

The Bunk



I had seen it—my bunk—on the training day in late April 2014 at Mystic Seaport, when we visited the *Charles W. Morgan* as a group of eighty voyagers selected to join the 38th Voyage of this historic whaling ship. Built in 1841 and docked in Mystic, Conn., from 1941 until now, the *Morgan* had been extensively rebuilt for [one final cruise](#), a journey to heighten awareness of whales and the history and culture of whaling. I would be one of nine voyagers on the New Bedford-to-Buzzards-Bay run.

Starting our tour below-decks aft, we peeked into the after cabin, with its red velvet divan, the very one on which Clara Bow frolicked in [Down to the Sea in Ships](#) (1922). Then came the captain's stateroom, with its gimbaled bed. We edged around the narrow table where the officers ate, passed the mates' quarters fitted up with tidy bunks and a little wall desk, and made our way through the blubber room, tilting our heads at right angles under low beams. Our guide waved to the starboard side, where three new toilets, brightly lit, stood in a row. "Those will have stalls when the voyagers arrive." We moved forward to the fo'c'sle—all partitioned into twenty-four wooden boxes painted like the white pews in a plain New England church. "Each will have curtains, a mattress, a pillow," said our guide. "Bring a pillowcase and bedding." The bunks looked clean, simple, graceful, light. I tried to imagine sleeping in

one.

For the next ten weeks I tried to imagine sleeping in one. A bunk seemed to my literal mind the most direct route to Melville's kinesthetic experience on board ship. Not that he writes much about bunks—more, in fact, about hammocks. But something about those neat tidy boxes impressed on me forcefully what he must have felt for the hours he spent resting. Those bunks looked hard.

It was not at all the physical discomfort I minded, or that I imagine the young and agile Melville minded. It was sleeping in such intimate quarters with twenty-three strangers. How did Melville find the private time he craved? How would we, the voyagers, find quiet moments for reflection on this remarkable voyage? How would we behave among strangers?

But when I arrived on July 7, it was impossible to tell where the strangers were. Each bunk was enclosed with a calico curtain on a string. Crewmembers had stowed their gear underneath, and voyagers tossed theirs onto the thin brown mattresses. I hastily selected one by the doorway, near the fan. The bottom bunk would be the easiest to slip out of at night. No chance of planting a foot in some unsuspecting sleeper's face in the dark. The pillow fitted snugly into its case, my bag lodged neatly under the bunk, and I ran up on deck for the orientation meeting.

My strategy was simple. Whereas other voyagers stayed up into the night, talking, getting to know one another, photographing the ship in the lights from the New Bedford pier, absorbing the experience in wonder, I sought solitude and expedited bedtime. At nine o'clock the fo'c'sle looked empty. Grabbing toothbrush and washcloth, I tilted my head as I traversed the blubber room, changed into T-shirt and gym shorts inside a stall, washed in the tiny sink, and slunk back to my bunk. I had my necessary items at the ready: cellphone (for a clock), glasses, flashlight, water bottle, clothes for the morning in a small pile, toiletries, writing equipment. Wake-up call at 5:45: I would be up before then and gone, looking for a quiet spot on deck where I could somehow commune with Melville's spirit.

But how to sleep in this odd wooden box?

The first thing was to arrange myself horizontally like a cheese slice in a tea sandwich. The bunk was long enough, but I could not sit up. One side opened to the fan and blubber-room door. On the other I sensed the presence of a bunk behind the curtain. Boards loomed directly above my head. At my pillow: the end of another bunk. Someone in that bunk had already gone to bed, and as soon as my head slid onto the pillow, that person began snoring. Snoring. Snoring some more. Snoring directly into my ear and the inner chambers of my head.

I could not lower the volume. I could not switch to another channel. I could not turn on a light and read until I got sleepy. No wee dram. Nor could I nudge this person and hope that he or she might slip into quieter sleep. My only recourse was to turn around so that my feet would be at this person's head, my

head just a few feet farther from the noise.

But in the dark and confusion, I could not figure out how to turn my body around. I could not sit up, had to switch legs that suddenly seemed way too long and shift a torso that could not bend and straighten itself properly. In the end, nothing worked except to get out of the bunk, move the pillow, and lie down again, with cellphone, glasses, flashlight, bag of toiletries in a pile near my head. Success.

The snoring went on, voyagers came to bed, and I lay awake for hours. I remembered in *Moby-Dick* Ishmael's comic efforts to soften his first bed at the Spouter Inn, a haphazard arrangement of boards, by planing down the knots. I thought of Melville coming in from a night watch, and I willed my breathing to slow and deepen, my body to relax, my mind to quiet. I slept.

At 2:30, I woke up and saw the time on my cellphone screen. My brain was clear as day, and I got up, remembering to tip my head as I walked through the blubber room and went to one of the stalls. Then I clambered up on deck.

It was beautiful. The wooden planks felt warm and worn under my bare feet. I smelled the hemp and tar. There were the masts, colored ivory as bone, the sails furled, white as the flax and Egyptian cotton of which they were made. There were the lights from the pier, making bright pools and deep shadows on a stage ready and waiting for actors to appear. And there in the rigging was a full moon, looking like a ghostly galleon on a blackened sea. All was quiet. For a moment, I had the ship to myself. This was what Melville had enjoyed at the masthead: "such an opium-like listlessness of vacant, unconscious reverie." Melville went aloft for his reveries. I had mine amidships at the mainmast, looking up into the sky at the same moon he had watched on many a night.

Back to the bunk. Would I be able to sleep? Would I hear the morning call? Would I find my clothes? Would I ... ? Sleep descended.

Next I heard a pair of legs floating through the air near my head and softly landing on the boards in the dark. A pair of pants glided over them, and a fly zipped. Another pair of legs descended. In less than a whisper, brief words passed between two heads, and then a few, maybe four shadows slipped past me, out the door, up the ladder. It was five o'clock. I grabbed my clothes and toiletries, changed in the stall, brushed my teeth in the tiny sink, returned articles to my bunk, grabbed my writing equipment, and went up on deck, where crewmembers were drinking coffee, talking, getting ready for work. Great, I thought. Now I can write. Bring on the reveries.

I had a wonderful day on the *Charles W. Morgan*. I watched as the crew received their orders, pulled on lines, leapt into the rigging, set or furled the sails, and sent the ship winging on her course. I stood at the helm, hauled lines myself, filmed sailors at their tasks, talked with voyagers and visitors, read aloud from Melville's poems, studied sea and sky, stared for hours into the rigging, learned about winds, currents, knots, salinity, plankton. I ate

hungrily whenever offered food.

I also tried to think: What would Melville do? What was it like for him? I examined the try pots, the very ones used in 1841, and thought of how Melville describes them being scoured clean after the blubber got rendered into oil. Stealthily I fingered the tarred ropes heaped on the deck, the smooth wood of the mast, the warm sandy bricks of the ovens in which the try pots are set. Melville felt these things, I thought. Melville remembered these details because they were engraved on his skin. Melville encountered the winds and tides, opened his shirt to the sun, stretched his legs as he sprang into the rigging. Melville could have been here.

But that idea did not, in the end, seem very important. And no writing happened on my *Morgan* journey. No bright ideas or profound reflections on whaling history came to me. The day was a blur of smells, sights, lights, and sounds, and all I could think was that I was missing most of it. What had happened to my mind, that machine that automatically takes notes, looks things up, makes connections, hears quotations, *thinks*? It seemed to have been left behind in the bunk with the iPad I never got to use, the Gore-Tex rain gear that never made it out of the bag, the silk sleeping-bag liner that in the end was too confining to wear. When the day was over I was not even sure what I had seen.

Nothing settled as firmly in my mind as the experience of lying awake half the night thinking about sleep in a wooden box. Nothing seemed as palpable, as full of meaning, as hearing the sailors wake from a mysterious signal seemingly transmitted like a hum through their bodies, through the wood. Out of that dream-world, that place of darkness enclosed in the walls of my tiny bunk, came a profound sense of what it must have been like to sail on a whaling ship in 1841. Nothing above, below, and on all sides but the boards of a sturdy ship. Its wood held me, and I stopped thinking. Maybe Melville did too.

This article originally appeared in issue 15.1 (Fall, 2014).

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