

Looking In

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The Silence



Image 1: University of Dundee Archives Services, MS 254/8/1/12, Man on SS Morning with Gun, n.d.

I see a kind of performativity in his stance. The upright position, his left arm against his chest, cradling a gun at a right angle... I'd like to think he believed he looked stout and unflinching. At first glance, he seems to have something of a stoic quality, but his thick coat and gloves undercut that somewhat. The latter look almost like oven gloves. I wonder how someone could have used a firearm with them.

Who knows, maybe this really is how sailors stood on the ship, surveying the surface of the water. Nonetheless, I can read quiet, distracted thoughts in his gaze; something along these lines: "Can we move again soon? We might miss a breach at this rate, and I'll be damned if I have to wait two more days for anything to appear." Perhaps. That's a wild guess. Yet I can't help but wonder...

What did time mean to someone alone on the brow of the ship? Waiting those hours and days, suns and moons setting and rising like ice banks creaking against the hull of the ship, inevitably but so, so slowly. How often could the Arctic sailors even see around them? The mists must have been fairly frequent, especially in autumn and winter. The cold... I feel the ghost of its bite through the grey and grain of the image. I try to sit in this illusion for a

while, feel the sailor's numb nose, aching knuckles and sore knees from where he stands, in a past I know I can't ever fully perceive.

Nothing. Nothing for so long. But he must keep his wits about him; this is what he is here for after all. A slight breeze ruffles the hairs on his coat's padding and the very ends of his moustache. It may not be strong, but it is sharp. He needs to hold himself tight, as if he were applying pressure to a wound that spans his whole body.

If a fluke is missed on the horizon, even so little as a few odd ripples at the surface, that could be days of searching wasted, not to mention the wages lost. The *Morning's* owner had not been the most generous with pay at her launch, those many days and nights ago. Of course, who receives a good wage from the outset? The big fish are far fewer, for a good few years now. For the number of walruses, seals, porpoises that have been hauled on this deck instead of real catches, you would think this is a fishing expedition that just got stuck too far North for a few months.

At least the stay is free. Food, bed, the occasional card games during the hours off... It certainly is not the best sleep, meal rations do not allow for generous portions, yet it's far more than anyone in the mills might get during work hours back home, that's for sure. What is the wife doing now?

It is hard not to think about home when -

I stop myself here. I am trying to reach too far, guess too much. I have no idea if this man was married, if he had a family. Perhaps he boarded the *Morning* because he knew that few would miss him back home. I have no way of knowing this either...

I sit back. The image remains, whether I am looking at it or not. The scene happened, and it will continue to happen on a frozen loop for as long as it exists in this frame, no matter how staged it may have been by the photographer. But these echoes only show so much. A moment in two long-gone lives, preserved, refined, and put on show, and severed from their whole. Like a little baleen comb ripped from a skull, a shining candle from a vast carcass now sunk to irretrievable depths. I can't help but try to see something in this grey, misted view; the image demands it. The man's eyes, their whites the same shade as the cheekbones below in the flat light, looked to an unseen point in the horizon. What was there? I cannot see what he saw, so I must try to follow them inwards instead, guessing at what was in his head.

He must be thinking that *something* must be found. Only smaller catches so far, nothing seamen can get real wages for. Even a sperm whale or a humpback, anything to make these months worthwhile. What of the landing back home? The meals and sleep are all very well for now, but this much time at sea to yield little more than a dozen pounds will not suffice when back on land. The cold returns now, the wind a little faster. Breath rushes out like steam from an engine.

New employment must be secured, or the sea must be returned to. Family and acquaintances left behind for an employer that generously provides just enough.

There may be a certain pride in this line of work. Holds of barrels stuffed with blubber, stacks of bone and little piles ambergris may feel like returning from a conquest: soldiers of the frozen north. Quayside folks always seem impressed, and even while the excitement of unloading the ship comes with habit and repetition, it may be that a certain joy remains.

Yet the man knows that these spoils have been dwindling year after year. Ship owners and captains have been saying these past few years that the whales have just been moving further and further north. Expeditions may be unrelenting enough to end at the pole.

The man consoles himself. Perhaps this is simply pessimism. Yes, after years in command, faith must be kept and authority obeyed. Captains have led sailors to safety, wages for so long. And yet...

So many have been lost. A profession of death after all. Whales, sailors... The weight of sails, pulleys, chains, hooks, spears and the thrill of the hunt. The dash to the boats, the silent agony of the approach, the weight of an anchor in the gut as the spear is raised-

And there. There it is!

"There she blows!"

As the hunt starts to thud out, the cold starts to become nothing more than something distant, something long forgotten. He calls back to the captain.

"How many miles, Beveridge? What side?"

Through the binoculars, a plume of water jets straight up. As if the whale is trying to spit droplets into the grey vault above.

"About two and a half miles portside sir! Looks like she's a humpback!"

I can hear the rumble of those racing on the deck, and though the breeze ruffles the fur on the coats of the crew as they bolt from their stations across the deck, the cold seems to have disappeared. The only sensation now is a stirring in my gut, boots striking timber. The chains and ropes seem to unfurl in beats as the rowboats are lowered, louder clangs precede smaller thuds of heavy rope hitting wood. *CLANG-thud, CLANG-thud, CLANG-thud*. As if in tempo with these ropes and chains, the movement of the sailors on the deck becomes so frequent and constant that it almost melds into a low, humming current of noise. The thrum accelerates. The boats are lowered faster, and in greater numbers. More and more sailors approach the edge of the deck. Rope, chain and boots echo across the deck as they hit the timber below. The sailors, their intent and anticipation, as well as object, noise and motion have coalesced into something approaching a cohesive organism, a life of its own.

I am sinking further in.

The Hunt

Rattling the chains, the sailors lower themselves into the tumult that always surrounds them in this moment. Legs and hooks, arms and ropes, all latching and detaching, spokes and paddles melding themselves into a timber engine, bracing themselves only for motion.

The first strains are silent. The pace increases, yet every fibre in their thoraxes, the joints in their forelimbs, burn at the command of the captain. He keeps his eyes on target, the everything in this moment, the one thing that matters in the vastness.

*Swaying below, a sail in denser winds, breathing in
the sounds of their watery world. A constant
journeying, always rising and setting, their flukes
are their own sun and moon. A creature of horizons,
life is carried on over time unmeasured, far
beyond a single body.*

Inverted carapaces on water, exposed extremities flailing at the water, they drag on out of necessity. They are always chasing to avoid later starvation, to feed the steel maws back home, those that always hunger and never fill. They follow the one that knows its way so they can find their own.

The harpooneer lifts the long iron tooth and unwinds the rope, a false umbilical gifted with jaws of metal, limbs of rope and ceaseless appetite.

But he was already bound long ago
by an obligation to serve
a higher power.

*The water gurgles in cooler tones as they approach
their new home. They shift with the light,
sensing in life through their ever-half-open mouth
and preparing themselves to breach, taking
the sky. They must first drift downward and reach
the water beneath, lifting themselves
from their length and lungs. They have yet to sense
what waits above.*

Their gaze never rests. It flits, bounces, darts with the waves, not waiting for the mists to clear. Instead, they keep wearing themselves down, down to the bone if they must. The wait keeps on mounting, bearing down on these engines of flesh until "There! Give it to 'em!"

The harpooner lunges his head toward the boatheader's view and readies his spear, its mass pulling on his whole self. It is a combined weight, both what is there and what is felt, the metal and wood, as well as the desperate need for it to find its target. It launches from the arm with hardly any arc, suspended for a quartered moment and then bites.

*Heat.
Sudden and flashing. At first, it starts from no single place
then it becomes
a searing and singular needle, the size of its ache pulsating. As if torn
from the everything they were a part of, the whale plunges fast in retaliation. They must
begin their fight.*

"To the stern! Hold to the stern!"

Like in the factories, the line screams and spits smoke as limbs lose themselves in the frenzy. The silence is long broken, the hunger and agony can now shout yet the waters pummeling the sides of the little wooden shells, lashing at the forms inside, will later form into feelings of pride and exhilaration, increasing the hunger so that the hunt may last and the machines back home may eat forever. This is a madness that is very carefully devised and between the whale and those that hunt it.

*The strain of the fight is decided by strength
of limb and weight of bone. Tendons writhe
through the pain of red plumes. The tonnes rush up now,
muscle swatting at the shadowy speck. It is on or it is over.*

As blood is pooled onto the surface

and the ancient mass thrashes at little limbs,

did the sailors and the whale ever see themselves
fighting death in each other's eyes?

The Catch

I stare between the lines, the frames,
masts, taut ropes, square hatches,
heavy chains and the men in tight,
thick clothes. They stand with the
straight height of the ship, still as
iron bars, in flanking formation on deck.

Do they see the narwhal's faded sheen?
The gently sloping form, a massive tear drop
out of water, yet to lose its shape, slung at an uneven angle on the deck.

I read no remorse
in the faces of the sailors. One face is obscured
by the rigid contour of a rope,
others by dull, exhausted expressions.

Do they feel as trapped
as the whale,
trapped as
I feel at the whole frame?
I try to reach out into the creature and sense

the slime of wet
timber beneath sticking
very slightly to the skin, dead
weight of long slack muscles dragged
from a clearer place
below.

Perhaps the last
slow ballooning breaths
that try to draw in the muffled clinks
thuds of ropes and chains swaying ever
so slightly with the surface -

But I am too late.

I am nothing to this scene, aside from being
far
too
late.



Image 2: University of Dundee Archives Services, MS 254/8/2/3, Captured Narwhal, n.d.

Source for Images 1 and 2:

- University of Dundee Archives Services, MS 254: The David Henderson Collection (1710 – 2005).