

Sailing without Ahab

Ecopoetic Travels

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A Bosom Friend

No place like a bed and no love like Q.
No warmth like the sun and no ship like the P.
No food like chowder and no book like his tattoos.
No task like head-selling and no place like New Bedford.
No shave but with a harpoon and no breakfast but beefsteaks.
No head but George Washington's and no hat but Abe's.
No kindness but pagan and no simplicity but his heart.
No chill like the darkness and no blanket but his idol.
No warmth but a low fire and no voyage but for whales.
No smoke but from his pipe and no chat but til morning.
No future but with him and no ship but the P.
No place like a bed and no love like Q.

— Ideas

How can we know when futures hit us?
Picture: the cozy pair in bed,
Smoking a long pipe,
Chattering about nothing,
Deferring sleep.
Pale and tattooed legs cross and uncross.
Somewhere deep in ocean's darkness
An idea appears—
Births itself, rushes toward the surface, sounds,
Breaches into fullness,
And no one takes any notice.

[. . .]

He's the center but he's not here.

Left behind—that urgency, focus,
Unrelenting will, drive,
The surge of words, tapping on the wooden deck,
Mad eagerness for revenge and thick heart's blood.

It's hard to sail without.

The deck-ring sits empty in the appointed place.
I, nearly stumbles over it when his watch musters at sunrise.
No ivory peg plumbs that hole,
No hammer smashes no doubleton,
No oaths are taken,
No sacrifices made,
No devils worshipped.

Instead we sail out to sea—to what? Where?
What drives headless *P.* into immensities?
Starbuck's aristocratic bearing, Strubb's cheer, Flask's
unconsciousness?

Or is it I, alone, high on the masthead,
Shielding his eyes from sun-glitter,
Who steers while sleeping?

Or is there no steering at all?

A Scene on the Quarterdeck

Strubb comes forward as in a play,
Because cheer's the greatest challenge,
Cheer and a vision of common things,
A crew that faces opacity together.

Old age is always wakeful, doesn't say the mad old man
Who's not here.

Strubb wants to pause the tapping
That unrelenting marks time,
Shapes a voyage into a quest for revenge,
Sharpens the harpoon of resentment.

No such rhythms as we sail into unknowing.
Already aloft, I, sees Strubb confused, aimless,
Wandering the quarterdeck as if a grassy plain,
Tall fronds wavering under a steady breeze,
Timid rabbits safe and well-hidden beneath.

✓
The Chart

It's an impossible project—

Making a two-dimensional image of
The three-dimensional globe. And it's not just
Curvature that distorts.

The ocean seethes with depth,
Surges with currents and tides,
And in every way frustrates
The chart maker's fixity.

Nonetheless, tools exist.

You lay them flat on a table in the stern cabin,
Plot distances and direction between points
That are never as stable or singular
As they appear on the page.

✓ The chart can focus a monomaniac's attention.
It can seek out white whales
And other monstrosities.
But we are sailing without,
Open to unplanned coincidences
Of comingling and flow.

The complex flatness and mathematical precision
Of thumbs and meridians and constant angles
Serve not to narrow the chase,
But to display the world's salty plurality—
Mad dynamism, unrepresentable in full,
Emulated in parts.

The Kind of Harpoon I. Throws

The beast at which we strike bleeds history
Not allegory.

I. casts barbs at living flesh
Not ideas.

The Chase—First Day

Since [. . .] is not here to steal the seeing,
Tashtego raises Moby-Dick.
He wins no doubt but gains a sight
Of flashing sunglister—
The bodily glare of Great White Evil God
As he so divinely swam.

Why should we not seek his body?
Why not out of thirry, make one man?
Straining at oars,
Splashing across a gentle swell,
Daggo's broad back visible
Even to I, who labors my bow oar,
Mere inches from Q's coiled frame,
Eager to exchange oar for harpoon
And to cast at that infinity.
The whale's jaw snaps boat-ribs.
Men scatter.
Stubb counts five floating oars
And numbers five rescued men.
Away to leeward spume rises
Once, twice, to reveal direction,
Then two incandescent flukes catch the sun's last light,
Flash defiance at the P.,
And dive.

The Chase—Second Day

From below
The P. echoes faintly,
Just a blip of sonic reply,
A ghost of a ship
Protruding wooden keel into
An ocean of sound.
The White Whale hears—
The muffled green texture
Of floating kelp
And the silver bellies
Of flying fish piercing the surface.
The White Whale hears—
The sideways perambulations
Of scavenging crabs
And the profundity of cogitations
Of the octopus in its cave.
The White Whale hears—
The bottlenose dolphins'
High-pitched squawk
And the frenzied scatter
Of deep-water mackerel.
The White Whale hears—
The rustle of wind
Disturbing ocean's surface
And the ninety-degree turnings
Of the curtlefish.

The White Whale hears—
The mourning cry of
The pelican mother
Who nurses her young with the blood
Of her own breast.

The White Whale hears—
The naked feet of Q,
As the harpooner descends
The masthead for the last time,
His eyes scanning
For I's face.

The White Whale hears—
Endless permutations of soft-bodied
Jellyfish, as they prepare
To dominate
Not-yet-warming seas.

The White Whale hears—
Stillness and contemplation
From the flounder
Whose eyes scan the flat bottom
In opposite directions.

The White Whale hears—
The screech of the frigate birds
Who gather off the whaleship's bow
Awaiting scraps
And knowing what's to come.

The White Whale hears—
A slowness encroaching,

As the P. exits the North Equatorial Current
Standing toward the center of the Gyre
Where plastic reigns today.

The White Whale hears—
The accumulation of unbleached
Corals, building lives upon lives
In clear water, infiltrated
By clownfish and moray eels.

The White Whale hears—
The mouth of the Giant Clam open
Admitting water,
And shut again
After some time.

The White Whale hears—
Voices of tiny men
In the rigging,
Singing work songs
And furling canvases.

The White Whale hears—
Far off in rocky Nantucket,
The voice of a boy,
Whose father is at sea.

The White Whale hears—
The fluid displacement
Of the Blue Whale,
Earth's most massive swimmer
In the deepest seas.

The White Whale hears—
Tashtego the Gay Head Indian

Ascend the main
To take Q's place
At the watching.

The White Whale hears—
No peegleg
In no augur hole
No harsh voice
Championing violence.

The White Whale hears—
The soft feet of I.
Sneaking toward the foremast
To climb one last time
In darkness
Before dawn.

The White Whale hears—
So many more things
That not song nor computation
Can number them.

Having heard
So widely that all the universe
Is known,
Moby-Dick swims
now!
And all undersea creation
Fan-tails in his wake.

The Chase—Third Day

The things that come together do not
Equal each other.

The P. floats in glorious confusion,
Bearing Q's majesty, Pip's madness, Stubb's boldness,
The queer wisdom of the old Manxman,
The regenerating curiosity of I.,
All floating together,
Not in harmony but in company,
Parceled into whaleboats
Sleeping within one Nantucket keel,
A coffin made of American wood,
Inside a dream of acquisition,
Reaching for oil and sperm,
Grasping—what? Nothing—
At the last?

Opposite the whaleship swims the forehead
Of Moby-Dick, *combinedly possessed* by the strength
Of all the angels that fell from heaven.

Oh, Flask, cries the Mart, misquoting Shakespeare—
For one red cherry
Ere we die. Cherries? replies King-Post,
I only wish that we were where they grow.

And the predestinating head
Swims his predestinated path
Across fatal waves
Into God-denying keel
Drowning utopia.
Christians and pagans and carpenters,
Cooks and blacksmiths and mast-mounted Q.