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Five Dusky Phantoms: Re-reading *Moby Dick* in Times of Trouble

I had started re-reading *Moby Dick* just before the fires in Sonoma County last fall, as an endless plume of dark smoke poured out of the north, flowing like the River Styx along my neighborhood beach in San Francisco. In that hazy week, tense with the tragedy of unfolding stories, there was a news photo of an older couple who had survived by diving into their neighbor's swimming pool as the flames surrounded them. They huddled together through the night; the water protected them, but by morning the turquoise pool where they stood had turned black with fallen ash. The role of water as protector or destroyer is one of the myriad strands within the macrocosmic sweep of *Moby Dick* in which I find reflected, so much of my own life and our collective moment as well.

A masterpiece is a kind of rubric from which we can discern a living pattern. It is a fractal, or a skeleton key, an energy field of movable circuits; illuminating connections between something in the past to clarify our present. Today Melville's masterpiece reads like a prophetic gift from an earlier America, warning of a deadly strain in the culture that still smolders in our psyches.

The similarities between Captain Ahab and our current president, my family being priced out of our modest beach house in San Francisco, and a lost world that existed the first time I read *Moby Dick*, are all here. Endings, beginnings, warnings.

Moby Dick, in case it's been a while, is a story narrated by a sailor called Ishmael, who shows up in New Bedford, Mass. looking to shake off the "damp drizzling November in his soul" by joining a whaling voyage. Little does he know that the ship he has chosen somewhat at random, the Pequod, will be captained by Ahab, an obsessed maniac set on exacting revenge from a large white whale who has bitten off his leg. The ensuing voyage, as Ahab pursues his hatred across half the world, ends badly for everyone except of course, Ishmael, who alone escapes to tell the tale. That's just the face of it, like the ocean itself, every thing interesting happens under the surface. The sheer inventiveness of Melville's prose, willing to caste itself anywhere, is breathtaking, and as post-modern as anything since.

Moby Dick may be our most alive great book, in its pages life seethes and swells together, you can cut into it, eat it, flip it over, talk to it, stand on it, listen to it. It veers from micro to macro in the turn of a clause. In a typical scene, the second mate Stubb, has killed a whale and wants to eat some of it, on the side of the ship a school of sharks are already eating, Melville's prose dives in to the melee.

"While the valiant butchers over the deck tables are cannibally carving each others' live meat with the carving knives all gilded and tasseled, the sharks also with their jewel-hilt mouths, are quarellesomely carving away under the table at dead meat, and though you were to turn the whole affair upside down, it would still be pretty much the same thing, that is to say a shocking sharkish business enough for all parties"

Reading *Moby Dick* immerses one in a system of deep time and intense physicality that we have lost and may never have again. It is this reality of the corporal, the outdoor live action life that the advent of the

screen world has obscured, and discouraged. Between the smooth freeways on which the tech residents flow into and out of San Francisco and the smooth glass of the screen that guides them, gale force winds, and flying harpoons have no place. What the tech world brings us, a flatness, a smoothness, *Moby Dick* shatters. Most of us would struggle to survive through one page of the action on the *Pequod's* deck, awash in slippery blood, swinging iron chains and flames from the rendering pots boiling down the blubber.

While the physical world of *Moby Dick*, and the vast sweep of time and space it invokes seem to be vanishing from American experience, other aspects of the story feel more present, or even prescient. In shaping the character of Ahab, the deeply damaged man, who leads with a monomaniacal selfishness that obliterates all common courtesies and care; Melville has rendered the metaphorical outlines of our current president. We now have Ahab, the half man, hell bent on destruction, leading the ship of state, with congress crewing on his ship of doom. The fact that the crew of the *Pequod* fails to stop the deadly mission of its captain is central to the unfolding tragedy of *Moby Dick*. Melville ponders how a crew of stouthearted sailors could acquiesce against their better judgment, and go along with Ahab on a hunt they know to be deadly. The answer is, in increments.

For weeks after the voyage begins, Ahab stays quietly below in his cabin, until one bright day he finally appears on deck, to rally the crew to his intention, to hunt down the great white whale and kill it. It's not so strange a request, the getting of whales is their business after all, why not the big one? Ahab intoxicates them with liquor and gold, nailing a golden doubloon to the main mast, a treasure for the man who first sights the white whale. As he speaks, he elevates the rhetoric of his personal revenge to a noble quest, as he urges on his crew.

“And this is what ye have shipped for men! To chase that white whale on both sides of earth, till he spouts black blood and rolls fin out. What say ye men, will you splice hands on it now? I think ye do look brave.”

“Aye Aye shouted the harpooners and seamen. ...

Ahab has to cajole the rational and hesitant Starbuck (the first mate) that he should believe as well. *“The crew man, the crew! Are they not one and all with Ahab, in the matter of the whale.”* We’re reminded of the president’s claims about his own popularity, as if the fact of being liked is evidence that he is right. Soon after this speech, Melville lets us overhear Ahab, pacing the deck, reflecting on how it went.

“Twas not so hard a task. I thought to find one stubborn, at the least; but my one cogged circle fits into all their various wheels, and they revolve.”

And our president is right behind him, pacing the West Wing a year ago, “How could it be that I could win, first time out? I can’t believe it was so easy. It’s amazing. I’m amazing.”

Meanwhile Ishmael begins to realize, then regret, how easily he has been swayed by Ahab’s hate-filled rhetoric.

“Ahab’s quenchless feud seemed mine.”...” With greedy ears I learned the history of that murderous monster against whom I and all the others had taken our oaths of violence and revenge.”

Whatever vengeance each sailor carries, has found a target in *Moby Dick*, the strangely colored creature, the one we can’t see or understand. Our horror mounts when the first pod of whales is sighted. As the boats are lowered to give chase, Ahab suddenly appears: *“With a start all glared at dark Ahab who was surrounded by five dusky phantoms who seemed fresh formed out of air.”*

Suddenly Ishmael understands that these are foreign men Ahab has been hiding below deck since the Pequod sailed, his special crew, ready to help him do his own bidding, regardless of the contract with

owner or crew. The 'dusky-phantoms', are not exactly Russian operatives, but their presence violates the way a ship is run, the sailors know they shouldn't be there, and are not to be trusted. But eventually, the crew of the Pequod comes to accept the phantoms, rationalizing that the ocean is vast and whalers often pick up unaccountable things. *"Beelzebub himself might climb up the side and step down into the cabin to chat with the Captain and it would not create any unsubduable excitement in the forecastle."* How much strange behavior our congress, lost ship that it is, has gotten used to I'll leave for others to trace.

In his famous essay *Call Me Ishmael*, modernist poet Charles Olson posits, among other insights, a detailed argument for Ahab representing a certain kind of 19th Century industrialist. The whaling industry itself, now so distasteful to our ecological sympathies, was even in 1851 recognized as a wholesale plunder of God's creation. In his various chapters on cetology, the author broods on the likely extinction of whale species through hunting. It wasn't like they didn't know. But owners of whaling vessels, Puritan by pretension, were willing to forgive almost any offence on board if the hold came back full of oil. Success on a voyage depended on paying the crew as little as possible to catch as many whales as possible. Wal-Mart and the whale-mart are cut from the same American cloth. With the dusky phantoms Ahab is simply hedging his profit margin by bringing in a sort of second extra crew, who work only for him. True his profits are of a psychotic emotional currency, but he wants them just the same. Lately, here in San Francisco especially, it seems we've also come to accept a sort of hopeless materialism, as if we have no choice in the matter but to acquire and pay. How I long for the city that was once so wild and open, a city that had not been readied for sale.

When I first read Moby Dick I was 20. I had just moved from a cabin in the mountains of Oregon, where I had gone partly inspired by Thoreau's *Walden*, but then had come to the "city" thinking rightly, that this was where writers were, and I was going to be one. It was still easy then, to find a spacious room in a Berkeley Victorian in exchange for babysitting and gardening. There was plenty of time off, so I'd also gotten a part-time job at an influential small press in the Berkeley hills. I packed books to mail out, in a closet under the stairs, several nights a week. There was also a steady stream of writers coming to the press, smoking on the deck high above the Bay, giving impromptu readings, anthropologists, Irish fiddle players too. Some times older poets would show up, and compelled by lust or curiosity, I would have to seduce them. It was fantastic. Mornings we might search out obscure Vedic texts at Shambala Books on Telegraph. A copy of *War & Peace* would be purchased as a gift, a sexy note added to the title page. I absorbed these poets' lifetimes of reading, over breakfast and espresso; it was in their small talk, their kisses. I wasn't in college, but I was working my way through the books everyone read, and more importantly talked about. This was before the proliferation of MFA's, when any official imprimatur was looked on with suspicion. Literature was subversive, illicit, alive and pressing on the now. I read then as the young do, with a hunger for information about how to live. Now I read with outrage, about all the ways we fail to live.

I'm sickened by Ahab's selfishness, and can't help but see the whole voyage, as an incredibly depressing and pointless ship of doom. I can't help but see that the big thing here is not the whale at all, but the maniacal obsession of Ahab, who is more than ready to take everyone with him down into the murderous depths if only he can get what he wants. This is a novel about the problem with minds that can only entertain one point of view; it's about capitalism or materialism or whatever you label the need to capture and possess things. I want to yell, Fuck you Captain Ahab, you and your self involved little wounds.

Take you're hurt little carcass and stay at home. How many are you willing to take down with you on your raging race for revenge. I have a grown son who could get on a boat with someone like him. I'm sick of the Ahab force at work in the world today, good and honorable people like Queequeg and Tashtego, and Starbuck, taken down ineluctably by the tyrants in charge.

For the last ten years we've rented a stucco row house a few short blocks from the Pacific at Ocean Beach. I hear the ocean while I read, or write this at my desk. Its constant voice has become the sound of home. What is it saying I wonder? When will I know? Shouldn't I know by now? I walk on the beach almost every day, staring out at the surging blue Melville once crisscrossed. Pondering the larger mysteries is a lot of what goes on in *Moby Dick*. After killing the first whale of the hunt, Captain Ahab speaks to its severed head, hanging by chains from the side of his ship, "*Speak mighty head and tell us the secret thing that is in thee.*" Everything? Nothing?

Once a few years ago, a whale carcass washed up on the beach here. It was fantastic, about fifty feet long, a fin whale. My son and I kept going back out to look at it. Its body had been torn open and was rotting. Layers of pink blubber, carved in tiers, reminded me of the ceiling decorations in the Alhambra. The structure of the whale was so hard to fathom, like some ancient geological event, pink, grey, massive, carved with caverns and streams, but leading where? The fins, still buried under the surf, looked pathetically small in relation to its bulk. Then we saw its round glassy eye, which made us want to cry, because we realized that the whale was like us, it had looked out on the world, had traveled. What mysteries had he seen? Our eyes were so much the same.

Around the time of the fires we learned that our house is being sold, redone. The rent will likely triple. Like hundreds of artists each year we just can't afford to stay anymore, so this summer we'll leave the city where I've lived mostly, for forty years, where I've raised my children. Sometimes leaving feels like a fire in which I will lose everything, but sometimes it feels natural. Leaving was how I got here to begin with. Leaving is what we do in American stories. Ishmael understands.

Perhaps the saddest scene in my re-reading of *Moby Dick*, is not the final sinking of all ship and crew; but what the *Pequod* becomes before it goes down. If you've ever been with a dying person you know that at the end, things begin to fall away, dignity, control, the voice. The *Pequod* is a dying ship. First the life buoy flies off by accident, then a man falls from the mast, then goes Ahab's hat, lifted off by a giant black bird. The last thing to fall away is compassion itself. It happens like this.

Another whaling ship the *Rachel* passes close by the *Pequod* and Ahab shouts out to the Captain.

"Hast thou seen the white whale?"

"Aye, yesterday. Have ye seen a whale boat adrift?"

Captain Gardiner of the *Rachel*, a fellow Nantucketer whom Ahab knows, boards the ship and tells his story. They had indeed seen Moby Dick, had even given chase, but lost one of their whaleboats in the process. The Captain begs for the help of the *Pequod* in his search, *"My boy, my own boy is among them... A little lad but twelve years old."* Gardiner offers money to charter the ship, even reminds Ahab that he himself has a son. But Ahab can see nothing but the nearness of his prey, his answer is final and chilling.

"I will not do it. Even now I lose time. Good bye, Good bye."

Now the *Pequod*, captained by a man who has lost all human feeling, can really do nothing more than go down. So begins the fatal chase.

The air out here by the ocean is almost always fresh, but the week of the fires there was a strange light on the water during sunset, not the usual gleam of amber and magenta, but a sour orange light, flame colored, like a toxic spill on the water.

Still, people keep coming to the beach. The streetcar route ends at the foot of Judah Street. Tourists from Paris or kids from Oakland disembark, cross the Great Highway, walk up the dune, and there it is. The great opening of sky and water, everyone seems hungry for. People come here to play, or ponder, or fall in love. Every week, I see some new person with a bouquet of flowers stand at the water's edge and pray.

This city, like so much of the American life described in *Moby Dick*, which was once metaphysical and playful, discursive, unruly, and at heart egalitarian is now being tamed and readied for sale. It's as if we have been moving backward out of the unexplored waters Melville draws us to, spooling back to that cold steepled, flat screened, white church in New Bedford, where everything is accusation and sin. We could call the story a non-quest or an un-adventure, but who wants to read that, let alone live it.

What finally bothers me most about having to leave San Francisco is giving up the beach. On this stretch of sand I am conscious of being held against the edge of two great immensities. The civilized grid of the Outer Sunset on one side, square blocks and book shops, while across the Great Highway the deep wilderness roar of the waves stretches to the horizon, to the sun, to the beyond here. But Melville reminds us always of the mystery within as well as without, and all the deepest borders we cross without even noticing.