



contemplating the lingering mythology of whaling
and the ~~great~~ American novel
unread

presented by Salty Xi Jie Ng



“It is difficult not to address whales in romantic terms. I have seen grown men cry when they see their first whale. And while it is a mistake to anthropomorphize animals merely because they are big or small or cute or clever, it is only human to do so, because we are human, and they are not. It is sometimes the only way we can come to an understanding of them.”

Philip Hoare
The Whale

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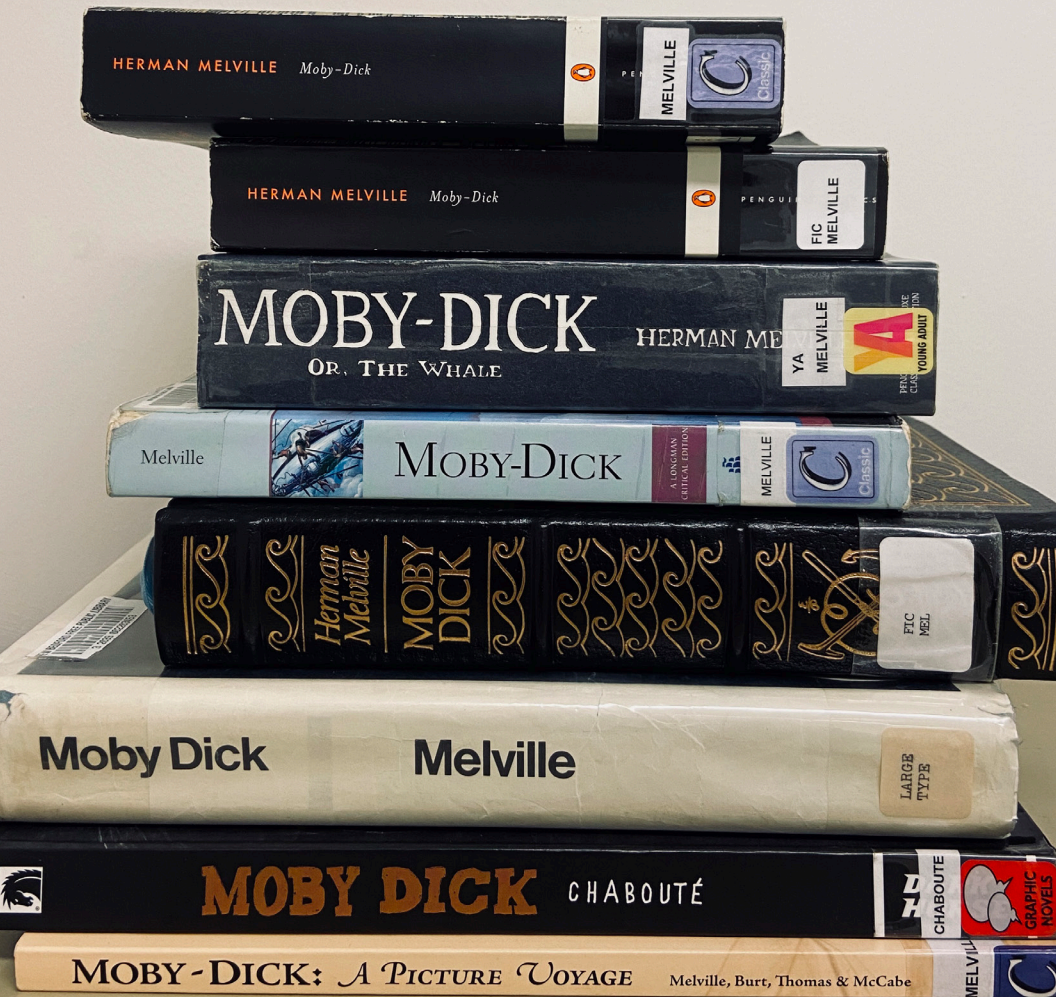
Salty Xi Jie Ng (b. 1987, Singapore) co-creates semi-fictional paradigms for the real and imagined lives of humans within the poetics of the intimate vernacular. // saltythunder.net

“Though elephants have stood for their full-lengths, the living Leviathan has never yet fairly floated himself for his portrait. The living whale, in his full majesty and significance, is only to be seen at sea in unfathomable waters; and afloat the vast bulk of him is out of sight, like a launched line-of-battle ship; and out of that element it is a thing eternally impossible for mortal man to hoist him bodily into the air, so as to preserve all his mighty swells and undulations... Any way you may look at it, you must needs conclude that the great Leviathan is that one creature in the world which must remain unpainted to the last. True, one portrait may hit the mark much nearer than another, but none can hit it with any very considerable degree of exactness. So there is no earthly way of finding out precisely what the whale really looks like. And the only mode in which you can derive even a tolerable idea of his living contour, is by going a whaling yourself; but by so doing, you run no small risk of being eternally stove and sunk by him. Wherefore, it seems to me you had best not be too fastidious in your curiosity touching this Leviathan.”

Herman Melville
Moby-Dick; or, The Whale

Preface

For several months, I found myself, a tropical Chinese-Singaporean, living in the ex whaling capital of the world. Everywhere I turned was some Moby-Dick or whale inspired business, motif or product. As I strolled the Whaling Museum, I felt the blistering chill of whaling voyages, the yearning of whaler wives, inhaled whiffs of blubber? whale bone? preserved whaling logs? This is a brutal, obscure history continuously striving to be upheld in ways buoyant and respectable. Yet the whales are so far from shore, and so endangered. I wondered, What is it like to grow up here or live amidst this? What are people's real connections with whales? Dare I investigate this through the lens of the revered American novel?



Every year, the Whaling Museum organises its longstanding, official Moby-Dick Marathon, where esteemed readers spend some 25 hours taking turns to recite the entire novel, replete with hot soups and merchandise for sale. The Alternative Moby-Dick Marathon is a playful, somewhat subversive counterpoint considering different ways of approaching the seminal literary epic that may reveal our relationship to place, history, nature, and indeed, life. It invites in everyday people who have grown up around and in some sense, inherited, whaling history but who are not necessarily inclined towards reading the 135 chaptered book or dissecting it. Nonetheless I suspect they have all been touched by the energy of whales in their lifetime. It is also worth noting that the seafood industry is a complex world where whale conservation entangles with the livelihoods of lobster fisherpeople.

The first thing I had to do was listen to the Moby-Dick audiobook (21 hours, sometimes in the shower). Then I set about collecting alternative Moby-Dick versions from locals—all the better if they had not read Moby-Dick (and many had not), for they would then be largely informed by the mythology that sticks sweetly to their streets, by every *whale thing* they had ever encountered. I am deeply grateful to those who participated in this strange activity (“It’s okay if you haven’t read it! How would you summarise it?”) and contributed to the fascinating spectrum that now constitutes this humble Marathon. Contributors were invited to simply share thoughts, make up their own summaries, fantasize wild versions, or intuitively put together lines and bits, as a few of us did, huddled at the Co-Creative Center one cold evening. The deep breathing of an omniscient, wise, old whale spirit never felt far away.

I hope the entries collectively offer a glimpse into the inner worlds of those connected to Southcoast whaling history, as well as productive trickster ways in which we can access seemingly untouchable things that are intimidatingly epic or cemented in history. This Marathon will be presented at the New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park in September 2021, alongside *A Whaling Descendant Performs In Four Acts*, an experimental collaborative film I made during the pandemic with Charlie Chace, descendant of one of the 19th century’s last whalers. Together, they contemplate the lingering mythology of whaling, interspecies connection, and, on a befittingly large scale, what it means to be a mammalian being in the cosmos.

In solidarity with the magic leviathans,

Salty Xi Jie Ng

Artist fellow, New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park

Artist in residence, College of Visual & Performing Arts, University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth

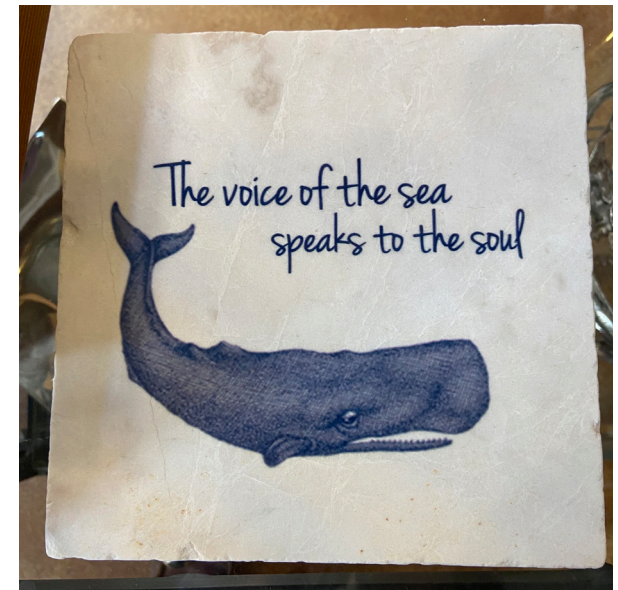
Foreword

For those of us who love Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, it is easy to name its merits and relevance to contemporary society. In it, one discovers musings about manhood, meditations on race and religion, and allegories about power; the number of lenses through which it can be examined are truly limitless. However, Melville's 135 chapters (plus an epilogue!) of complex prose can prove difficult for twenty-first century readers with our tweet-length attention spans. It is no secret that *Moby-Dick* is itself a leviathan to conquer.

Here, Salty Xi Jie Ng uses her powers of community building and interdisciplinary thinking to make the book relevant to 2021 in a new way. During her time in New Bedford, she compiled a number of alternative—and short—versions of *Moby-Dick*. National park rangers, descendants of whalers, and other thinkers offer their interpretations of Melville's 1851 novel in both prose and poetry. Many contributors are New Bedford locals, people constantly grappling with the legacy of whaling at the edge of their deep-water port. Some speak earnestly, others jest, and all contribute to a refreshing understanding of the story's significance to both individuals and a broader culture.



product at Moby Dick Retail, 2020



product at Whaling Museum retail shop, 2020

In contrast to the novel, these versions will take a reader mere moments to enjoy—not weeks. They validate every experience of the tome, including pleasure, play, confusion, and frustration. Coming 170 years after its first publication, they assert that there are myriad ways to interpret *Moby-Dick*, even when it is not read at all.

A film, events, and this collection comprise Salty's project of "contemplating the lingering mythology of whaling." The legacy of the industry is ever-changing, and this publication seeks to play a part in that. In fact, Melville himself admitted that knowledge around whales and whaling should be continuously revised and added to. In the text of his most famous novel he concedes that, "This whole book is but a draught—nay, but the draught of a draught." Here, various voices imagine what that final product can be.

Marina Wells
PhD Candidate, American Studies
Boston University

Catching a whale.

- Wayne Bralewski
New Bedford local; Maintenance staff, Star Store Campus,
University of Massachusetts Dartmouth College of Visual &
Performing Arts

Big white whale, scrimshaw, Seamen's Bethel, Nantucket
sleigh ride.

What it means to me? Tourism.

- Kevin Carter
Manager, Carter's

Crew hand, thinking: I gotta go down the pier this morning to
see if any ships are leaving port on a whaling ship. 15 months
is a long time to be away from home. Well let me get to it.

At the pier: Excuse me, sir, do you know of any ships going on
a whale hunting trip? Yes pier 3, the Mordan needs a crew, try
there. The commander's name is Captain Charles.

At pier 3: Captain Charles sir? Captain? I understand you need
a crew for your next whaling journey? Might I join your crew
for this trip?

- Peter Baptista
New Bedford local

I'm not sure if I was supposed to read it for school. I think I cheated and read some notes on it. It's about the captain of a ship and his determination to get this whale before this whale got him. I saw Gregory Peck go past at the *parade when I was four. When the whale was attacking the ship on screen, I remember seeing Gregory Peck. As a kid it was frightening. I was afraid of whales. I think I'm getting confused with Jaws.

- Robin
Sales Clerk & Buyer, Moby Dick Retail

**When the 1956 Moby-Dick film (1956) had its world premiere at The State (now known as the Zeiterion Theatre), a parade went through downtown New Bedford. It featured an inflatable whale and Gregory Peck, who in his role as Captain Ahab was the film's leading man.*

Men were brave to go out there without radars or anything on little ships. I remember Ahab but not much else. I remember the parade. Half of New Bedford was there I'm sure. I think I had a crush on Gregory Peck. He was in a convertible and he was very handsome.

- Joyce
Salesperson, Bedford Merchant

The fight of the great white whale, the one that got away. They got him at the end, right?

- Trevor Carter
Manager, Carter's

Captain Ahab hunted for the white whale that took his leg.

- James Lamy
Volunteer of the Year, Seamen's Bethel

He goes crazy and wants to hunt the whale. I have no idea—did the whale kill his brother?

- Chris Jones
New Bedford local, Destination Soups employee

One guy hunting one whale. One day the whale fought back, and the whale won.

- Nathan Costa
New Bedford local; Maintenance staff, Star Store Campus,
University of Massachusetts Dartmouth College of Visual &
Performing Arts

A group of old men went out to decimate whale populations for profit, because humans turn anything that challenges them into villains.

- Anonymous Fall River resident

It's about whales. They go on a boat and they get the blubber with their harpoons, for the oil lamps. It's sad they had to do that. Many whales and men lost their lives. I'm glad they don't do that anymore.

- Cindy
Sales Clerk & Buyer, Moby Dick Retail

The words that Herman Melville used were confusing to a teenager. A whaling journey amongst a lot of men in search of a monstrous whale no one has seen. When they finally harpooned it, the whale destroyed everything around it. It was like looking for a needle in a haystack.

- Kimberly Aubut
Operations Manager, Seamen's Bethel

Obsession and the message of an ego.

- Lindsay Compton
Ranger, New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park

If anyone says anything about Moby-Dick to me, I think about the Bethel because I'm in the Ladies Branch of the New Bedford Port Society. The Bethel is looked upon with love in this city. The Ladies Branch takes care of what goes on after services as well scholarships for students. We watch over them.

- Ginny Morrison
Volunteer, Seamen's Bethel; Secretary, Ladies Branch of the New Bedford Port Society

And the women of New Bedford, they bloom like their own red roses. Plainly did several women present wear the countenance if not the trappings of some unceasing grief. I was called from these reflections by the sight of a freckled woman with yellow hair and a yellow gown. Never did any woman better deserve her name. Whaling may well be regarded as that Egyptian mother, who bore offspring themselves pregnant from her womb. Now would all the waves were women, then I'd go drown, and chassee with them evermore! That's the reason I never would work for lonely widow old women ashore. The whale, the whale! Up helm, up helm! Oh, all ye sweet powers of air, now hug me close! Let not Starbuck die, if die he must, in a woman's fainting fit. It was a clear steel-blue day. The firmaments of air and sea were hardly separable in that all-pervading azure; only, the pensive air was transparently pure and soft, with a woman's look, and the robust and man-like sea heaved with long, strong, lingering swells, as Samson's chest in his sleep.

- Salty Xi Jie Ng
New Bedford visitor

Obsession to the point of failure. In life we are told that dedication will lead you to success, but sometimes that is not true. Sometimes what we define as success isn't success at all. Captain Ahab let his emotions get the best of him, and guide his motives to an unhealthy degree. Yes, he did kill Moby Dick and fulfilled his plotted revenge, however. Was it really necessary? Was it worth losing that many more men, or even his own life? Weighing the odds, it doesn't seem to be a very successful feat... but more of a tragedy.

We all have our own "white whale" in life, whatever that may be. Whether it is pursuing a dead end job, saving an unhealthy relationship, or working towards being the best at anything. What good will it do if you neglect your own happiness, wellbeing, or other relationships to get there? One fate is not predestined in life, but many fates are possible. I hope we are smart enough, and enough self aware, to chase the right ones.

- Lauren D'Elia
New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park employee

Far more than a story of whaling, Herman Melville's Moby-Dick (1851) is "a grand, ungodly, god-like" book. A book of blasphemy, it is also full of humor, which is in turns sly, boisterous, poignant, and hilarious. Set in the immensity of the ocean, Moby-Dick asks all the central questions of life—what is truth? who are we? does immortality exist? It answers none of them, but the book's importance lies in asking these eternal questions.

- Mary K. Bercaw Edwards
Melville Scholar; Associate Professor of English and Director of Maritime Studies Program, University of Connecticut

Whales and people clash in a boring, racist story.

- Rufai Shardow
Ranger, New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park

It's set in the future where Moby-Dick is one of the last whales. Its white blood cells can destroy cancer cells. Captain Ahab's wife has cancer, so they're trying to find Moby Dick to cure her of it. Queequeg is a badass cyborg with special abilities to capture the whale without harming it – for science, not oil – using tranquilizer darts or a net. Ishmael is nervous because he is in love with Queequeg and he feels that no one has fallen in love with a cyborg before. The tranquilizer darts and nets are also used to enhance their man-robot sex life, in which Queequeg is on the bottom and does not possess human genitalia. They end up finding Moby Dick, the one whale, and did not want to hurt him. They decided saving whales is more important than saving people with cancer. Things work out for Ishmael and Queequeg's love. Ishmael's mum is happy with her cyborg son-in-law.

- Bruno
New Bedford local, Destination Soups employee

A seeker enters the cosmos and finds:
you can look into other people's eyes & hold their hands ~
all is unknowable, absurdly incomprehensible;
and salvation is a happenstance handmade coffin.

- Andrew Schnetzer

National Park Ranger, previously stationed at New Bedford
Whaling National Historical Park

The City That Lit The World

“Still we can hypothesize even if we cannot prove and establish”
as waters turbulent beaten by the atmosphere
drip of rain and lit metal windows
serenade the waters of the bay
the rawness of a romantic gesture
time back when
celestial beams of light take us home
to a sense of hope rooted from the earth
to the ocean ship
star dust lips taste of salt casted skin
how many parts of circle back inward
to reach that final dock
of unsworn secrets and truth
buried deep beneath the sailors' skin
are untethered boots
rooted in the ground
for a glimpse of a lifetime
of unseen days ahead
the light appears for a second of eternity
as the moon as risen above
floating

“A sullen white surf beat against its steep sides; then all collapseed,
and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand
years ago.”

- Dena Haden

Artist; Director, Co-Creative Center

living is nothing, the time
before you, and at the same
time, small; an unwritten life
is simply ponderous;
the bottom of the sea is
a fearful thing.
I will try my own
warm bilocular heart.

- Salty Xi Jie Ng
New Bedford visitor

Ahab No. 5

In the future, they're after the ambergris. They
bring the whale on deck and induce vomiting
to get it. Ahab is a cologne tycoon (not a
perfume tycoon) who believes whalers were
right in the past – women are bad luck on a
ship. So they chase Moby Dick because it has an
infatuating aroma, a high quality of ambergris.
In this chase to make cologne for rich people,
Ahab is castrated. No matter how much cologne
he puts on, he feels forever emasculated.

- Anonymous New Bedford local

where were the others
when i found lumps?
these lumps

i sat there cross-legged
bitter
all morning long

i squeezed myself
i squeezed myself

would i keep squeezing forever!

for now
now
it is tough

but
flesh
is hard to keep

- Seamus Galligan
Fairhaven local

The Pulpit | Enter Ahab; to Him, Stubb
The Sermon | The Pipe | Ahab's Boat and Crew. Fedallah.
A Bosom Friend | Queen Mab | The Spirit-Spout
Nightgown | Cetology | The Pequod meets the Albatross
Biographical | The Specksnyder | The Gam
Wheelbarrow | The Cabin Table | The Town Ho's Story
Nantucket | The Mast-Head | Monstrous Pictures of Whales
Chowder | The Quarter-Deck | Ahab and all
The Ship | Sunset | Less Erroneous Pictures of Whales
The Ramdan | Dusk | Of Whales in Paint, in Teeth, etc.
His Mark | First Night-Watch | Brit | Cutting In
The Prophet | Forecastle - Midnight | Squid
All Astir | Moby Dick | The Line | The Blanket
Going Aboard | The Whiteness of the Whale
Merry Christmas | Hark! | Stubb Kills a Whale
The Lee Shore | The Chart | The Dart | The Funeral
The Advocate | The Affidavit | The Crotch
Postscript | Surmises | Stubb's Supper | The Sphinx
Knights and Squires | The Mat-Maker | The Whale as a Dish
Knights and Squires | The First Lowering | The Pequod Meets the
Ahab | The Hyena | The Shark Massacre | Jeroboam's Story

- Julia Zimmerman
Intern, New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park and New
Bedford Art Museum

For some, books are a lifestyle; integral to one's being, they are intimate companions. An ex-girlfriend, a writer, once called me a "Moby-Dick person." I'd not read the book, but she was right. It soon grew to be as important a part of my life as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, and *Two Years Before the Mast*. In graduate school I applied for an internship at Mystic Seaport Museum, went to the interview, and was rejected. I re-applied the next year. The interviewer asked me why I wanted to be an intern at Mystic Seaport, and I told her straight off, Herman Melville wrote in *Moby-Dick* that the sea connects all things and I wanted to work in a maritime museum to understand that idea better. She said: "This interview is over. Be here on June 2nd. You're hired." Books matter for some, and for one pursuing a career as a whaling curator, a thorough familiarity with *Moby-Dick* is requisite for the job.

- Michael P. Dyer
Curator of Maritime History, New Bedford Whaling Museum

Great story, difficult to read! Needed a dictionary nearby and must confess never actually finished the book. If truth be told, I believe it was John Houston's 1956 classic movie that brought the story of *Moby Dick* alive for most folks, inspiring many to go back and re-read the book (or at least attempt to).

- Catherine Potter
Fairhaven Resident

Be honest. But then, unearthly complexion, that part of it - to be sure, it might be nothing. I now screwed my eyes hard towards the half-hidden image. He kindled the shavings into a sacrificial blaze. All these strange antics were accompanied by still stranger guttural praying in a sing-song, extinguishing the fire unceremoniously.

- Dena Haden
Artist; Director, Co-Creative Center

A snapshot of New Bedford, Moby Dick is a highly-detailed, antebellum, view-finder of the city's influences and affluence. It by no means describes my city, merely, the people who industrialized New Bedford's working classes for profit. I often contrast Frodo Baggins and the Shire when I think of Ahab and New Bedford. Each journey had perils and monstrous experiences, but while Frodo's quest is partly out of love for the place he lives, Ahab's drive and motivation is not rooted in New Bedford residents' safety or quality of life, but he will use its resources to find The Whale. The glorification of the whaling industry that Moby Dick often inspires, has roots in American ideals of individualism, with Ahab's faults being accepted as misguidance or misfortune. I believe the New England whale hunt should not be viewed in term of any one person, whether harpooner or captain, but rather it is more akin to the Pleistocene-era hunting of mammoth and mastodons, in which hunting parties worked cooperatively to collect food and resources for the community they belonged to. Using spears and stone tools, these hunters went out to find, hunt, kill, and disassemble massive beasts at their kill sites, much like the whalers did in the 18th and 19th centuries. I feel that Moby Dick is widely understood as a character study and that has clouded the economic and social realities that the whaling mythology contrast. In my opinion, it's dangerous to not understand the impact that individual profit of whaling had on the city of New Bedford. This pull to elevate whaling history is so strong still, that even the mill and labor history of New Bedford is often glossed over as unaffecting the city's landscape and culture. One only needs to count the number of tenement buildings, among other indicators, in New Bedford to understand that the modern city is collectively influenced by almost any other force than The Whale.

- Aneshia Savino
New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park employee

Um well

I'm about 320 pages through the book (halfway) but if I could count the pages where something actually happened it might be like... 100 tops

It's so repetitive as well! "The head of the whale is 1/3 the length of the body of the whale" has been stated at LEAST 10 times in the past 10 pages...

Also Herman Melville is essentially a conman who read some books, thought he was smart, and concocted up some random characters and plagiarized all the philosophy books in a sort of amateur way

Is the writing objectively good? For the most part, yes.

EVERYTHING is a metaphor. Is the writing objectively enjoyable and action-based? Not at all. Do I like the book? I liked the beginning when things actually happened, but in the middle it's so repetitive and basically all Bible references that I don't understand So that's my take on it I guess ahaha

- Natalie Chace
Whaling descendant

end of Alt MD Marathon

“I have wondered whether, as we lie on our deathbed, drifting ever closer to oblivion, surrounded by increasingly elegant televisions and computers, plugging more and more directly into ever more electro-optical links, more videographic, stereo-electronic nonrealities (all the while looking forward to the onslaught of 3-D, holographic, high-definition, virtual reality), slipping, submerging, subsiding into mental oblivion- into terminal civilization- I have wondered, I say, whether the whales are trying to call us back from the edge, back from our lost and mesmerized state, or whether they, along with the rest of life on earth, are just relieved to see us self-destruct?”

Roger Payne
Among Whales



Things to Do in the Belly of the Whale

Dan Albergotti

Measure the walls. Count the ribs. Notch the long days.
Look up for blue sky through the spout. Make small fires
with the broken hulls of fishing boats. Practice smoke signals.
Call old friends, and listen for echoes of distant voices.
Organize your calendar. Dream of the beach. Look each way
for the dim glow of light. Work on your reports. Review
each of your life's ten million choices. Endure moments
of selfloathing. Find the evidence of those before you.
Destroy it. Try to be very quiet, and listen for the sound
of gears and moving water. Listen for the sound of your heart.
Be thankful that you are here, swallowed with all hope,
where you can rest and wait. Be nostalgic. Think of all
the things you did and could have done. Remember
treading water in the center of the still night sea, your toes
pointing again and again down, down into the black depths.



