails surging
and swelling over blue waters,
all simultaneous, all synchronized,
dancing, lifting the great shroud
of the sea.
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 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,
the Morgan now looms and
moves across the canvas
of my mind, sails billowing.