

Too Many Adjectives

Sever, Gas and Electric by Matt Ruff

On the morning that Joan Fine first made the acquaintance of Meisterbrau, the *Yabba-Dabba-Doo* took up station in the waters off Montauk Point. Leaving his first mate in the control room to watch for potential targets, Philo Dufresne retired to his quarters to write for an hour. In addition to being an internationally acclaimed eco-pirate, Philo was a closet novelist, and for the past ten years he had worked off and on to complete the Great Atlantean Novel, an epic of anthropomorphized whales, porpoises, and fish. The working title was *No Opposable Thumbs*, and like Philo himself the book had its moments of sheer brilliance.

It would never be published.

Try as he might, Philo had not been able to correct the fatal flaw in his writing style, which a single sentence would serve to illustrate: *Baruga churned up thirty-foot-high, prismatic sprays of salty brine with his gargantuan, all-powerful, spadelike flukes as the deadly explosive-tipped harpoon penetrated his warm, fleshy blubber and went off, flinging hot, cruelly sharp shrapnel into his great life-pumping heart.*

Too many adjectives. Or as a smart text-editing program had once told him: "Not every noun requires a modifier." While Philo agreed with this in principle, every attempt he made to write leaner prose ended up looking naked to him, unfinished. Causing him still further distress was the nagging sense that this inability to leave well enough alone ran directly counter to his environmentalist ethics. Unable to reform his composition and unwilling to give it up, he committed his novel like a secret memoir to the pages of a diary and kept it locked in a safe.

As he wrote that morning (using a refillable ballpoint pen, his low-tech response to the trauma of word processing), he could hear the skitter of tiny rodent feet above and around him. The decks of the submarine were riddled with a network of shatterproof plastic tunnels, warren to several hundred or so blue hamsters, an exotic breed that would have sold for ninety-five dollars or more apiece in the New York Pets-R-U's. Philo didn't keep them for their resale value; he just liked the way they looked, liked especially the life and energy they radiated as they scampered from one end of the sub to the other. With ten bobcat cubs also in residence, the *Yabba-Dabba-Doo* was a truly kinetic vessel.