

# Melville

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You cannot loiter long in this downtown library branch  
without being asked what you're looking for. I said  
I always wanted to read *The Lives of the Squids*.  
The librarian mentioned that there were three volumes.  
She looked me over like I was an olive  
in a root beer glass. I'd rather do origami

than read about the construction  
of innocence in the nineteenth century.  
I'm not a formalist, but I can read inscriptions  
on a crypt as well as the next guy. I'm tired of living  
on salt pork and whale fat: Bored with looking  
into the dead mouths of coelacanths .  
She looked at me as if I had taken something  
unspeakable out of my pocket.

She said she could look up *mollusks*  
on her computer. *Cephalopods* I corrected.  
That's when she explained that there was a prejudice  
in this district, dependent as it was on the bovine economy.  
Excuse me, I said. I said the truth was I had recently fractured  
my knee, which caused me to speak on several topics  
at once. What was I saying just now?

She looked so sweet then, so terribly thin.  
I barely stifled an impulse I suddenly had to touch her ear.  
I'm sorry, I said, but I had lost my thought. As she tilted  
forward I could see her forehead's waxy gleam,  
her pasty, white neck, the light slipping down  
the modest slope of a breast. Oh, I was lost.

By the time I came to my senses I realized  
I was standing beside a whirlpool . There was no way I could  
go back to what I had been doing, parsing sentences.  
Doing piecework. I had to shape up.  
I had been drowning in pages of water.

Living in a group home. Surely I knew that the truth  
slanted . What sad harpoon had I lashed myself to?

On what bone had I been gnawing?  
I had consented to the doctrine of filth only  
because what else could one do. How could I have  
not seen the taxi cabs idling, their signs turned off?  
It was time to go by then. The air  
was being shut off a little at a time.  
There was a lance in my side. She was saying  
something. She was telling me a fable  
about obedience she thought was important for me to know.

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