

MY WHALE

by MICHAEL FERTIK | FIRST PUBLISHED IN ECLECTICA, JAN/FEB 2014

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I met him on land. He was as tall, straight, and angular as a one-flue harpoon, and as handsome as a castle. His smile could have lifted the spirit of the spinster sewing at home or the albatross lost abroad, and the good Lord had been pleased to place the entire aurora borealis in the pair of his eyes. He had shoulders to carry a banyan tree and hands to grip the trunk around. And when he spoke, you could hear the low thunder of surf and the sweet songs of thrushes. Even the sunrays seemed to find him among the Massachusetts clouds. Here, finally, was your hero.

We launched a gam right off. I could tell we would be friends.

Properly speaking, he met me. It was an old New England clam bake, down to the sand pit and the kids splashing in the waves while they sized up the cobbed corn. I was off near the new pier, leaning on one of the disused pilings, watching the activity, my bare feet submerged for my own sake. The men and women laughed and cooked, stirred pots, and handled cups of grog. I was thoroughly enjoying myself.

It was hard not to spot him. He appeared to be popular with everybody. Eventually, he noticed me as well, and he flopped down the beach in my direction, his legs long and loose on the sand as if he weren't used to walking on terra firma but couldn't be bothered to be bothered by it.

"Hail, Mensch," he said to me, apparently taking me for a German, which would not have been strange. "Found your own berth for the party?" He peered around. "Looks like you've sussed out a prime view. You're right about one thing, by my measure: the woodwork always sees the whole picture. You strike me as a man who knows the truth in it, and who could not admire a man for that?" He set his head back to look at me and stuffed his hands in his breeches, planting his feet apart in a wide stance while he awaited my response.

I searched him for a sign that he was making fun. Finding none, I allowed a grin and said, "I'm not much for clams."

"Hah, hah!" he laughed heartily. "As well you should not be. Nasty, small-minded, bottom-feeding, unimaginative, ancient, unchanging, unfathomable, uncurious, unadvent'rous creatures. Too easily defeated. The sole untrustworthy mollusk. Never has something with so little t'lose mustered such midget ingenuity with such breathtaking consistency for such miniscular gain. Nary a bright idea to be found among the beds from Newfoundland to the Keys. Save one. Ev'ry clam has a cousin who slyly slips you his poison at your repast. It

turns a scene of peace and restoration into an agony. Truly the most treach'rous shellfish, pretending to surrender and all the time relying on a relation to plot pitiless revenge."

"Are you making fun with me?" I asked him, unsure again.

"No, Mensch! I'm making friends with you! I am amplifying your good opinion and sharing fellowship with you in't."

I saw no draw in disbelieving him. My considerable experience in these matters guided me to the conclusion that rare men such as this seldom had time for whole-clad irony. Who has need for irony when your hands allow you to break an oxen neck in two like another man might pop a clam into his mouth? Though rarely did such a man speak in one note alone, either.

"My name is Ezekiel," he told me as he stretched out his hand without a hint of guile. "I saw you over here by yourself, and I wanted to know what kind of fellow would take himself apart like that. From your hat I thought you might not have any English, which might have explained all, but I had a heap o' hope that there was a better'n to answer for it, and I am a gladder mariner to know there was. My dice say you're a more int'resting one than the rest of 'em up that hill combined! While you're taking my hand, would you have a mind to tell me how you're called?"

"I'm the woodwork," I said.

"Oh! Hah, hah! So you are!" He laughed deeply and arched his back to face the sky as he grabbed his belly.

"Yes, the woodwork! Well, then, I shall be glad to know you, Woodwork. We will make famous friends, I ha' no doubt. Yes, yes, there is a lot to you!" He stood straight suddenly and cocked his head as if to have a better look.

"But you're no New Bedford man. I'd ha' known you." He squinted as if in self-doubt. "Are you?"

"No, no. I've just been here. I've just come here. On a ship."

"How else?" he said out loud to the sea. "Come with me then," he said, and he slipped his arm through mine, stooping to the sand to pluck up my shoes as he marched us toward the picnic. "Our friendship will be famous."

Then it was thus.

Within a fortnight, I sailed with him as the boatswain on the battered whaler Sussex under the command of the wassailing toper Rufus Coffin Mott of Nantucket. Mott preferred the company of his bottle and the first mate,

an old Royal serviceman called Tack who vaguely claimed to have seen Nelson hit by the sniper at Trafalgar. It was the second mate, named Starbuck, who ran the ship. Despite a child's age of 18 years and not a whisker on his face, his stone Quaker sobriety, close family relations in Nantucket to Mott's, razor's attention to profits, and caretaker's knowledge of the Sussex preempted reservations about his stewardship.

In his inexperience, Starbuck was, however, a middling sailor, uneasy outside a beam reach, which made catching up with the whale herds an erratic affair. This did not seem to bother Ezekiel any more than it did the captain. He would lean against rails and into the wind, light a pipe or order lines to be drawn up or down, lower the longboats, row them in the direction of the herd, row them back, raise them up, trim the lines, shift the table, and never a sign that he was moved or perturbed by the result. It was all the more amusing since Ezekiel had billeted as the third mate, the man next most responsible for the fiduciary outcome of the voyage. His main occupation seemed to be talking. He would talk with me, with the crew, with Starbuck, and to himself, it seemed, watching the foam. From the way he deported himself, you could hardly tell he had ever known any responsibility at all.

"Look here, Woodwork," he would say, as we lowered ourselves into longboats for the chase into a sea of right whales. "Witness the perfect mastery of man over even the inhospitable domain of the sea. See how easily he organizes himself into squadrons on remote waves in the pursuit of wily animals one hundred times his size in a global enterprise that lights the homes of how many millions of his fellows." He would breathe in deeply and then set about commanding his longboat to the front of the flotilla.

On the return, after ten hours of rowing and pitching rail to rail, with no kills on the record and not even a single bleeding harpoon, I would find him in the same humor. "Woodwork," he would say, one leg dangling outside the running boards, "what a fine creature is man. See before you the fellows rowing still, haggard and yet impossibly unbowed, the eager meat of their trying rich enough in renewal for them to cast themselves into the waves again tomorrow, without hesitation or diminished expectation of a Nike's victory. Never mind Cincinnatus or your Henrys or our Washington. They knew what it was to rig a ship and trim it, to be sure, I don't mistake't. Now here are the men of epics. The exemplar templars," he would say, and he'd laugh. "But it is in all men. Find me a man who is not a hero, and I'll show you a man who ha'n't had his chance or the proper instructor."

"You sound sure of it, Ezekiel," I would say, "as I pull my arms out of their sockets and my back into perdition."

"Hah ha," he would slap his leg, leap to sit beside me to row, lashing the tiller with a line. "Right you are and have ever been, Woodwork. Perdition has naugh' to do wi't it. If I am wrong, I'll be shattered!"

Who could not enjoy such a man? To strike such a diffident and philosophical air when he had nothing to show for his labor. You could not call him lazy. He was the picture of activity when the time came. Nor would he brook anyone's saying the voyage had been "unlucky." "There is no unluckiness, Mensch. A man of your apparent education must know't," he would tell me as we huddled over the rudder so his voice would not carry as far. "Never mind the hun mentality of our crew. You know as well as I do that our showing these months has been poor for a want of seamanship. I tell you as straight as that mast there, it is our own fault. No luck this way or that."

"Then you could tell our good captain your opinion straight as a mast," I replied. "Or put in a hand to assist the second mate. He'll listen to you. He's half afraid of you and half an admirer. I'd say he's practically waiting to be told how to go on."

"An impossibility not worth revolving," he answered without reproach. "You might be right, but you may not be, and never mind it either direction. No, sir, that man Starbuck is under a heavy load not of his own choosing, and it's his to bear until he gives it up to someone else. I don't envy him his stock, and he ha' been abiding it well enough in his own way." He rapped the rail with his knuckles. "We seem to get closer to the pod ev'ry time. He's figuring out what to do." Ezekiel's easy mien never left him as he said it, and the only irony I could sense had more to do with the state of his own assessment than the state of the assessed. "The nat'ral order of things will have it no other way. That man, no matter his age or skill, is the second mate. I am the third. I've no mind to broach him."

The conversation paused as I piped a command to trim the sails for a tack. We listened for the waves after the turn, and then I went on.

"I don't square that with your philosophy," I said.

He looked at me.

"You tell me a man has no destiny but his own," I said.

"I do."

"No chartered course. No points he must beat."

"All true. I knew you were the man to tell, Woodwork." He looked like he was enjoying the anticipation of my heading.

“The powers that be are those of mankind and not the Maker.”

“Well, let us not blaspheme, Woodwork, in case, in any case.” He smiled. “But you are on the tail of it.”

“Call them the old gods, then. Man is now in his triumphant phase, up on his own Olympus.”

“On his own Olympus. That’s good!”

“The nymphs and mermaids are retired.”

“Perhaps not retired, but no longer so useful. No, that’s not it. No longer the captains. They are seafarers like the rest of us.” The wind fell off, and he turned the wheel to catch it again. “I think we are just awaking to our own strength. Men have forever had the ken to chart their own course, but they are just finding it.” He looked at his hands.

I observed the lines and the foam running past the stern as I considered what he said.

Ezekiel straightened his gaze again. “Have you ever seen such a marv’lous sight as a man succumbed and straitjacketed to the hunt of one ambition?”

“Not for a long time,” I said before I could control myself. Ezekiel shot me a sideways glance.

“Then you see what I mean!”

“But you don’t see what I mean,” I replied. “You have averred that man finds his own stars. But you won’t talk to the second mate about sailing this ship faster into the school of whales.”

“Aha! Now I’m on t’you,” he said, handing me the wheel and gripping the stern rail behind him as if preparing a casual declamation to the crew. “It is to do with the nat’ral order of things.” Some about us, some within us. It is wiser to sail out of the port with the tide, not agin’t, though not impossible. You must sail around Cape Horn, not through the continent, though Balboa showed you could do it th’other way if you must.”

“These are facts of nature,” I protested, remembering my own philosophers, “not of men.”

“They are the same, Woodwork. Take our own example. In the pursuit of oil, men have set up corporations and agreements with understandings as to how ships shall be built and outfitted and crewed and finally sailed

and profits distributed. The shareholders in the corporation of this vessel Sussex have appointed Mott to be its master, and he has ta'en Tack and Starbuck and me to be aship wi' him. I ha' ta'en you. The natural order of things is what man has made it. I am party to the contract the same as you or Mott and good Starbuck, and it is no more natural that I should throw him over than 'tis that we should stop hunting whales or that they should surrender themselves to our cull."

I lit a pipe. Ezekiel lit his.

"Ezekiel, you compare the killing of a beast to a parlay with our second mate on how he might trim the sail to greater mutual advantage?"

He laughed. "Woodwork, you have me at the tip, 'tis true. The logic's structure is sounder than th'example. But you can easily afford to cut some slack. The form of the thing stays true the whole time."

The Natural Order of Things

On occasion, a combustion of muscle and speed would prove that he meant what he said.

When the Sussex's first laden longboat returned with its prey in tow, the boat's harpooneer, a Hawaiian perhaps unfamiliar with the custom or perhaps rejoicing in the voyage's maiden kill after weeks without success, cut strips of flesh for his crew and passed them to his men. Ezekiel, seeing this, leapt over the poop rail with one hand and, carrying his body forward in a continuing motion, brought his other hand in a fist under the harpooneer's chin, lifting him clear into the open air before the force of the blow landed him on his back. He stood above the Hawaiian and placed his heel on his chest. "I led this hunt," he spoke in a half whisper that carried across the hushed deck. "You owe me—and no one else—the first slice of that whale." He looked ready to murder the man at that instant, to turn his foot and crush his sternum. The Hawaiian's face was all confusion and hoary terror. Then just as suddenly, Ezekiel reached down, plucked the harpooneer's hand, and lifted him standing in one stroke. He ripped the harpoon from him and held the flue, heavy with whale steaks, over the open brazier. The fat crackled, and spurts of oil jetted up and over the heads of the crew. The flesh singed immediately. Ezekiel withdrew it from the fire and, drawing the harpoon point to his mouth, bit directly into the thickest part, cleaving the morsel off with his teeth. Then he clapped the harpooneer on the shoulder, tore off a strip of the burnt meat, and returned the spear. "Let's break this whale flesh together," he said softly, allowing a grin to stretch into a smile and then a full wing-on-wing beam. After watching the Hawaiian eat, he turned to the men and bellowed "we shall now all enjoy the repast that our harpooneer has wrought, and that his fellow longboat men have purchased, with more skill than the rest of us have mustered thus far on this voyage!"

Then he let out a whoop that the crew answered with their own, and by that time it seemed that only the harpooneer had any clouds at all left in his face.

I saw it once on land, too.

Patience Tobey was one of the many young women in New Bedford who yearned for Ezekiel's attentions. After the Sunday sermon, as they laid refreshments outside the meetinghouse, the ladies would bustle his way to inform him of the selections they had prepared. Patience was a picture of New England rosy-gilled girlhood, red hair tumbling down her neck past dimples and three easily spotted freckles. She bounced from foot to foot, and she was forever adjusting her bonnet when confronted with Ezekiel or, for that matter, any unmarried man. She was a siren without guile or song. She had everything to recommend her.

So did many of the ladies of New Bedford. Patience was special only in that she was courted by an eligible enough bachelor from the crew of the *Sussex*, a man of twenty who'd been helmsman on the whaler, which meant he'd taken home what it took to settle down and had the promise of making sufficient income across future voyages to manage a family and a fine house. Patience, either having little or responding to the ardor of his applications, eventually switched her principal affections from Ezekiel to the young mariner. Declarations loomed. An observer seeing her in Ezekiel's presence might have been allowed to imagine she still harbored the old passion.

For his part, Ezekiel appeared to harbor amorous passion for no one. I believe he preened when the ladies surrounded him at a picnic, and he thrust out his chest when the men clapped him on the back and the tavern offered him toasts. But I never took his preening to be hubris; instead it was pride in the warmth of friends and merriment from being in their midst. I never saw him take pains to seek out a crowd. I never saw him embrace a lady or heard him talk of intimacy with anyone excepting one story he told of a native Polynesian woman whom he described in such poetical detail that I believe he had an idea that he had left her with a child of grace. In his mind's eye, his son was playing on a beach, looking at the waves, wondering after him, ten thousand miles away. In New Bedford, he did not court, discuss any application, make love, or apparently contemplate any course with any of the women whose company in public he so clearly enjoyed.

He nonetheless savagely beat the young helmsman whom Patience had agreed to marry. Following him out of the tavern late on the night of a rowdy celebration of the young man's good fortune when he had slipped into the alley for some relief, Ezekiel grabbed him by the shoulder to spin him so that he micturated on Ezekiel's trouser legs, and Ezekiel smashed first the left and then the right side of his face before he fell to the ground in a puddle of accumulated taverngoer leavings. Ezekiel smiled as he stomped the man's body methodically, from his feet up past his ankles, calves, knees, thighs, pelvis, belly, rib cage, sternum, hands, forearms, elbows, and shoulders.

He stopped himself before kicking the man's skull. The attack had endured several minutes, during which time the helmsman's grievous howls drew no one from inside the noisy bar. I watched quietly from my vantage point. I thought I might intervene if Ezekiel made to kill him. But he stopped at the head. He had been careful to make no fractures.

"To rip the fabric of the natural order of things is to tear asunder a rigging far vaster than your own or than which you are apt to see," he said to the helmsman. Then I thought I saw Ezekiel turn his chin ever so slightly as if considering whether he had just stumbled on a truth. "You went a-fishing in another ship's waters. And your master's. Without permission or even a sign of your intent. It is impossible to let you proceed on that heading without a correction. Well," he drew up his height and squared his cuffs, "now conditions are settled again. I bless you and wish you fair winds in your marriage."

He turned on his heel and walked out of the alley toward the piers. He stood at the end, the tips of his boots edging over the bay, and he stared at the moon and clouds for hours. I still wish I had asked him if he was thinking about what he had said.

Saving the Sussex

So neglectful were Captain Mott and the First Mate, so inexperienced a seaman was Starbuck, and so unperturbed was Ezekiel, that the voyage of the Sussex needed saving were it to avoid ten years at sea or a penniless return to port. Some months after we sailed from New Bedford, with the haul of only half a dozen whales in our hold, I took it on myself to solve the problem. I summoned a herd of sperm whales to pass before our bows two hundred miles northwest of their usual position. The ship was parked for a month as the crews engorged themselves on the hunt and the sharks celebrated themselves into a fury amidst the rose-stained waves. The men sang and hauled and rowed and hunted and carved up the meat, and the cauldrons flared hot all day and night to keep up with the geysers of oil. Even sodden Captain Mott stumbled out of his quarters to witness the carnival and pass a bowl of his own rum among the crew. Starbuck busied himself with the tabulation of the harvest as stoically as he had endured every other part of the sail.

Ezekiel passed the month with his chin tilted upward to the sky and his mouth agape as if he were on the verge of declaiming a broadside speech. Ezekiel's longboat would launch and fill first, then haul out again to chalk up another kill as quickly as he could make it move. As the herd was all around the ship, there was nearly nowhere to row, so he asked me if I thought we could haul two whales at a time "if the sharks will give us a shaft of air to breathe," and I nodded my head with a grin. He took an extra set of harpoons aboard, and he made to kill whales alongside the harpooner, who appeared to enjoy the competition. Spear by spear, they would see who could drive the spike deeper into the whale's flesh, and then who could deal the death blow first, and finally who could

make the first strike true enough to kill the beast on the spot. Holding out his own cup at the end of an endless night, bringing it to the lips of our small band as they tipped back a brew of his grog and the blood of the whale, he declared "Drink now, men, and first here our harpooneer and our boatswain's mate Woodwork, and now each of you, one by one, until all have drunk from the same cup, and pledge with me that you shall seize ev'ry whale in your reach until the braziers of our ship be exhausted and our cauldrons overflowed with his oil. Pledge with me to master this seabed of fish so that no man here need brook the word of the sullen imposter who claims he took more whales than any other. Swear with me now that we shall leave no whale wounded that we don't kill, and that we shall kill ev'ry whale we set to wound. Swear! Swear!" The men thrashed themselves into a frenzy like the sharks below the surface of the waves. Even I cried "I swear! I swear!" as we danced in the firelight from the boiling cauldrons.

Some days later, as we stalked close behind a slow-moving sperm whale, the fish wheeled about and dug the full breadth of its tail into the water, and it powered for our hull. Ezekiel steered the helm toward the whale's head, in the practice at this short distance, to give us the best chance of avoiding the punishment of a brow's blow to the beam. The whale charged faster. His plan was more cunning than ours. As we approached, he veered first to starboard and then hard to port, hurtling once again toward the broadest and softest part of our hull. Ezekiel's eyes were wild as he raised a cry in the air and perhaps a laugh, as well, and he hurled his full weight against the tiller to bring us about and deflect the attack. "Wain off!" he shouted, and before we could drop our oars, he had grabbed a harpoon and raced between us down the length of the longboat and, leaping off the centermost bench, hurled himself on the back of the whale as if on a warhorse, landing equally on his feet as on the tip of the harpoon, which sank to the full depth of the steel. The whale made as if to scream. It rolled to port, and its eye registered terror and fury as it dove, striking our vessel only enough to startle our crew as it made for the depths to escape Ezekiel and the end of its own life. The harpooner sprung to his feet and cast his spears down the other side of our boat, and one of them found its way to the muscle. The longboat kicked up out of the water as the whale towed the harpoon lines. Ezekiel grabbed the gunnels as we surged ahead and hauled himself through the racing foam up into the boat. He brushed his face with the back of his hand as he took the rudder, and I thought I heard him say "yes, good job, now kill you." In an hour, the whale exhausted and succumbed.

Ezekiel Talks

We were on land for maybe three months before heading to sea again. The company owners heard about our bonanza and hurried out vessels to the same grounds in the hope that a new migratory pattern had been discovered. Of course they found nothing.

Ezekiel was good-natured as before and cut a metaphysical jib. He wanted to use his share to acquire a house, and we spent the days searching for a frame or a lot he could like. I stayed to observe him. Maybe I had

already decided to do something.

“Prefer a thing unique!” he told me. “I do prefer unique, Woodwork. Like you. To find my berth on land is to give my mind a proper harbor when I’m to sea again. A unique home. A man must have a home and a wife and a hearth just as he must have a voyage across a distant sea to make him know’t. Ay, to chart my course away, I must first have an away.” Then he looked at me and squinted. “An away of my own. Not New Bedford. Ay, she’s good, plain enough. Not my friends here, nor even you, Woodwork! My own wood, ground, and stove that I can raise up or tear down or make build anew with my own hands and will. Stone of my flesh, wood of my bone. A rail on the walk made from the jaw of a whale I’ve hunted with my own harpoon.”

“What will you do?” I asked him, overlooking the village from atop a bluff to which we’d returned twice for scouting. It might have been the third question I had asked him since we’d met.

“How?” He softened and looked in my eyes. I had not seen his face so curious and receptive.

“What do you aim to do, Ezekiel?”

He concentrated his face. “You don’t mean ‘bout the house.”

“No,” and I rubbed the gravel under my foot. “What will you do with the fate that you do not have?”

“Now that’s it, I follow. I ken your piece.” He placed his hands in his breeches. “You’ve the right mark there. What is a man to do.”

Not just any man, I thought to myself. A man with your frame and mind. The kind we used to seek out and fear. The kind our sisters used to embrace. The kind that made us traitors to ourselves, whose lives demanded us to ask why we were needed at all.

“Do you truly believe that men chart their own course?” I asked.

He nodded at me, perhaps afraid to say it aloud on a Sunday. His shoulders sagged with the burden of his perspective.

“How do you know?”

“If we do not, then why do anything? Too terrible a thought. The old fates clipping strings. Newer demons whisperin’ in ears to seize souls and make us do madness. I am for man. I am for him, Woodwork, to get the

better share. Not for th'other. It's for him to see where he must go, and then go."

"And how if a man does not?"

At this his shoulders sagged again, and he bent his head forward.

I felt good about myself. I felt I had him. We remained mute for some time. I enjoyed the salt air on my tongue and in my nose, and I enjoyed the sight of the sun reflecting on the sea.

After a pause, he spoke again, and it was my shoulders' turn to sag.

"Never us mind, Woodwork." He drew himself up to his marvelous height and drew back his frame and opened his chest toward the sea. "The good earth can't be ordered all at once. Nor can a man."

It was a pretty phrase, and it was true enough to say at a different time. Now, however, it was the first occasion on which I had seen him dissemble. It was a pitiful retreat. I found the old anger rise in my breast, and the old disillusion. I knew I had to do something.

The Whale

I took a berth on Ezekiel's next ship, the Sarah. He had declined all offers to mate, though he had many, and he made the case to the owners that he was a man to captain and nothing else. He produced maps compiling migration patterns and estimates of the most damaging squalls and the costs associated with them. A Quaker owner named Beals nominated him captain of the Sarah, an older ship that held less room for oil but could still make good speed.

Ezekiel lost no time. He placed his crew, including old Woodwork as his second mate, having missed Starbuck by a week to another captain eager to profit from the rumor of the young man's good luck. We provisioned, planned the course, and sailed.

It was no surprise to me that Ezekiel was a natural master captain. The ship flew through the water in perfect trim. The men loved and feared him. His maps drew the Sarah to fertile grounds, and the decks were awash in whale blubber.

I waited till the voyage was already and quickly a success so that Ezekiel's reputation as an able captain would be sealed no matter what upon his return to New Bedford.

Then I sent him.

Moby Dick was the mightiest and most fearsome creature in what remained of my ancient dominion, one of only a handful of monsters I have ever called cousin. Mindless, unburdened, heartless, undying, with skin of rough boulders and long scythes for teeth. Greater in girth than your blue whale, greater still than that prancer Njord's old terrible pet hafgufa, more senseless than Babylon's tiamet, he relished crushing everything between his jaws and enjoyed the taste of none of it. All the sea feared him, would whisper leagues in advance of his erratic path to scatter and escape the infinity of his consumption. Even the ocean before him seemed to disappear into his gullet as into the blackness of a vacuum. When he came upon a foundering ship on a high sea, he would swim near the drowning men to observe their terror and then gnash them with his teeth and then bite the planks of wood from the sinking ship and chew the rigging and tackle and swallow the bits of their making, the bedding and plates and chests of clothes, bibles, family treasures, and weapons, then the ship's manifest itself, lustful but curious, as if by taking them into his bottomless belly he could not only know them but erase from the earth the history of their ever having been. Finally he would gnash the isolated planks to which the lost sailors clung for life, depriving them of their buoys, circling them as they came to realize their drowning, and only then swallowing them and digesting the record of their lives. I knew him to do the same with the whales he mated and even his young, even the young he recognized as his own. Here was the beast who wanted no legacy or future but his own, none even that issued from him. He would dive and dive again to tear apart his prey, returning to the spot until the last vestiges were inhaled and disappeared. Here was the first mammal I ever knew who could have betrayed a feeling but never did, for he had none to betray.

Him I conjured for Ezekiel.

He appeared in the lee of Mocha Island, 20 miles off the coast of Chile, where we were anchored for leisure and light refitting following the turbulence of Drake's Passage.

At first the crew mistook him for a cloud, a fetch of mist rolling slowly along the horizon line, bobbing in front of the rocky beach and seascape. Moby Dick made loose half circles around the Sarah, trimming her into the shoreline as if corralling a heifer.

It was not clear-eyed Bennett up in the crow's nest who spotted him, nor even the able-bodied Flax, leaning against the rail to look out, though my bet with myself had put the money on him. Instead it was the manic Helvetian Alois Holz, who had sailed the yawl with a small party to the island for fresh water and was now stretching his feet in the sand of the proximate beach.

Never before had a man so genetically unfit for sea boarded a whaler. Holz hailed from the berg of Stans in

the mountains of Unterwalden, where he had been raised for a life of dairy farming. Encouraged at a young age by his elder brother to find a calling more suitable for his restless nature, Holz had made his way to France and then over the Pyrenees and eventually to Portugal, where he took up arms as a mercenary for the forces of Don Miguel. Tasting adventure, he set sail from Porto across the ocean to Brazil and later to the whale fisheries of New Bedford. Cradled in his birthright of granite, suckled in spruce forests, and daily exhibiting all the quivering energy of a chamois, he had no business being trapped on a ship atop heaving waves for the better part of three years at a stretch. Holz appeared to me to abhor sailing. He was the perpetual volunteer for any task that would get him ashore, no matter how menial or how hostile the environment on land. I had seen men like him before. They were built for hard earth, walked the breadth of the ship pale green from illness for the duration of a voyage, and yet could not keep away from the sea.

This Alois Holz, rubbing his calves with his hands and rooting his heels in the cool sand of the beach, was the first to spot Moby Dick. He glimpsed the albino hulk and stared, stunned. Then, frantic, he leapt to his feet and waved his arms wildly.

The crew spotted his warning and raised the alarm.

“Thar she blows!” the cry came from Bennett in the crow’s nest. It was obvious by now. Word spread instantly of the whale’s size. The crew were assembled to port, leaning over the rails, gazing at the beast.

“Look how huge!” one said.

“A beautiful creature!” said another.

“Fearsome,” said a third.

“A treasure of oil!” said the first.

“Of spermaceti!”

“A whole church of spermaceti!”

“I’ve never seen the like!”

“Nor I!”

“Nor I!”

“Let’s kill it at once!” said the first.

“Yes!”

“At once!”

“There must be two hundred barrels in him!”

“Three hundred!”

“Four!”

“A lucky day, this!”

“A lucky place, this Mocha Island!”

“A lucky captain, our Ezekiel!”

Then Ezekiel stepped forward to the rail, and the crew parted for him. He raised his glass to his eye. Then he lowered it again.

“Look,” he said, in singing tones that carried across the decks and water perhaps as far as Holz on the beach, “how like a shark he is, how he circles us, taking us in like a scene of a play or a prey he has seen.” The crew hushed as they watched what Ezekiel had observed. A playful smile gathered up his lips. “Take notice of this curious fish, men. He is huge, yes. Massive. The largest I have laid eyes on. Then see his tail. How lazily it moves. See how he scarcely dives. Watch it, mark it. Unnat’ral in a whale.” The men breathed assent. Ezekiel rubbed the side of his face. “Now see that he approaches, coming closer each turn he takes ‘bout the boat. He does not run. He does not swim away. Is he a lame fish near death unable to save himself? Is he deranged? We have all seen such whales from time to time. Or is he unafraid?” The crew chuckled. “A great philosophical fish. Swimming about, eyeing the visitors, asking what sort of pirates are these, come after Drake and van Noort, have they, my, how differently they dress themselves, nothing like the old days!” The men slapped their thighs as they laughed harder. I turned to survey the sailors, amused at the reaction and wondering which of them would drown first.

Suddenly, Ezekiel's countenance changed as he gazed out at Moby Dick. I breathed through my nose in anticipation and satisfaction, and the waves swelled. "Ay, but eyeing is it." He leaned forward to gain inches through his glass, and the crew did the same, and the ship eased further to port. "Regard his eye. How he keeps us in his gaze, fixed." The men stopped laughing. "Constant and the same from port and starboard. There is no warmth, nor fear, nor accident. This whale . . ." He trailed off. The air hung still for a moment as the wind changed direction. The crew waited, looking at Ezekiel and again out at the water.

"Let us kill him," Ezekiel breathed, finally and without inflection.

The crew moved like a bolt, breaking for their longboats and harpoons and lines. Ezekiel turned and climbed to the poop deck to observe the action. I followed.

Three longboats made ready to launch. The first to lower was helmed by the third mate, a steely New Bedford man named Eliot and his cousin Fleet the harpooneer. Eliot and Fleet had sailed together since they were thirteen. They winked at each other and the crew as the men celebrated the speed of their readiness and belted a whaling song from their hometown.

I grinned as I noticed Ezekiel furrow his brow until he confirmed what he was seeing.

Moby Dick had turned his head to face the Sarah, and he had accelerated.

Ezekiel did not move. There was no reason to move other than premonition.

Moby Dick powered his tail faster and faster as he drew toward the ship. The crew startled. Eliot the third mate looked up from his lines as his longboat neared the surface of the sea. Fleet gathered his eyebrows in puzzlement and raised a lance reflexively. No one reversed the lines to raise the vessel back toward the rails of the Sarah. The crew simply abated their work into a gauzy slow motion as they waited, stunned, to see what would transpire.

At least one man shouted "look out!" and then another "he's coming!" and then another "prepare!", for there was no call they knew for it.

The men on board scrambled for weapons and cover, and Eliot's longboat just glazed the swell, when Moby Dick hurled himself against the breadth of the Sarah at the waterline. He crushed the yawl into a thousand splinters and impaled Fleet on the timbers and Eliot on his lower teeth. The cousins died looking at each other in terror, wondering what had gone so wrong so fast.

Moby Dick struck the ship like the Warwolf trebuchet. He stove in the hull at its widest and collapsed the bulwarks above. Three men fell into the churning water, and the whale gnashed at the first and buried the other two beneath the waves with a roll of his girth.

Pandemonium seized the crew. The men cast down steel flues and even knives into Moby Dick's back and flanks, now one spear, now two, now four more, as if over the wall of a besieged city. The boatswain led a party below decks to stanch the flooding waters. The two longboats in readiness hurled themselves into the waves to fight back. I made to prepare a fourth, but Ezekiel raised his hand to stop me.

Moby Dick dove and swam under the Sarah, blowing air again on the starboard side where the waters were still calm and blue, a forever away from port. The longboats shoved off from the Sarah so they might be free of the hull and able to give chase. Ezekiel lunged to the starboard rail to watch what he would do. Moby Dick tilted his tail below and rose his head above the water so his eyes broke the surface.

Ezekiel looked at the whale, and the whale looked straight back at him, hovering in the swell. I saw them lock eyes, and I heard my own heartbeat as I waited to see how long it would last. Finally, the two other longboats careened around the bow of the ship in chase, and their wild shouts of revenge filled the air. Moby Dick shifted his gaze to glance at me. Noticing, Ezekiel turned in my direction, a quizzical expression on his face, then right back to the whale just before he slipped himself beneath the waves and disappeared.

The men stood in their longboats and scoured the surface for signs of the deep. The foam of murder bubbled from their mouths. A squabble of seagulls and the wavy beat against the hulls were the only sounds to be heard. I gripped the bulwark with excitement.

The lead longboat was commanded by the Sarah's first mate, Bill Dare of Norfolk, Virginia, an exceptional seaman who took no opportunities to vigorously deny suspicions that he was the direct descendant of Anamias Dare of ill-fated Roanoke. Dare was everything his name could afford him. An adventurer, a pioneer, a gambler who could scarcely decline a bet from anyone, least of all himself. He made wagers with himself every day. Would his boat be the first to kill a whale or haul one in? Would he climb the ropes faster than the other fellow? How if he used only one hand? Would his benchmate finish his steak in six bites or fewer? Could he thread the rope in a single attempt? Could he thread an entire cloth without touching the line to the edge of a single grommet? How long could he stand to high wind without shifting his feet or holding on? You could see him honoring his bets with himself. At meals he would just as soon pass his portion of grog to his crewman—or measure out exactly half and then pass the balance—as he was to consume it. Mostly he would join a port leave the moment he could, but, on occasion he would refrain, in spite of his famous appetite for women.

Dare's harpooner was a New Orleans roux named Malveaux. He was the most finely dressed man on the voyage. Malveaux possessed vests, coats, tunics, trousers, hats, cravats, buckles, belts, and braces befitting a gentlemen's activities in shooting, judging, doctoring, banking, and churchgoing. Moreover, he wore them daily for different occasions that obviously made sense to him but the pattern of which I could not perceive. Having no mustache, he used wax to smooth long sideburns that required no smoothing. Were his arms not so ambidextrously and unnaturally potent with a lance, he would never have been allowed the extra stowage for his large trunk. Harpooning in particular stressed the fabrics to tearing so frequently that Malveaux was known as the second most proficient tailor on the ship after the surgeon, and certainly the most careful.

The follow-on longboat steadied itself one length off Dare's stern. Its helmsman was the shortest grown man on the Sarah, a chopped pine stump called Bracetti, originally from Corsica, who defiantly and publicly maintained his ardor for Napoleon, which combination of facts gave rise to much hilarity among his shipmates and frequent resentful fighting from him. Bracetti fairly shook from unspent aggression, and he was as likely to throw flue after flue as he was to hold the tiller when it needed holding. His harpooner, by contrast, was a lengthy weeping willow from Connecticut, an old line Congregationalist called Lyme with a peaceful, sallow mien whose popularity with the crew was buoyed in spite of his countenance by a reliable, deep-gutting, underhanded lob of his lance that he could perform and perform again with all the windy leverage of his diffused limbs and the speed of an undistracted mind.

I gripped the bulwarks as I listened to the water slap against the hull and peeled my eyes for a break in the swell.

The waves erupted from beneath in an acreage of wrathful white. Terror screams erupted from the oarsmen on Dare's vessel as Moby Dick vaulted himself straight up from the deep with his infinite jaws enveloping their boat and his teeth collapsing the frame all around them. His gullet opened wide for swallowing. Malveaux and Dare, doomed and immovable, their boat and bodies wrenched violently left and right, grabbed their harpoons and thrust one and then another and still another into the whale's head and spine as he carried them aloft. Then Moby Dick hurled his face forward and then down into a dive, and the remains of the longboat and its crew shattered as they struck the water from the height. Then he dragged them into the brine below, and they cried no more. As fast as he had come, he disappeared again, and only the swirl of bubbles and Malveaux's silk hat bobbed to the surface.

Ezekiel leapt over the poopdeck rail to his longboat, barking to the men to make it ready. They lowered in a flash, casting off to hover near the spot where Dare had drowned and raising their lances in preparation. Bracetti, frozen at first, gave a whoop and steered his vessel next to Ezekiel's so that they might strike together and so that even Moby Dick's massive maw could not swallow them both at once.

Ready as they were for another explosion, their strong arms held aloft to plunge down on the whale as he burst forth from the sea, they did not observe Moby Dick quietly, even gently, float the full length of his body to the surface, allowing half his head and tail to break the water line.

He blew. Then suddenly the crews looked aft and saw him. He swished his tail, churning the water deliberately, like a bull tearing the dirt of the stadium floor.

Ezekiel and Bracetti ordered the crews to draw the boats around to broadside the whale so that all hands might throw their harpoons into him.

Moby Dick surged forward. Lyme launched his spears first, catching the whale twice on his approach. Then Ezekiel and Bracetti joined, and then the others. They struck him six times altogether. Blood from his back and brow flowed freely into the sea. Still the whale heaved toward them, and still he gathered speed, aiming for the place where the longboats' bows kissed.

At a signal, Ezekiel and Bracetti yanked hard on their tillers, and the crews pulled on the downwind side, opening a broad avenue between them.

The whale was going too fast to slow. His wide head sailed between the vessels, glancing them forward and doing no damage.

Ezekiel raced to the bow and slammed a spike into the peduncle, the source of the whale's power. A high pitched squeal bleated out from his head cavity as he rolled to one flank and looked behind him for the pain. Then he dove like a dolphin and was under the waves. Ezekiel craned to full height to see if he could spot a bubble trail or a mound in the water. The crews regrouped.

Moby Dick resurfaced, his brow once again facing the boats. Now Ezekiel and Bracetti arrayed their vessels lengthwise toward him, bows pointing in his direction. Then Ezekiel threw his hand forward, and the men pulled. I saw that his idea was to close the gap as quickly as possible to give the whale less space to gain speed and to afford the boats the maximum control to change direction and evade.

Moby Dick saw it, too. He engaged his tail, pushing himself toward the boats in a measured charge. Ezekiel's face fired hot red, and the thick spray seemed to steam as it struck his skin. "I SHALL KILL YOU!" he shouted, and the men frenzied about him, pulling into the waves with the full pressure of their backs. Moby Dick rumbled and shrieked.

The whale was shrewd. He waited till he was three lengths away, and he veered hard to port and then again to starboard to set himself against the breadth of Ezekiel's boat. The captain saw it happening and ruddered to starboard to deflect, but the blow was strong, and the gunnels buckled. The seaman sitting closest to the whale strike, a Charleston man called Cape, died instantly as his rib cage collapsed beneath the force. The sea rushed into the vessel. The men bailed as Ezekiel and the harpooner heaved spears into his side. Bracetti maneuvered closer to rescue the men. I gave the order to prepare the last longboat for launch. The men never had time to lower away.

Moby Dick dipped under Ezekiel's boat and raised himself out of the water. The ship tipped, and its contents emptied into the sea. Ezekiel, wresting himself free of the slide, landed on his feet on the hard chine of the sinking hull. He raised a harpoon in his two hands and leapt on to the whale's dorsal flesh with the burden of his entire frame. The blade dove straight through the sinew, and the greater part of the wooden handle followed. The whale's mouth gaped, and his eye squinted tightly shut and then reopened to reveal a watery glaze of mammalian agony. Moby Dick rolled and then dove, his giant bulk sliding under the waves to leave Ezekiel and the wreckage floating in the frothy swell.

Bracetti's men grabbed two sailors who were still alive and hauled them aboard. Then they rowed for Ezekiel. He looked furious but unharmed. He turned his neck to see if the whale might surface again, and then he struck out in a swim for a collection of wreckage to arm himself with a lance.

Moby Dick had the same idea. The whale surfaced near the flotsam. Opening his jaw, he took hold of a Temple toggle harpoon in his teeth. Then, with a single volcanic thrust of his tail, he raced forward to Ezekiel's position, thrashing the water madly, stabbing at the captain. Ezekiel kicked and screamed. The water and foam boiled hot red.

The Beginning

Ezekiel was nearly lifeless when they picked him up and lifted him into Bracetti's longboat. The men rowed feverishly back to the Sarah, but there was no more reason to panic. The water calmed itself. Moby Dick had glided away, ducking below the gentle swells and blowing again lazily when he was well away into the horizon line, enjoying the sunshine and the cool water beyond the shelf of Mocha Island.

Ezekiel's body was a shipwreck. Any other man would have expired, but he did not, as I had known he would not. The flue of the harpoon in the whale's mouth had struck him square in the face and been dragged down the length of his body in a jagged furrow, finally puncturing his leg through and through. The surgeon amputated.

I took command of the ship while Ezekiel could not and in the absence of our first mate Dare. There was no going but home. Altogether Moby Dick had killed twenty-four men, eight from northern states, eight from southern ones, and eight more born in places overseas who had come to New Bedford to hunt whales. Only eight of us remained on the crew, plus the captain in his cabin.

Whence he did not emerge. When he regained consciousness, he consulted with the surgeon in his rooms, in tones no one on deck could overhear. Following this interview, no one entered his cabin again for the duration of the voyage, and he invited no one, not even me. It seemed he was nursing himself. Through his porthole, he would demand food, clean bandages, and whalebone. All were left for him on the table before his bedroom door. The men spoke in whispers, wondering what in the blue world he could be doing. They wished him well. They worried themselves. Some prayed, some for him.

I did. I prayed for him and for myself that my plan had worked. The sail back to Massachusetts was fine. That much was easy. But my mind turned the entire time I held the wheel on what was keeping him below.

Something was different. His voice was lower; not weaker, but steadier and cavernous. And when I heard him speak—when I heard him tell the crew his requirements and when I visited his door and he politely but firmly rebuffed me—I observed that he used the old forms, as I thought I had never heard him do before. “Ye go away now, Woodwork, and ye mind about the bandages.”

He emerged within sight of New Bedford. The crew leaned over the rails and hooted their hellos to the men and women ashore. The Sarah displayed her full sails and colors, which billowed brightly in the beam breeze we followed into the harbor. There was so much excitement that I got carried away myself, waving my hat to the gathering crowd on the piers and shouting “Hullo! Hullo!”

It took some moments for the heavy wooden thumping to reach the consciousness of the crew. We turned. There he was, fully dressed in his coat and vest, erect, walking across the poop deck to join me at the wheel. With every step he landed a giant whalebone peg where his leg had been, sending a thud and boom across the ship as it struck. He stood next to me and turned to face the port. The men, shocked, took steps toward the aftcastle to greet and congratulate him. But, seeing no warmth or sign of response, they retreated to the rails and again were overcome with the joy of seeing their harbor and people.

As we sailed toward the pier, he made no motion to take the wheel from me, and I let minutes pass in case he had something to say. I trembled.

Finally, bearing it no longer, I smiled at him and said “Good to see you, Ezekiel!”

The breeze blew. There was no response, no notion of a head's turning nor a muscle's moving.

"I say, it is very good to see you, Ezekiel!" I tried again.

Once more there was no response. Then, thinking better of it, I smiled broadly and looked at him and declared, "Apologies! It is so very good to see you, Captain!"

Again there was no reply. At first he simply stared forward as before.

Then he turned his face to mine, revealing a deep, fleshy scar down the length of his head. "Call me Ahab."