

Blue Meridian

THE SEARCH
FOR THE
GREAT WHITE
SHARK

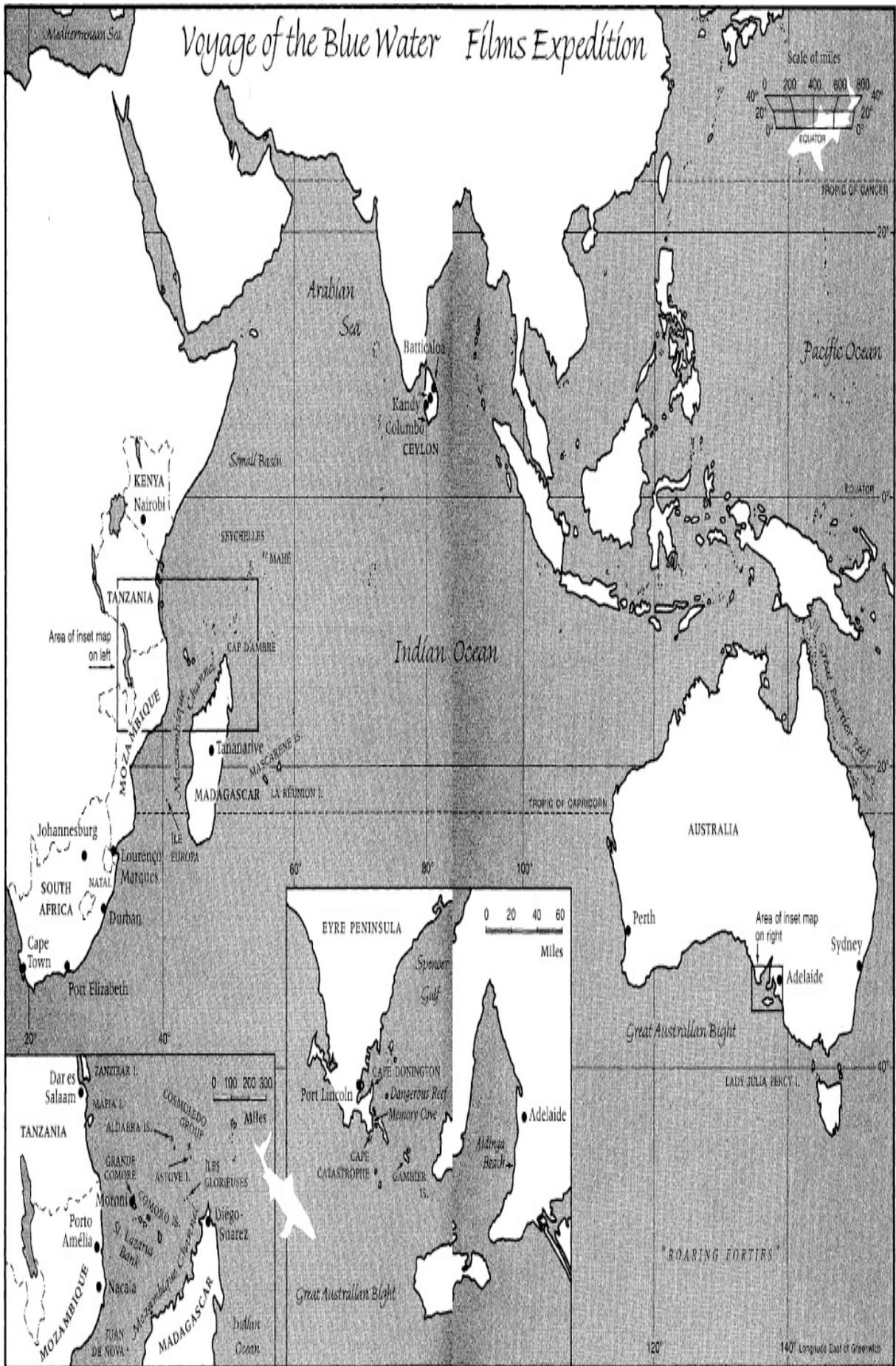


Peter Matthiessen



PENGUIN BOOKS

Peter Matthiessen (1927–2014) is the only writer who has ever won the National Book Award in both fiction and nonfiction. His travels as a naturalist and explorer have resulted in more than a dozen books on natural history and the environment, including *The Snow Leopard*, his first NBA winner. Matthiessen's equally important career in fiction has produced a collection of stories and nine novels, among them *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* (an NBA finalist) and the Everglades trilogy (*Killing Mister Watson*, *Lost Man's River*, and *Bone by Bone*), which, rewritten and distilled, were published in one volume in 2008 under the title *Shadow Country*, winner of the NBA in fiction. *Shadow Country* was also the 2010 recipient of the William Dean Howells Medal, given by the American Academy of Arts and Letters for the most distinguished American novel published during the previous five years. Matthiessen was a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. His final novel, *In Paradise*, was published just after his death in 2014.



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Nature is our widest home. It includes the oceans that provide our rain, the trees that give us air to breathe, the ancestral habitats we shared with countless kinds of animals that now exist only by our sufferance or under our heel.

Until quite recently, indeed (as such things go), the whole world was a wilderness in which mankind lived as cannily as deer, overmastering with spears or snares even their woodsmanship and that of other creatures, finding a path wherever wildlife could go. Nature was the central theater of life for everybody's ancestors, not a hideaway where people went to rest and recharge after a hard stint in an urban or suburban arena. Many of us still do hike, swim, fish, birdwatch, sleep on the ground or paddle a boat on vacation, and will loll like a lizard in the sun any other chance we have. We can't help grinning for at least a moment at the sight of surf, or sunlight on a river meadow, as if remembering in our mind's eye paleolithic pleasures in a home before memories officially began.

It is a thoughtless grin because nature predates "thought." Aristotle was a naturalist, and nearer to our own time, Darwin made of the close observation of bits of nature a lever to examine life in many ways on a large scale. Yet nature writing, despite its basis in science, usually rings with rhapsody as well—a belief that nature is an expression of God.

In this series we are presenting some nature writers of the past century or so, though leaving out great novelists like Turgenev, Melville, Conrad, and Faulkner, who were masters of natural description, and poets, beginning with Homer (who was perhaps the first nature writer, once his words had been transcribed). Nature writing now combines rhapsody with science and connects science with rhapsody, and for that reason it is a very special and a nourishing genre.

Edward Hoagland

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I should also like to thank James F. Clark of the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard for permission to paraphrase his arguments in support of the hypothesis (see [pages 29–30](#)) that the white shark's gigantic relative, *Carcharias megalodon*, still exists.

P.M.

For my brother
George Carey Matthiessen

It is to sailors the most formidable of all the inhabitants of the sea, for in none besides are the powers of inflicting injury so equally combined with the eagerness to accomplish it.

—**JONATHAN COUCH,**
Fishes of the British Islands (1862)

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good Friday, 1969. Aboard whale-catcher W-29, Captain Torbjorn Haakestad, out of Durban. The coast of Natal just emerging from night shadows, twenty miles astern; no birds. Moon high over stern mast, and sun swelling the sky directly ahead, under the low cloud mass of yesterday's storms.

* * *

Storm had prevented W-29 from sailing earlier in the week. The wind whirling up the coast in squalls made it certain that the boats would stay in port on Thursday, but the office voice at the Union Whaling Company knew nothing about weather; it thought it best that any passengers should be on hand. And so I arrived at Salisbury Island docks at 3:00 on Thursday morning and sat in the guard's shack, talking to the gunsmith; he takes this shift so that he can be available in case one of the harpoon guns needs repair. In fair weather, the boats retrieve the buoyed whales at dark and haul them, sometimes a hundred miles or more, to the slipway at Durban, arriving ordinarily after midnight. At 3 A.M., after refueling and taking on water, they are bound offshore again, to be on the whaling grounds at daylight.

"Whaling is very interesting," the gunsmith said. "Very interesting." He was a short cautious man with white hair and an accent. I asked if he went often to the whaling grounds, and he said never. "I been with this same company twenty-one years and I never been out there yet." For a moment, he looked surprised himself. "I know it is interesting, but I am not curious, I guess." He shrugged. "Maybe I afraid I get seasick." Outside his window was the black harbor, and a light shine on the black blowing water. The water licked at the rusty hulls of idle whale-catchers, ranked four deep along the piers: like most shore whaling operations, this one is dying for want of whales. "Sometimes them big shark come right in here. Big ones. I see them right in here." Sharks are so numerous in Durban harbor that a shark-fishing club has been set up; its members fish from the long harbor jetties.

It was raining. The gunsmith's clock ticked on in the dead time before dawn; the air turned cold. Periodically, he announced the time, shaking his head as if, after all these years, something was imminent.

In a hard chair, the gunsmith slept—an old man in a hard chair by a black window. This was the bad light before dawn, the hour of sick dreams and thick awakenings. But when one has sat up all night, it is the hour when time stops, an hour of intense awareness; the ticking continues but the hands have stopped, and one can stand back and inspect the moment as if its mechanism were encased in glass.

The old man coughed. He had dozed like this on countless nights, hands resting mutely on his thighs, side by side like the old feet in the blunt shoes square to the floor; his feet and fingertips pointed straight at me. His stillness filled me with the consciousness of my own name, my age, the small scars and calluses on my life's hands, my solitude, my transience, and my absurdity. He sighed and so did I.

Today or tomorrow I would watch the killing of sperm whales. Later I would go beneath the sea as an observer on an expedition that had come to film the great ocean sharks as they came in to attack the rolling carcasses. Because it is senseless the whale slaughter would be ugly, but the shark's banquet would be beautiful. Such elemental life-in-death would be less horrifying than exalting, restoring the immediacy of existence. The shadow of sharks is the shadow of death, and they call forth dim ultimate fears. Yet there is something holy in their silence.

* * *

At 5 A.M., there was no sign of W-29, which was towing seven whales, nor of W-25, which was towing eight. The gunsmith kept imagining that he saw lights at the slipway across the harbor, where each whale is loaded onto a flatcar and trundled by rail a few miles down the coast to the shore whaling station. Here barefoot, bloody-legged men with flensing knives slash at it even before it is hauled clear of its car. In a bedlam of chains and machinery, great S cuts are made along its length, and chain hooks secured to the foot-thick blubber, which is hauled off in whale-length strips. The meat is stripped next, then the jaws, which are snaked away to crosscut saws to be cut into manageable pieces for the huge cooking vats buried here and there in the concrete platform. The meat extract is essentially creatine, which is derived from the high myoglobin content in mammalian tissue; creatine is a chemical salt that awakens the taste buds, and is much used in the manufacture of soups. Myoglobin makes the flesh of sperm whales purplish and bitter, but the ton of meal derived from each five tons of meat and bone is 75 percent protein, and is used as a component of hog and chicken feeds.

Nothing is wasted but the whale itself. The head oil, or spermaceti, is used as an additive in motor oils, the teeth are saved for ivory, and the bone, blood and guts go into the manufacture of bone-meal fertilizer. The water used to wash down the great platform pours off into the sea below, where fishermen cast for whatever comes to the bloody surf.

Other whales taken are all rorqual species (*Balaenoptera*): the finback, which may reach eighty feet, the sei (Norwegian for "sail": refers to shape of dorsal fin), and the lesser rorqual, or little piked whale, known here as the minke; the sei and the minke whales are relatively small. All three are baleen whales that feed on plankton, and their meat is good—a big finback may be worth four thousand dollars, or nearly three times the value of a big sperm whale—but the catch is small and growing smaller. Blue

whales, right whales, and humpbacks are disappearing from these seas, and to kill them is forbidden. It is also forbidden to kill finbacks north of 40 degrees south latitude (they breed in temperate seas), but both laws, the local whalers say, are ignored by the Japanese and Russians. In the old days, Union Whaling operated a big fleet in the Antarctic, but a few years ago it sold its factory ships to the Japanese and restricted its operations thereafter to the shore station.

The great whales of the seven seas are so depleted that Japan and Russia alone among the nations of the world are still engaged in open-ocean whaling. Though the industry now depends on the small sei whales and minke, the remnant bands of the great whales are destroyed wherever encountered, and doubtless the lesser whales will hold out long enough to make it certain that the last of the leviathans will be exterminated along the way. Already the blue whale is practically extinct, and in most parts of the world the right whales and the humpbacks are close behind. The one large whale that still survives in any numbers is the sperm whale, which is hunted in every ocean in the world and could disappear in the next decade.

Using catcher boats and helicopters, the factory ships move ponderously about the oceans, killing ever larger numbers of ever smaller individuals. The relentless waste of life is barely profitable, since almost every whale product except ambergris is more readily available from other sources: the whaling industry is dying of consumption. Still, there is no better use for these monstrous ships and their fleets of whale-catchers—and no better use for whales, to judge from the apathy with which their slaughter has been met—and perhaps a few more years can be wrung from the investment. “Overhead” is the sole excuse for man’s persistence in the destruction of the whales, and in the name of this small economy the mightiest animals that ever existed on the earth will pass from it forever.

* * *

The whale-catchers came in just after dawn, and I went aboard W-29. Captain Haakestad had washed and was toweling his wet head. “That was a hell of a night,” he said, straight off. “Fifty-mile-an-hour wind out there.” Remembering my mission, he shook his head. “We not go out today. We go Friday, three A.M.”

Toward midnight on Thursday, I went aboard W-29 again. There was nobody around. I found a berth and crawled into it, awaking when the ship sailed, about 3.30, and again when the first seas tried her hull; then a hand shook me. “It’s ten of six!” the crewman said, accounting for his act. I got out of the berth and pitched onto the deck, where the dawn wind struck me in the face. The harpoon gun mounted in the bows, rising and falling as the boat sliced through the heavy surge, was a hard black silhouette against the sun that rose from the far reaches of the Indian Ocean.

* * *

At daylight a sailor climbs the rigging to the crow’s-nest. We are thirty miles due east of the coast, headed toward a 1000-fathom depth at 14.5 knots. W-25 is off to port, and to starboard, spread out three miles apart as they fan out from Durban’s Cooper Light, are W-17, W-16, W-26, W-18. The old steam engines on these whale-

catchers burn crude bunker oil, twelve or thirteen tons of it each day; the engines are so simple that almost nothing can go wrong with them, and they are powerful, but in a marginal industry they burn too much fuel, and there will be no market for these ships when the whales are gone. These are the last six in the fleet; they average 160 feet in length, with a 28-foot beam. All were built after World War II in Fredrikstad, Norway, and all have white topsides on a rusty gray steel hull, with a heavy black smokestack banded in bright blue. They are rakish ships, high in the bow to insure a good angle for the harpoon gun, and so low amidships—the work deck must be as close as possible to the water—that in moderate seas the main deck is awash; the low deck, climbing slightly once again as it sweeps astern, gives the ships a sway-backed appearance, as if they had sagged beneath the weight of their big steam engines. W-29 carries three Norwegian officers and a crew of fourteen: Captain Haakestad, First Mate Reidar Smedsrud, Wireless Operator Willy Christensen, four engineers, three firemen, a messboy, a steward, a bo's'n and four seamen.

A first bird, the sooty shearwater, slides like a shadow in the trough of the unlit sea. The wind is out of the southwest at ten knots, but there are mare's-tails, and the day will freshen. In this part of the austral oceans, the prevailing winds are southwest or northeast; a rare and violent storm wind that lashes and carves the open coast is known as a black southeaster.

A radio call from W-25: she has sighted whales. Although the quarry is ten miles away, the captain abandons the big spread of eggs and bacon, smoked herring, beans, chili peppers, brown bread and milk; he is catch leader of the fleet, responsible for the position of the boats.

Northeastward. The whales are fifty-six miles at sea, on a 78-degree bearing from Cooper Light. The spotter plane, turning in high silence in the ocean distance, has located two pods several miles apart, headed slowly south.

A giant bird, bone-white but for upper wing coverts and under wing tips, and a thin band at tail tip and wing's trailing edge, all of these black; its beak and legs a pale pink, like a sun-worn conch shell high above the tide line—this is the wandering albatross of the southern oceans, the greatest flying bird on earth.

At 8:15, W-25 is broadside on the horizon, blunt black on a silver sun. She is killing whales. Slowly she turns in the pall of her own smoke and is underway again. Another whale blows near the yellow-and-green flag that marks W-25's first kill; in the morning wind the bright flag snaps on a bamboo pole that rises twelve feet from the buoy float. Fixed to the pole is a small radio transmitter so that the buoyed whale may be located from a distance, even after dark. In the old days, radios were unnecessary: the ships did not have to wander far to find another whale. Even four years ago, the season's catch of sperm whale out of Durban was three thousand animals; last year it was eleven hundred. This year it will be even less, and next year, so it is said, the shore station will shut down for want of fodder.

At W-29's approach, the whale has sounded. Willy Christensen leaves the boat's high bridge to take up his post in the radio shack, and a few minutes later his voice rises eerily from the tube: he has located the whale with his machines. The captain grunts something at the helmsman, who alters course and signals to the engine room to halve the speed. Captains prefer to be called gunners and are hired primarily for that talent whether or not they have a master's ticket. Now the Gunner leaves his seat in the

starboard corner of the bridge and walks the long sloping catwalk that leads from the bridge over the litter of chains and hawsers and big winches of the foredeck to the bow. The gun on the bow platform is tilted so that the heavy barb on the harpoon is pointed downward at the water, and flyingfish skid outward, veering away between the waves.

The whale remains at a thousand feet. On the bow, the Gunner sits on the catwalk step, big hands resting on his knees. He is a stolid unpretentious man with a gentle voice, and he is patient. The sonar can track the whale a half mile down, unless strong underwater-current lines intervene. "With us they stand no chance," the mate says quietly, a trace of weariness in his tones, perhaps regret.

Christensen's voice rises again, and the mate gives the helmsman a new course. The boat slows to a hum and glides forward in strange stillness, the slosh of water audible along the hull. Below, the whale rushes through the dark, driven by the relentless *ping* that it is unable to escape, and above, the steel boat waits, rolling heavily in the monotony of seas. The sperm whale can submerge for an hour or more, but this time is rapidly decreased by panic when the animal is pursued. Peering down into the silent sea, I wondered what sort of awareness tuned the minds of those great hellish shapes so far beneath. The sperm whale has a bigger brain than any animal that has ever evolved, and unlike the baleen whales, it is not a grazer but a hunter; other cetacean hunters such as the porpoises are very intelligent animals indeed. Doubtless these doomed creatures were communicating their alarm, though whether they have the vocal range of the baleen whales is doubtful: a herd of humpbacks (and probably other baleen species as well) sing like the horns of paradise, arriving at harmonics not attainable by the instruments of man. For the sperm whale, only *clicks* are known—sometimes these sounds are audible during the last throes of the harpooned whale—and it is possible although not likely that, like the humpbacks' low-frequency notes, these *clicks* can carry enormous distances and are designed to do so. (It is now believed, from preliminary evidence, that the deepest and most sonorous notes of a humpback whale can and may be heard by another humpback anywhere in the same ocean basin, and may even resound around the world. Cosmic sounds, electronic sounds, the music of the spheres shimmer through the soft gurgle of the sea with the resonance of an echo chamber, and with them soft bell notes and sweet bat squeaks, froggish bass notes, barks, grunts, whistles, oinks, and elephantine rumblings, as if the ocean floor had fallen in. No word conveys the eeriness of whale song, tuned by the ages to a purity beyond refining, a sound that man should hear each morning to remind him of the morning of the world.)

* * *

A patch of bright-brown sargassum weed. A storm petrel. W-29 rolls and wallows, and the man in the crow's-nest swings in crazy arcs on the morning sky.

The whale has vanished into the abyss. Sperm whales can descend to at least 7000 feet (a two-and-a-half-mile round trip from the surface), and this one had escaped the sonar. The radioman, reappearing, shrugs. W-25, tracking another whale, wheels across our bows, full speed ahead, heeling over to near 45 degrees as she makes her turn. The sun glints on the sky-blue band of her black stack, amidships: on the band is

a big *U* for Union Whaling Company.

9:10. The helmsman, a dark figure with patches of fair skin on neck and throat, points to the eastward: a wash of white water is subsiding where two whales have broached. But these whales, sounding, are assigned to other boats that come up rapidly from the south. W-29 is bound offshore, where the plane, like a black hornet on the sun, is circling.

The mulatto helmsman with white throat patches is classified “white,” whereas two of his mates who would be white men elsewhere in the world are classified in this rigid land as “colored.” Their officers are perplexed by apartheid but not offended; it is not their business. Like all South Africans, they ask uneasily how one likes South Africa, and I answer by not answering. They nod, still perplexed, still not offended. After all, their expressions say, we are Norwegian. Later I asked Willy Christensen how *he* liked his adopted land, and he sighed. “Nothing ever happens here,” he said. “But I been here so long, I don’t know nothing better any more.”

A solitary tern, sixty miles offshore, is gone again before I catch it with binoculars; the boat rises on a swell, and when it descends, the swift white bird has vanished like a wisp of spray into the infinities of sea.

Where the pod was first sighted, the plane has dropped a dye marker, and an unnatural bright stain of plastic green rises and falls on the cruel blue. A mile further, the ship comes upon the whales. Fleeing bad vibrations, they are headed rapidly offshore, porpoising strongly through the choppy seas. There are more than twenty in formation, and the family groups remain tight together, swimming abreast. On every rise, the sea pours off the glistening black backs; then the mist of their breathing disappears in an explosion of white water. Clouds cross the sun, but the surface of the sea, still reflecting light, is a strange dead silver. The sun returns. The wind is rising, and when the whales blow, a rainbow appears in the fine mist as it drifts downwind.

9:48. On the bow, the Gunner’s heavy form rises and falls, breaking the line of the horizon. The harpoon gun swings from port to starboard, searching for the biggest whale, but these close groups are composed of cows under thirty-three feet; he finds no target. The bow cuts the pod in half, and the whale shapes, fleeing to the side, slide like cloud shadows beneath the sea. In moments, they rise, surging and blowing, and the ship rides down on them. The Gunner raises one hand almost casually to point; he bends to his gun again as the ship surges. A loud thump on the wind, muffled and ear-stunning—the mate runs forward along the catwalk to reload the gun.

Oddly, the shot has missed; the Gunner sits down heavily as the mate reloads. A sailor lugs a slotted red harpoon from the foredeck and with the help of the mate jams it into the muzzle. Inside the four flights of the point, the harpoon, four feet long, weighs 185 pounds. The mate sets the explosive grenade that detonates in the whale’s body three seconds after impact, and with a few turns of light lanyard secures the harpoon against sliding out of the tilted muzzle. Then the human silhouettes retire from the bow, all but the form of the seated Gunner, as black as the gun itself on the sparkling sea. Less than three minutes have elapsed, and already W-29 is circling in on another pod of whales, so close that one can see the distinct forward angle of the sperm-whale spout that issues from a hole just to the left of the center line of the head. (The Gunner says that this hole is closed when a sea washes over it and that sometimes a whale in flight will try to spout underwater.) Ploughing and blowing, the whales

leave a white wake in the blue, backs gleaming like smooth boulders of obsidian in a swift torrent; as W-29 comes down on them, they sound. One black back arches into a curve, and a huge fluke rises in slow motion from the sparkling ocean. Water cascading from its fluke, the whale slides down in silence into the sea.

At 10:15, as the ship heels into position, the whole pod broaches in one mighty burst of mist and spray. The ship rides herd on the black backs, the harpoon point still seeking a big whale. At 10:19, a series of explosions: the shot, the muffled boom in the whale's body, and the jolt of a huge spring belowdecks. The nylon harpoon line, with a breaking strength of twenty-four long tons, is reeved through chocks under the gun platform, then up over a heavy pulley under the crow's-nest, high on the mainmast, then down again to heavy winches at the aft end of the foredeck, under the superstructure; the pulley is rigged to enormous springs under the foredeck that take the main impact of the whale's first thrash.

The whole ship quakes. The dying whale has veered away to starboard, and the harpoon line shivers spray as it snaps taut; the white of the cachalot's toothed lower mandible flashes in the light as the beast rolls, and the first well of its blood spreads on the surface. With her winch, the ship is warped alongside, and the mate puts a killer harpoon—a grenade-carrier with no line attached, known to the Norwegians as the flea—into the thrashing hulk as the crewmen jump to dodge the wall of spray. Now the whale is still; only the pectorals twitch a little as the last life ebbs out of her. Already a long pole has been used to jam a hose tube into the carcass, and air is pumped in to make sure the whale will float. At the same time, the sailors rig a heavy noose around the base of the fluke, which in turn is secured to the big float of the marker buoy. With a flensing knife lashed to the end of a long pole, the mate, doubled up over the gunwale, cuts the harpoon line where it is spliced to the imbedded missiles, and the ship backs off from the buoyed whale. The harpoon gun has already been reloaded, and a new line spliced to the harpoon. Eleven minutes have passed from the moment the first iron struck the life out of the whale until the whale-catcher reverses her screws and backs away.

The inflated whale lies on her side, washed by red waves of her own blood. Already the bright stain on the bright sea is huge and thick, as if it would never wash away. The blood spurting from the wounds is a deep mammalian red, but on the surface of the sea it turns red red, as vivid as a dye, and the amount of it is awful.

By international convention, not observed by the Russians, these men say (they very much resent it that the Russians and Japanese, having copied all the Norwegian techniques, now dominate the whaling industry), a sperm whale less than thirty-five feet in length—thirty-eight feet in the Antarctic—may not be taken, although a two-foot leeway is granted in acknowledgment of the difficulties involved. A gunner's fine of thirty pounds that is levied by the government on each whale under thirty-three feet is considered part of the overhead. In whaling terminology, a small sperm whale runs from thirty-three to thirty-eight feet, a medium one from thirty-eight to forty-three, and a big whale is anything larger. This whale looked undersized to me, and I asked Willy Christensen what he thought. He grinned, jerking his head toward Haakestad, who was rolling slowly up the catwalk. "Better ask the Gunner," he said.

Before returning to the mainland, the spotter plane reported that seventy whales were in this area, and for a time there were spouts everywhere, but the other boats

were also having difficulty in locating whales of legal size, and W-29 steamed further offshore to look for big bulls that might be attending the main pod. For three hours the ship searched hard, with no success. Often, in the middle of the day, the whales seem to disappear, and it is supposed that they are hunting giant squid in the ocean depths, coming up infrequently to breathe. The wind had risen to a 25-knot blow, and spouts would be hard to see in the whitecapped water; dark shearwaters arched across the iron bows like boomerangs and, beyond, the world was empty.

Noon on the meridional seas. Blue sky, blue sea, a ray of sun reflected from the deeps like a blue meridian.

* * *

By early afternoon the six boats had harpooned but six whales between them, and since W-29 was short two men on its crew, Captain Haakestad decided to tow the six whales into port. The other boats would hunt all afternoon and if weather permitted lay to at sea until next morning.

Though the whales had been floating for several hours, two of them had drawn no sharks at all. The rest were skirted by a few oceanic white-tip sharks, tawny ochre in color: they slid in and out of the red roil and wash of whales and hull, unhurried, almost motionless. Each whale had one albatross or more, picking red gobbets from the blood pool, and one was courted by a pair of storm petrels, dancing and fluttering like black butterflies.

Below, behind, and further out, in the blue shadows, other sharks hung back at the ships' approach; there was no sign of the frenzy that in the past ten days had stripped five buoyed whales to ragged backbone. According to the spotter plane, one of the stripped whales was a large bull; its forty to forty-five tons of flesh were gone in half an hour. The Norwegians said that twenty to thirty big sharks raging at a whale carcass was not an uncommon sight, and at these times the sharks were not deterred by ships; sometimes they surged halfway out of the water, or lay on the carcass for fifteen seconds at a time, gobbling at the flesh above the surface.

The ocean off South Natal is notorious for its sharks; there are two and a half times as many shark attacks off the Durban–Port Elizabeth stretch of coast than in all the rest of the east coast of Africa, from Cape Town to the Gulf of Aden, and the offshore waters of Madagascar. On November 28, 1942, the British troopship *Nova Scotia*, carrying Italian prisoners of war, was torpedoed on a bright calm morning in these waters, and a minimum of seven hundred people died, many of them victims of a shark attack that went on for hours. The few survivors owed their lives to the U-boat captain, who surfaced, perceived his mistake, said, "I'm terribly sorry," saved two of the swimmers, and risked his own security by transmitting a radio call for help.

Each whale was detached from its buoy, then winched up by the bridle on its fluke to the port side. When the base of the tail was lashed tight to the hull by a heavy chafing gear of rope-wrapped chain run through a hawsepipe, the enormous flukes, surging above the level of the rail, were trimmed and notched by the mate's flensing knife in a way which indicated which ship had caught which whale; when he sliced the tips off the heaving flukes, the shining black wings skittered away into the sea.

The first whale was winched tight to the hawsepipe furthest aft, and the next ones

were secured one hawsepipe forward, in succession, so that whales already taken in tow would lie alongside as the boat eased along and not impede the operation. There are six hawsepipes on each side of the ship, but all whales were secured on the port side; the ship lay broadside to the wind on her starboard beam so that the work could be accomplished in the lee.

In the late afternoon, W-29 collected her last whale and headed west on the long voyage to Durban. Heeling to port, she was slowed perhaps three knots by the dragged carcasses, which writhed and twisted in the wash and sea surge as if come to life. Crashing together, their graceful flukes cropped, jaws slack, tongues and guts protruding, they looked damned, and the infernal atmosphere as twilight came was not lessened by the clank of the rough chains that sawed the hides, nor the din of the sea's rush against the carcasses, nor the rank wake of mingled blood and feces that washed out of them into the darkening blue-turquoise of the wake. During the harvest of the whales, the ship had collected the attendant albatrosses, and the giant birds wheeled up and down, wings motionless, stooping now and then to pluck a scrap, then climbing again until the wind seized them. Far astern they wheeled and fell like whitecaps blown free from the hard afternoon sea, and the pale shadows were still visible at darkness.

* * *

At supper, the Norwegians plied me with hot peppers, which on this ship are consumed with every meal; they laughed heartily at my tears. We discussed the expedition of cameramen-divers that was here in Durban to film sharks on the whaling grounds, including, if possible, the great white shark, an aggressive man-eater known locally as the blue pointer. The divers would descend in cages into the murk around the whale; the cages were light, with flotation devices to control their vertical motion, and though the water here was one mile deep, they would not be attached to the ship. The whalemens whistled. Learning that I would go down in the shark cage, they shook their heads. "Here," somebody said, shoving the pickle jar across the mess table, "better have some more hot peppers."

I lost a chess game to the Gunner and turned in. When I awoke, some time after midnight, W-29 was off the whale slipway in Durban. Under the lights, the black whales glistened in the murk, which looked thick as petroleum. I thought of the gunsmith, and of the harbor sharks following the blood trails through the night below.

Saying goodbye, Captain Haakestad said that in all his long years with the whaling company he had never bothered to pay a visit to the factory, which is only ten minutes from the slipway. Like the gunsmith, he spoke shyly, in surprise, as if vaguely troubled by his own lack of curiosity. Probably he would never go. It was said that in 1970 this shore station would close down, and he and the mate were starting a shop in the suburbs and a life of retail merchandising. He had never liked the sea, the Gunner said, and would not miss it.



in New York, in 1968, Peter Gimbel had talked about his Blue Water Films expedition, which would hunt large sea creatures at several remote locations in the Indian Ocean, including the whaling grounds off the South African coast. Since I planned to be in East Africa in any case, and had never seen a whaling operation, much less big sharks at close quarters underwater, I accepted his invitation to come along as an observer. How would his film differ from the Cousteau shark films that were currently appearing on television? “I said ‘big sharks,’” Gimbel said. “Those films are fine, but I didn’t see a shark over nine feet. The sharks we want will be dangerous to divers, and the shark we want most is the great white shark—in fact, the film is a search for the great white shark, whether we find him or not.” The great white shark, which may exceed a length of twenty feet, is much the most dangerous creature in the sea.

Since I had no real experience underwater, Gimbel suggested that I come that summer to the Bahamas, where he would be running tests on equipment and crew. There I could make a descent or two in his shark cage, and decide whether I still wished to try it in the Indian Ocean.

In late July, I joined the film crew at Hog Island, across the channel from Nassau, where a house had been rented that had a dock and even a small workshop-laboratory. I was fresh from my first two diving lessons in the Florida Keys, where neither instructor had accompanied me into the ocean, and where I had been forced to go to the aid of a fellow student whose straits were scarcely more dire than my own. My third lesson, which came from Gimbel, was more helpful than the other two put together.

After twenty years of experience, Peter Gimbel is one of the best divers in the business; it is he who obtained for *Life* the first pictures of the *Andrea Doria*, lying in 225 feet of water in the treacherous, dark North Atlantic currents off Nantucket. He is also a first-rate teacher, taking the trouble to explain the theory of diving as well as the practice of it; he knows that an extra scrap of knowledge might save your life. More important still, he dives with you and watches you and sets up such small tests and emergencies as pulling out the mouthpiece of one’s air line; these things can happen by accident underwater and may cause an inexperienced diver to panic. (It is panic, not