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Leviathan

or, The Whale

Philip Hoare

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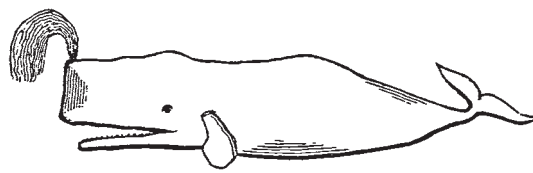
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or,

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Contents

	Prologue	1
I	Soundings	11
II	The Passage Out	41
III	The Sperm Whale	65
IV	A Filthy Enactment	101
V	Far Away Land	115
VI	Sealed Orders	131
VII	The Divine Magnet	161
VIII	Very Like a Whale	197
IX	The Correct Use of Whales	229
X	The Whiteness of the Whale	261
XI	The Melancholy Whale	299
XII	A Cold War for the Whale	331
XIII	The Whale Watch	361
XIV	The Ends of the Earth	381
XV	The Chase	403
	Bibliography	423
	Picture Credits	429
	Acknowledgements	431
	Index	437

There Leviathan,
Hugest of living creatures, on the deep
Stretch'd like a promontory sleeps or swims,
And seems a moving land; and at his gills
Draws in, and at his breath spouts out a sea.

John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, quoted in title page
to the first, English edition of *Moby-Dick*



Prologue

> For thou didst cast me into the deep,
> Into the heart of the seas,
> And the flood was round about me;
> All thy waves and billows passed over me.
>
> Jonah 2:3

Perhaps it is because I was nearly born underwater.

A day or so before my mother was due to give birth to me, she and my father visited Portsmouth's naval dockyard, where they were taken on a tour of a submarine. As she climbed down into its interior, my mother began to feel labour pains. For a moment, it seemed as though I was about to appear below the waterline; but it was back in our Victorian semi-detached house in Southampton, with its servants' bell-pulls still in place and its dark teak staircase turning on itself, that I was born.

I have always been afraid of deep water. Even bathtime had its terrors for me (although I was by no means a timid child) when I thought of the stories my mother told of her own childhood, and how my grandfather had painted a whale on the

outside of their enamel bathtub. It was an image bound up in other childish fears and fascinations, ready to emerge out of the depths like the giant squid in the film of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, with its bug-eyed Nautilus, Kirk Douglas's tousled blond locks and stripy T-shirt, and its futuristic divers walking the ocean floor as they might stroll along the beach.

I thought, too, of my favourite seaside toy – a grey plastic diver which dangled in the water by a thin red tube through which you blew to make it bob to the surface, trailing little silver bubbles – but which also reminded me of those nineteenth-century explorers enclosed in faceless helmets and rubberized overalls, their feet anchored by lead boots. And in my children's encyclopædia, I read about the pressurized bathysphere, an iron lung-like cell in which men descended to the Marianas Trench, where translucent angler fish lured their prey with luminous growths suspended in front of their gaping, devilish jaws. I was so scared of these monsters that I couldn't even touch the pages on which the pictures were printed, and had to turn them by their corners.



Southampton's municipal swimming baths, with their verdigris roof and glass windows, were a place of public exposure and weekly torture on our school trips there. Ordered to undress, revealing chicken flesh and, on older boys, dark sprouting hair, we shivered in ill-fitting trunks as we stood on wet tiles which, I was told, could harbour all sorts of disease.

Padding out into the echoing arena where weak winter sun threw mocking ripples on the ceiling, we lined up to plunge in the shallow end, ordered into the water by our PE master, a wiry-haired man with an imperious whistle on a cord around his neck.

Once in, we were told to hold the hand-rail and kick away with our feet. With my fingertips turning blue with the cold and my tenacious grip, I created enough white water to seem proportionate to my effort, although it was really an endeavour to disguise my ineptitude. Then we took a polystyrene float, crumbling at the edges like stale bread, and were instructed to launch ourselves across. The far side was as unattainable as Australia to me, and the reward for success – a piece of braid to sew on one's trunks – was a trophy I was as likely to win as an Olympic medal.

I never did learn to swim. The barked instructions, the fear of sinking to the tiled bottom along with the old sticking-plasters and hair-balls, combined to create an unconquerable anxiety. I somehow associated swimming not with pleasure, but with institutions, hospitals, conscription and war, with being ordered to do things I didn't want to do. At the beach I'd make my excuses when my friends ran into the sea, pretending I had a cold. Throughout my childhood and my teenage years, I lived with this disability; I even came to celebrate it, perversely, as a strength.

It was only later, living alone in London in my mid-twenties, that I decided to teach myself to swim. In the chilly East End pool, built between the wars, I discovered that the water could bear up my body. I realized what I had been missing: the buoyancy of myself. It was not a question of exercise: rather, it was the idea of going out of my depth, allowing something else to take account for my physical presence in the world; being part of it, and apart from it at the same time. In a way, it was a conscious reinvention, a means of confronting my fears.

For the poet Algernon Swinburne, the sea was a sensuous vice, one that he revealed in his only novel, *Lesbia Brandon*, set in his childhood home on the southern coast of the Isle of Wight, with its dramatic rocky cliffs overlooking the waters of the English Channel. In the book – not published until 1950, forty years after Swinburne's death – its young hero, Herbert, learns to love the water: 'all the sounds of the sea rang through him, all its airs and lights breathed and shone upon him: he felt land-sick when out of the sea's sight, and twice alive when hard by it.' He even dares the waves 'like a young sea-beast . . . pressed up against their soft fierce bosoms and fought for their sharp embraces; grappled with them as lover with lover'.

Swinburne, the son of an admiral, had a picturesque beach from which to swim; I grew up in a suburb on the other side of the Solent – a place of working docks and cranes and shipyards, close to which my father worked in a cable factory, testing huge insulated telecommunication lines which ran along the Atlantic sea-bed, as if tethering England to America. From my box bedroom at the back of the house I could hear the ships' horns on foggy mornings; at night, clanking dredgers gouged out a route for the huge liners and container ships that ply Southampton Water. Here, the sea represents commerce, rather than recreation. A port is a restless place, a place of transit, rather than a place in itself. Here, everything orientates itself towards the water – even the area in which I lived, Sholing, was a corruption of 'Shore Land' – yet at the same time the city seemed to ignore it, as if it and the element that is the reason for its existence were two entirely separate entities.

I think differently about the water now. Every day that I can, I swim in the sea. I feel claustrophobic if I am far from the water; summer and winter, I plan my time around the tides. Sitting on the shingly beach, I watch the ferries pass each other, briefly joining

superstructures before they part again, caught between somewhere and nowhere. Pushing out into the same waters that so excited the red-haired poet and bore up his pale, freckled body, I lie on my back, on a level with the land, letting the waves wash over me like a quilt. Unencumbered, unobserved, in the warm waters of late August or in the icy rough seas of December, I am buoyed up, suspended, watching the world recede along with my clothes on the beach.

Sometimes something gelatinous will brush against my leg – one of the cuttlefish that are often cast up on the shore, their mottled flesh, hard parrot beaks and slimy tentacles rotting away to reveal the chalk-white bone below. Sometimes I'll feel a sharp sting after an encounter with an unseen jellyfish. Yet I still go out of my depth, where no one can find me, where terns dive and cormorants bob, and where I have no knowledge of what lies below. I dream of bodies underwater, veiled yet animate, like the drowned woman in the lake in *The Night of the Hunter*, or the shark I thought I once saw in a Cornish cove from the top of a cliff. The way the water both reveals and conceals still disturbs me. It is a deceptive and heartless lover.

> Consider the subtleness of the sea; how its most dreaded creatures glide under water, unapparent for the most part, and treacherously hidden beneath the loveliest tints of azure.
>
> Brit, *Moby-Dick*

Cities and civilizations rise and fall, but the sea is always the sea. 'We do not associate the idea of antiquity with the ocean, nor wonder how it looked a thousand years ago, as we do of the land, for it was equally wild and unfathomable always,' wrote the philosopher, Henry David Thoreau. 'The ocean is a wilderness reaching around the globe, wilder than a Bengal jungle, and

fuller of monsters, washing the very wharves of our cities and the gardens of our sea-side residences.'

The sea is the greatest unknown, the last true wilderness, reaching over three-quarters of the earth. Its smallest organisms sustain us, providing every other breath of oxygen that we take. Its tides and shores determine our movements and our borders more than any treaty or government. Yet as we fly over its expanses, we think of it – if we think of it at all – merely as a distance to be overcome. In our arrogance, we consider that we have tamed the ocean, as much as we have conquered the land.

> . . . man has lost that sense of the full awfulness of the sea which aboriginally belongs to it . . . Yea, foolish mortals, Noah's flood is not yet subsided; two thirds of the world it yet covers.
>
> Brit, *Moby-Dick*

Once you have seen it, it is impossible to forget, just as if you never saw it, it would be impossible to describe. The sea is always in my head, the means by which I orientate myself to the earth – even in Red Cloud, Nebraska, where I once queued on a hot afternoon to swim in a public pool, a big blue hole in the middle of the Great Plains. It was as far from the ocean as I have ever been, but somehow a memory of it at the same time. The utter absence of the sea made its existence all the more potent.

To the careless, the water may seem the same from one day to the next, but under observation it becomes a continuous drama, made up of a million vignettes or grand gestures, played out at the edge of the shore or on the open ocean. It is a natural spectacle capable of rising dozens of feet into the air, or lying low like a glassy pond, so mirrored that it might not be there at all, seamlessly joining earth to sky. Surging and peaking, self-renewing and

self-perpetuating, it can take away as easily as it gives. It is as punitive as it is generous. Sometimes it seems to be a living creature itself, an all-engulfing organism through which all the world exists, yet we see so little of it as we go about our daily lives: a glimpse from the car or a plane, the smallest fraction, even as we are infinitesimal in turn, mere grains of sand. And as I linger on the sea wall on my bike, looking out over the water, calm and grey on an autumn afternoon, it is even more improbable to imagine that its unspoken surface was once broken by giant creatures.

> The Whale and Grampus have been captured in Southampton Water, and on such rare occasions there have been of course the usual arrangements for sight-seers. Small shoals of Porpoises often visit the estuary; and the visitor from inland counties may be pleasingly surprised, as he walks the Quays and Platform, to see at a short distance from the shore many of these singular fish rolling and springing on the surface of the water, then disappearing, and rising again at another point to renew their awkward gambols.
>
> Philip Brannon, *The Picture of Southampton*, 1850

In the early 1970s we went on a family outing to Windsor Safari Park, where the star attraction was a killer whale. My youngest sister, even more enthusiastic about whales than I was, bought a small colour brochure somewhat apologetically entitled

Dolphins can be fascinating
at Windsor Safari Park.

On the front cover was a grinning Flipper; on the back was an advertisement for Embassy Regal cigarettes which, we were informed, were 'outstanding value'.

'You will be amused and delighted,' the booklet went on, by 'some fact and figures which might increase your knowledge, and enhance your enjoyment of their performance. You might also want to take some pictures of your own – take as many as you like!'

After shots of animals lolling at the pool like beauty contestants or leaping in the air like acrobats, a new player appeared in the programme:



'He is growing at the rate of 1 foot per year,' we read – a fact that raised inevitable consequences, even as we took in the oversized swimming pool in front of us – 'and at only four and a half years old he is 16 feet long, weighs one ton, and eats between 80 and 100 pounds of herring a day.'

> He was specially caught for Windsor Safari Park off the coast of North America in 1970 and was flown to London by Boeing 707 in a special crate which allowed him to be sprayed constantly

> with water, keeping him cool and fresh. Eventually, by lorry and crane, he arrived in the dolphin training pool, and after a short time was ready to commence his training programme.

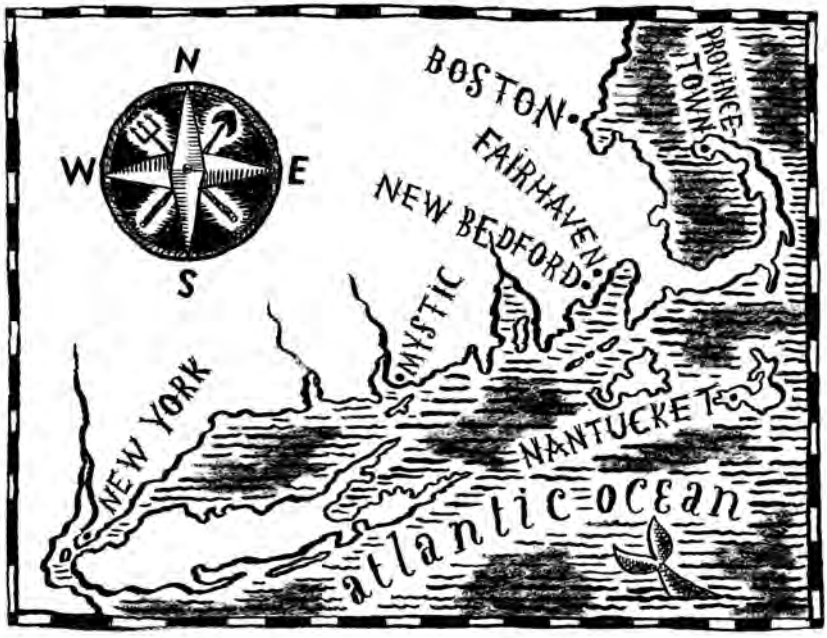
Only later would I learn that captive whales decline to eat, and are force-fed until they do. I was more concerned with the spectacle about to appear before my eyes.

I don't remember how Ramu made his entrance (although my sisters do); but as he appeared, this sleek, powerful creature with his glossy black and white markings, it seemed as though his shiny skin had been bleached by the chlorine that kept the pool turquoise-blue; a pale, mocking imitation of the ocean which lay far away from his zoological prison.

The whale went through his routine, responding to his trainer's demands like a lap dog. When he leapt in the air and landed with a splash – soaking the thrilled ringside audience at this orca circus – it was as if he were beaten by his captivity, even as his proud dorsal fin flopped impotently over his back.

'Here in their pool at Windsor,' the brochure reassured us, the performers 'should survive for a great many more years than in the sea, to delight and entertain their visitors'. Within two years Ramu had grown too big for his tank. In 1976 he was sold to Seaworld in San Diego, where he was renamed Winston, sired four offspring, and died, ten years later, of heart failure – one of more than two hundred killer whales to perish in captivity in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Back at home, I painted a picture of the orca in my journal, varnished and pristine on the page. But there were already other entries in my book, new passions. I forgot about whales, and thought about other things.


N
W
E
S
BOSTON
PROVINCE-TOWN
FAIRHAVEN
NEW BEDFORD
MYSTIC
NEW YORK
NANTUCKET
atlantic ocean

I

Soundings

> Chief among these motives was the overwhelming idea of the great whale himself. Such a portentous and mysterious monster roused all my curiosity.
>
> Loomings, *Moby-Dick*

It was my first visit to America. It was January, and I knew no one in New York. Freezing winds funnelled down the midtown canyons. Feeling homesick and lost, I took the subway as far as it would go. Outside the station at Coney Island, strange shapes stood in silhouette, skeletal versions of the Manhattan skyline I had left behind: a sinuous, hibernating roller coaster, and another instrument of amusement which looked like some giant gynæcological tool. I found my way to the aquarium and wandered through its empty interior, shuddering as I passed tanks filled with fish. There was something pathetic about this out-of-season place, a sense of abandonment blown in from the forlorn boardwalk and the suburban sea.

Let into the white walls was an observation window, thick enough to withstand tons of water. It reminded me of the portholes in Southampton's baths where children pressed their pasty



flesh to the glass; but this murky pane presented something entirely more spectral. Beckoning at the window, vertical and full length as if rising to greet me, was a beluga whale. It must have been twelve feet long, from its bulbous head to its stubby flukes; a huge ghostly baby fixing me with its stare.

As out of place as it seemed, this New York whale had an historical precedent. In 1861 Phineas T. Barnum had imported a pair of belugas to his American Museum on Broadway. Fished out of the waters off Labrador and brought south in hermetically sealed boxes lined with seaweed, the whales were twenty-three and eighteen feet long respectively. Their basement tank measured fifty-eight by twenty-five feet, but it was barely seven feet deep, and was filled with fresh water. In it they swam like lovers, although even their owner believed they would have only brief careers. 'Here is a real "sensation",' the *New York Tribune* marvelled, imagining that 'the enterprise of Mr. Barnum will not stop at white whales. It will embrace sperm whales and mermaids, and all strange things that swim or fly or crawl, until the Museum will become one vast microcosm of the animal creation.'

This fascination with the whale, like Philip Brannon's report from Southampton Water, was an expression of Victorian fashion, a characteristic marriage of ingenious science and human curiosity. In England, live whales were delivered to aquaria in Manchester and Blackpool (although one porpoise show was closed, for fear the flagrant activities of its performers should offend genteel dispositions), and in September 1877 a

beluga whale arrived in Westminster, in the centre of the world's greatest city. The nine-foot, six-inch specimen had also been caught – along with ten others – off Labrador, where it had stranded at high tide and was netted by Zack Coup and his men. From there it began its long journey to London.

Taken in a narrow box by sloop to Montreal, the whale was put on a train to New York – a trip that took two weeks. The animal spent seven months at Coney Island's Summer Aquarium where 'he contracted his habit of swimming in a circle', before being taken out of its tank and put on a North German Lloyd steamship, the *Oder*, bound for Southampton. During the voyage, it was kept on deck in a rough wooden box lined with seaweed, and was wetted with salt water every three minutes. Despite such intensive care, the whale had already begun to live off its own blubber.

At Southampton the beluga was transferred to the South-Western Railway, travelling on an open truck to Waterloo Station and to its final home, an iron tank forty-four feet long, twenty feet wide, and six feet deep, at the Royal Aquarium, a grand gothic structure recently built opposite the Houses of Parliament. The whale waited as the tank took two hours to fill. 'He had been lying still in the box breathing once every 23 seconds. He flapped feebly with his tail when he felt them moving the box. He fell out of it sidelong into the water and went down to the bottom like lead.' The animal was allowed three hours of privacy before the public, 'in great numbers', were admitted to view it from a specially built grandstand.

The Times did not feel this was the right way to treat a whale. 'It is not likely he will live long in fresh water, although he comes up at intervals from ten to 100 seconds to breathe, and sometimes spouts the water up through the wide nostril which he has

in the middle of his forehead. Noise or jarring caused by the workmen occasionally makes him stay beneath the water for two minutes at a time.' The beluga was fed live eels, but it was noted that its high dorsal ridge, 'which should be rounded with fat', stood up 'precipitously on his back'.

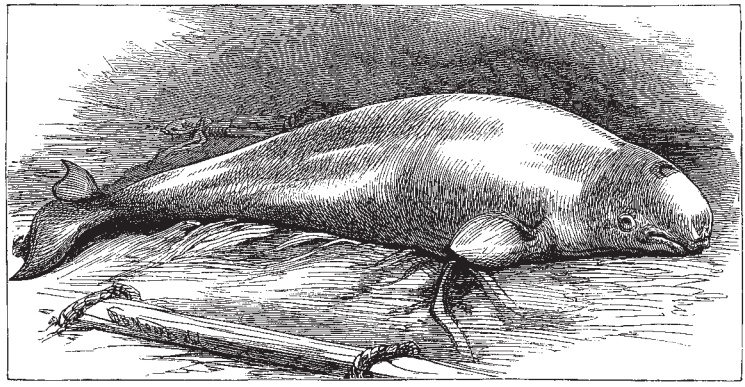
'Should he succumb to the unfavourable conditions of life in this city, no whalebone will be extracted from this monster,' the newspaper added. 'Nor is the white whale very rich in blubber. But his coat will make porpoise-skin boots.'

The Times's suspicions were correct, even if its assignation of gender was not. In what appeared to be delirious behaviour, the whale – which was in fact a female – swam up and down the tank rapidly, hitting its head on the wall. Then, 'having somewhat recovered, it again swam several times round the tank, again came into collision with the end of the tank, turned over, and died.'

Nor was the indignity over, for the body was taken out of the tank and exhibited to the public the next day. A plaster cast was made, and a necropsy performed by eminent naturalists and physicians. They discovered that far from starving, the whale had a full stomach – but also highly congested lungs. The fact that the animal had been kept on open deck on its way over the Atlantic, and, rather than keeping it alive, the regular dousing it had received, had resulted in rapid evaporation between soakings, causing it to catch cold.

The Westminster whale's public demise prompted correspondence from persons in high places. Bishop Claughton of St Albans, a poet in his own right, complained that it was 'the creature of which the Psalmist speaks as placed in its element by the Great Creator', and it was not man's right to take him out of it. William Flower of the Royal College of Surgeons – later to become the first

director of the Natural History Museum – had attended the necropsy, and countered that the 'supposed marks of ill-usage' on its body 'were the consequences of the eels in the tanks having after its death nibbled the edges of its fins'. Professor Flower claimed the entire process was justified for 'the advantage to scientific and general knowledge to be gained'. But then, his own institution had benefited from the donation of the internal organs, which would 'make very interesting preparations'.



THE DEAD WHALE AT THE ROYAL AQUARIUM.

Back in New York, Barnum's whales met with their predicted fate. Victims of equally inappropriate conditions, like fairground fish brought home in plastic bags, they too had died within days – only to be replaced by successive specimens until a fire destroyed the museum in 1865. Futile attempts were made to rescue the last beluga, until a compassionate fireman smashed the tank with a hook, 'So the whale merely roasted to death instead of undergoing the distress of being poached.'

Faced with this modern captive on Coney Island, I felt a mixture of fascination and pity. It was as out of place as a tiger in a Manhattan apartment. The animal ought to have been swimming

free in Arctic waters. Instead its pure white skin was soiled by its civic capture, as if the green algæ that covered the prismatic glass had contaminated it, too. It was struck dumb by the silence of that afternoon, and all the afternoons that stretched ahead. The beluga is the most vocal of all whales, known by sailors as the canary of the sea; here it was as caged as any tame songbird. As it hung there, this shrouded convict imprisoned for someone else's sins, I dared to touch it through the thick glass, as if something might pass between us. I waited for it to raise a flipper. But it didn't, so I turned away, unable to take its stare any longer.



After years living in London, the city had begun to press down on me. I sometimes felt as if all the sky were sea, and we citizens mere bottom-feeders, held down by its great pressure as we moved around the caverns and boulders of the streets. I lived on the borders of the City, within sight of the Docklands; over the years I watched the replicating skyscrapers rise up from the London clay like crystal stalagmites in a schoolboy's jam-jar experiment. At night I would dream that the tower block in which I lived was surrounded by water, inundated by the expected flood; that from my ninth-floor eyrie I could look down to see whales and sharks circling below. In other dreams, I saw a stone-walled harbour and a mass of marine animals caught within it, squirming and writhing to get out.