

ADRIENNE MOMI

Amore Dolce I, 2015
Gilded monoprint on washi, 18 x 24 in



COURTESY: THE ARTIST

NORIA JABLONSKI

Fragile

On the nights he did read to me, it was by the light of a gooseneck lamp he had salvaged from a trash heap. On the base of the lamp someone had written in Sharpie: “I ♥ my lamp.”

A pregnant blue whale, hit by a ship, washed up on a beach not far from us. We were now two-thirds of the way through the book, and the white whale had not yet made an appearance.

For my birthday we went out for sushi. We ate squid, a staple of the diet of sperm whales. He gave me a lamp. The shade was a propane tank shot full of bullet holes. “I heart my lamp,” I said. He also made me a card that said FRAGILE in red letters surrounded by lightning bolts. “You understand me,” I said, teary-eyed from the wasabi. “You understand that I am fragile.”

“Oh, it’s not about you,” he said. “It’s a comment on the nature of relationships. But it’s your card, so you can interpret it however you want.”

He didn’t read to me that night. He was far away, on the other side of the bed. I wondered if we would ever finish the book. I wondered if finishing the book meant that we also would be finished.

There were fewer and fewer pages left. Some nights when he asked if I wanted a story, I said no. I didn’t want it to end.

In Chapter 133, *Moby-Dick* is spotted, and the chase begins. The pleasure of being read to made me drowsy. I fought to stay awake while he read the last three chapters.

In the end, the boat splinters, the whale wins.

Noria Jablonski is the author of the story collection *Human Oddities* (Counterpoint, 2005). Her stories have appeared in *Five Chapters*, *Swink*, *Monkeybicycle*, *KGB Bar Lit*, and the anthology *Who Can Save Us Now?: Brand-New Superheroes and Their Amazing (Short) Stories*. She teaches at the University of California, Santa Cruz and was a 2007 Artist in Residence at Headlands Center for the Arts. She is a resident at the Tannery Arts Center in Santa Cruz.

One night before bed, he said, “I want to read you a little story.” And then he began: “Call me Ishmael.”

Every night for the next couple months, he read me a chapter of *Moby-Dick*. His copy had been accidentally dunked in a bucket of water. The dried book was swollen, its pages wavy and stiff.

In Chapter 10, Ishmael and tattoo-covered Queequeg share puffs from a tomahawk pipe. Then they touch foreheads, and Queequeg declares that they are married. They lie in bed together, bosom friends. When we lay in bed while he read to me, he would often press his hand against my breast.

For his birthday I commissioned a cake shaped like an open book. A white whale leapt from the frosted pages. The cake was red velvet inside, and the whale was made of crisped-rice cereal and marshmallow. Instead of candles, the party guests held lit sparklers, one for each year of his life, one sparkling from the whale’s spout. When the sparklers all burned out, he harpooned the whale with a kitchen knife.

Sometimes he didn’t come to bed until dawn. Days went by, sometimes weeks, without him reading to me. The phone would ring at 3 A.M., and he’d tell me not to worry, he was eating a fish sandwich at the twenty-four-hour diner. “Tomorrow night,” he’d say, “I’ll read you a story.”