

**ISHMAEL ON THE *MORGAN***

**Elizabeth Schultz**

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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.

## OIL THAT LIGHTS THE WORLD

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, isolated, 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, sketch-  
pads, 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.

## TIME FOR VALENTINES

*For the 38<sup>th</sup> Voyagers, Provincetown  
to Stellwagen Bank Marine Sanctuary,  
July 10-11, 2014*

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 38<sup>th</sup> 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.

## GAMS

“*GAM*. Noun—A special meeting of two (or more) Whale-ships, generally on a cruising ground; when after exchanging hails, they exchange visits.”

Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

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  
fecalogist, 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.

## WASTE NOT

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.