

## The Witness

An erasure of “The Whiteness of the Whale” Chapter 42 of Melville’s *Moby-Dick, or The Whale*

### 1.

What I was has been hinted  
What I am remains unsaid,  
(aside from the more obvious)

Consider touching another thought  
—completely, well, nigh ineffable—  
a most incomprehensible form

I hope to explain myself (explain *my* self)  
I witness beauty and recognize preeminence

I am heir to the human race itself,  
I am made the emblem  
the bride, witness, and tribute  
the higher mysteries incarnate

the sacrifice  
the spotless envoy with tidings of the name  
the ploy  
the celebration  
the innermost idea  
divorced from kindly associations and coupled  
the transcendent witness  
the fierce-fanged shroud

### 2.

I may possibly go still deeper into this matter:

It is not the witness which heightens that heightened  
hideousness; it might be that the ferocious innocence  
in our minds frightens us with a contrast.

Were it not for the witness, you would have intensified  
error.

3.

The white, white gliding ghostliness  
beheld in ordinary moods  
is peculiar, is most vividly  
the dead in eternal rest

Ruminating any other music,  
no—the silent stillness of death—in this call

Think thee the clouds wonderment  
and pale phantoms all imaginations?

4.

I remember  
I saw  
I ascended  
I saw  
it arch forth its vast archangel throbbing

I peeped  
I bowed  
the thing was so, so wide  
I had memories

I gazed  
o, the things that darted through me then

I awoke, and turning,  
asked  
He replied, Go! Hear that name;  
it is utterly unknown

I earned that name  
those mystical impressions  
were mine

I saw the wondrous  
bodily secret of a truth

I beheld

But I doubt.

5.

Our tradition is that of the magnificent monarch in his lofty pastures. In those days only the head chose which light could furnish that fallen world. The old walked amid endless plains, his circumambient subjects. In whatever aspect he presented himself, always he was the object of trembling reverence and awe.

Can I question, me his witness, so clothed with the same nameless terror?

6.

But there are instances where this witness loses that strange glory

they loath that witness  
impressed by the name

—this respect hides an uglier aspect  
but not the force of the aspect  
dominated  
omitted  
wild  
desperate

7.

If I fail to bear witness  
of the dead pallor lingering there  
that pallor of the other world  
that pallor of the expressive shroud  
then I fail my mantle  
and the king of...whatever  
grand or gracious thing  
he idealizes.

But dissent is impossible.

Can the witness wholly strip  
all association? Can we hope  
to hide?

Let us try.

**8.**

Let us try in a manner like this:

I follow another into the hall  
I present my shame to them  
I call them now tutor  
I lose the peculiar character  
I marshal in the long dreary speeches  
I unread history  
I fake an eyeless soul

**9.**

Apart from the traditions of dungeons and kings  
(which will not wholly account for my storied soul), the  
bare mention of that name—his name, a spectral  
fancy—lulls mortals to the old fairy forests, whose  
changeless pallor glides through the green of the  
groves.

This phantom,

more terrible than all the remembrances of  
spires and crosses lying upon each other, as  
tossed as a pack of cards,

is the strangest veil.

And here is a higher horror in his witness:

This witness ruins greenness, spreads pallor,  
fixes sown distortions

**10.**

I know this:

No witness confessed in terror.  
The mind insists on muteness.

What I mean may elucidate the following:

First: When drawing nigh the foreign roar, vigilance and  
just enough trepidation let me feel silent, shrouded  
in water—blue water—the fear hidden.

Second: Except, perhaps, in the eternal vastness, solitude  
lies in speaking solace.

11.

Witness, tell me why. Why is it you shake  
behind him? He cannot even see. Why  
start, snort, and burst in frenzies? There  
is no remembrance in him of his strangeness. He  
cannot recall anything. What knows he, the black  
distant dumb brute? To him the world is still  
deserted prairie dust.

12.

The mountains where the nameless things sign must exist.

That world seems formed, but not yet witnessed.  
It appeals with such power, far more than the most meaning things,  
the things most appalling to mankind.

13.

I define shadows, voids, and immensities  
as the thought of beholding  
Depth is an essence;  
witness, so much absence  
Time is a wide landscape from which we  
consider that other state

All these are subtle substances,  
only that deified absolute produces himself

I am touch  
lips  
eyes, blind

He, the shroud that wraps around me