

Four Divers

I.

Ink-laden, rows of type ring out

reports of brooding voyages:

the bark *Lafayette*, spoken to at sea last November

with twelve hundred barrels sperm oil,

the *Abigail*, seen four months ago at Oahu, bound home

with sixteen,

a Lady and her son, wishing to obtain passage, to join

her husband at Honolulu,

Walter Westervell of Poughkeepsie, aged about twenty-three,

killed by whale during hunt.

In New Bedford the price of oil continues to rise

(one hundred and thirty-one cts. per Gal., 1860)

as light-houses and street lamps burn their valuable welcome

interminably into the fog,

the Howlands and the Rodmans press their luxuriant candles, soaps, &c.,

and somewhere in the Pacific

a whale is unrolled, feeding its flesh to the fire.

II.

Chains for tillers, stud-link chains for flukes and fins—

should any Chain be wanted of given

weight or size, they will be furnished at short notice by

J. & T. DURFEE, Manufacturers of wrought iron and

certain steel—fences, vaults, edge tools, and whale craft.

Craft, meaning implements for catching fish;

catching, as in harpooning, lancing, scarfing, cutting-in,

driving iron into foaming body;

body, as in case oil, ambergris, and blubber, cut into

blanket and horse, minced into book or bible;

as in raw material, slippery with blood and fat, as in

product, as in

sold on reasonable terms, of superior quality, and with

punctuality of dispatch.

VII.

To reduce the threat of collisions with endangered whale species, vessels sixty-five feet or greater in length shall be slowed to speeds ten knots or less in management areas.

Local reports lament each ship strike. Compliance papers, their bold faces tacked to boards, flutter keenly in the wind. Only yesterday, hands stood, calling out sightings from nests, thrusting lance after lance into ribboned flanks from the bows of thirty-foot boats. Hands making fast the small of the whale, narrowing between fluke and fin. Able hands flensing the fish, the tips of their craft sharpened to eloquent points. Green hands severing and bailing the head case. Sun-dark hands, singed from trying out of oil.

Today, when the whale dives, my friend, a biologist, tracks its depth and marvels at its length. Two hundred metres and twelve minutes, reported in jerks and snatches, charting ragged points on screen. I visit with the friend. She keeps a skeleton model on her shelf, and I notice its carpals, metacarpals, and phalanges—hands, too, five digits within the blade of its fin.

XIII.

I knew a girl from the Cape once, her skin sleek with neoprene, dive flag red and white over the Jonah crabs in her catch bag. When we ducked under it was equilibria. Eelgrass tips pointing up to meet our breaths, gas-pocket haze of unknowing. Further out and fin black, she speared tautogs in two-minute breaths. She asked me to go out whale watching with her. She pulled on the cord and I followed.