

The metaphor that life is a sea voyage is ancient and widespread in human thought. It anchors human life on dry land and sets it at special risk on the sea, marking possibilities and impossibilities for transgression and triumph, opportunities for failure and transcendence — in exploration, commerce, escape from the ordinary and oppression, triumph over natural boundaries and cultural circumscriptions, and extensions of the twin powers of naming and knowing, of making sense of the traversable world. Shipwreck looms in this domain as a dangerous disturbance of prospects, a reminder of human frailty. It is death or dismemberment that lurches from what is ultimately an unfathomable source — a personified sea that alternately seduces with beauty and bounty then steals human life in a moment of inscrutable and, if not unimaginable, at least underestimated force. It crushes the vehicle of engagement on a wet and trackless path, reduces it to debris, and in some unknown rhythm expels its remnants to the land. The passenger who survives such a passage from terrifyingly wet to safely dry is necessarily transformed, internally and in the eyes of society, and becomes an anomaly of sorts, something to be explained, another dimension of challenge to be named and known for future reference. Shipwreck is a sign that the inherent power of the sea cannot ever be mastered by mortals and may be offended by those who try. But punishment for self-assertion is the very stuff that in its antithesis makes heroes out of survivors and gives rise to cultural braggadocio about vision, courage, and persistence in the turbulence of human existence. This would seem to be especially true among those who extract a living from fickle or unstable environments. Harvesting the sea has heroic dimensions in every culture touched by it. The variable circumstances of fishing, hunting, or scrounging for natural resources in other ways on the open sea can help us or kill us or reduce us to struggling supplicants and let us live to tell the story. The story offered here has no heroic survivors, only voyeurs after the fact, shortly thereafter and in the long run, who see themselves in the spoilage and skeletal remains of a dangerous world — spectators who understand implicitly the message and the mythics of the wreckage on the beach and the triggering dangers of whaling and who try to use that information to decode both the larger enigmas and the pressing realities of the moment. In its metonymic particulars, this is a cautionary tale wrapped in the history of signs of the sea. It becomes a whale story in every sense of the term.

*Somewhere off the southern coast of Viti Levu, Fiji*

## SHIPWRECK

“Sail me not in this place, ye ill fortunate wind,  
In this ship of the damned, ye whalers of fate.”

*[January 19, 1889]*

Squall line turned funnel cloud, dark and heavy on the horizon, gaining strength, fixing on its target of fear, arriving with supernatural speed on an ear splitting blast of sparking air and a cyclopiian wall of frothing water, stinging the crew, mastering the captain, as the vessel is picked up, spun high, twisted and slammed, smashed, bowsprit down, across the shoal, foundering for an instant in the deathgrip of demons and thunderous breakers, then capsizing completely in a pounding rage of screams, pleadings, concussions, shredding canvas, snapping masts, splintering decks, and water, water holding, water curling, then whorling and sucking, lifting timbers and terror in a whip of blinding wind and rain, raking agony across ridges, barnacles, and daggers of coral in a chaos of crosschop, a wave from the left, then another, a right higher than the last, furious fists of foam and stone, pummeling, splattering blood and surf, sinking and dragging the wreckage inland, further with every push and shove, every desperate stretch for shore, every grasp for the antithesis of wet, for dry sanctuary, turned ironically this day into sunlit coffin for the cold remains of the maelstrom, this hellish foul wind, horror from the unfiery deep.

[February 21, 1889]

Dust motes swirling in the geometry of sunbeams, piercing the dank shell of the hull, like glintings in the cracks of a passing storm, framed by the rotting planks of a badly gouged name, *Whalerider*, just above a big hole in the side, chest high, a fathom deep and wide. Crawl through it. Ropes and rain diced with sea water in the ribs — air brimming with the uncanny stench of rats and rot, straw, hogs and chickens, whale mold, smothering heat, stove oil, charcoal, rust, fear, and death.

Inner timbers split and warped, scrimshawed with the finger scrapes of desperation and confusion — the harried need to hold on to something, and to escape. Flotsam everywhere — ship's papers, a cup, rotting cloth and hammocks, shelving, a parrot cage. Ship's dog, harpooned on a nail high in the hull, now a maggoty slip of bone, hair, and flies. Hardwood transom split in half. Hatches cracked or missing. Masts torn loose, half-out of the surf, pointing the way in an unfinished crawl to land.

[January 19, 1989]

Sunny. Hint of breeze. Low sea, green and white winks wrinkling into mild surf, spreading bubbly fingers up the loins of the beach, salting the sea grass, sanding the sand crabs, teasing the dry line, retreating and repeating. Birds muffled into distant peeps. Peaceful day. Pacific. But the splintered wreck on the rim shows how deceptive this sea name can be.

There are ways to ply her, to seek her counsel and mercy. But beware the captain who finds her placid, or the blaspheming vessel that curses her moods. Even the breathless latitudes of the horse get coarse when ridden the wrong way. Inked by the greedy marriage of foul casts at seabound creatures and too many wishes for faster wind, Neptune's fateful daughter can scuttle your ship, conjure a different ride, run you hard on a ghostly tide — eerie steerage headlong into stabbing reefs and lost beaches by a power hell-bent for rest on a rockway where the sea does not span. Infuriated by the whalers' ill harvests on a flesh driven vessel named for its beastly zeal, it was that self-same placid dame who peeled away their sea, who showed them how many ways a whaling life can mean.

Named wrong by a port with no pride, *Whalerider* made the wrong wishes, ringed the wrong fishes, sought the wrong oil, reached the wrong shore, at the wrong time, with the wrong heart — an emblem of evil entombed in a wreck, and, with another wave of irony, also of hope sprung eternal in King Neptune's court, a tribute to salt justice, a snippet of sea history signed by crossed whalebones, crooked seaward in the sand, leaning, yearning, remembering — she's a whalesong sung on stormy nights, and to newborn calves on their first sunny days.