

On Making “The Spouter-Inn: The Patchwork Quilt”

There was neither impulse nor plan to construct this interior. It self-assembled without any effort on my part. Melville himself suggested most of the components and insisted on the composition.

The container, a thick-sided cube with a hinged door, appeared on the street one day amid a mound of trash, one of its sides staved in like a boat stoved by a whale, perfect for a room at the Spouter-Inn. I removed the staved-in side, glued the door shut so the front became the back. To disrupt the static square, I added an angled wall at the left. Then I painted the outside a neutral color, and the inside a weathered gray, but left the surrounding edge unpainted to preserve its imperfections.

I always begin by creating a crucial detail and composing a scene around it. For the exterior of the Spouter-Inn, it was Peter Coffin’s creaking sign. For this interior, it was the clam-cold fireplace. I deconstructed an antique handmade dollhouse bed, the color of scrimshaw-ivory and used the carved sides to support a scrap-wood mantle. The headboard became the fireboard, which I laminated with a man striking a whale, as Melville describes. (That scene and another, framed above the bed, came from an old banknote auction catalog.)

Next, the bed, which is described as large enough to sleep four harpooners. To scale, a bed that size would never fit in the room, but I suggest capaciousness by including four pillows. The counterpane, a gift from some miniaturist artisan long ago, was just the thing for turning flukes. At the head of the bed stands Queequeg’s harpoon, made from a bit of cannibalized (naturally) “Pirates of the Caribbean” merchandise.

The seaman’s trunk in the middle of the room is the washstand table. The pitcher is half full of water (clarified Elmer’s glue). There’s the landlord’s candle, and Queequeg’s poncho. That strange garment reminds Ishmael of a doormat before he tries it on (in front of a “bit of glass stuck against the wall”). It fascinates and repulses him just as Queequeg will, imminently. On the floor are the cannibal’s bag (a sachet with pinhead grommets) and a rolled-up hammock (aptly, a net for steaming seafood). A “parcel of outlandish bone fish hooks” rests on the “rude shelf” over the fireplace.

Ishmael says, “besides the bedstead and centre table, [I] could see no other furniture belonging to the place”; however, some pages later a chair appears—perhaps a glitch in continuity, but a necessary prop for Queequeg to throw his coat on. I added the chair belatedly (as perhaps Herman did). It is not glued in and can be moved around. (Moving an element changes the energy of a space.)

A few components in the diorama do not appear in the novel: a teensy portrait of Melville framed in a refrigerator magnet; a teensy volume of *Moby-Dick*; a teensy univalve I found in 1960 in Sarasota. The wallpaper above the door comes from a magazine ad. The wallpaper on the right is standard dollhouse issue, but spotted and besotted with Starbucks (of course) coffee.

At first I was going to insert a window in the right-hand wall. Ishmael, alarmed by Queequeg “staving about with little else but his hat and boots on,” refers to “the house opposite” which “commanded a plain view into the room.” In the end, I decided to imply the peering-in vantage, stage front, via the invisible fourth wall. The window after all is Melville’s remarkable visual descriptiveness, which allows readers to become voyeurs to the bottom of the sea. (Sorry!)