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Melville

Alan Soldofsky

San Jose State University, alan.soldofsky@sjsu.edu

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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.