



Terike Haapoja
*Foreign Beasts and Other Rarities –
Multispecies Histories of Dutch Colonialism*



This text is the script for an audio tour as part of the exhibition State of Wander – Towards Environmental Restoration at Paleis Het Loo, Apeldoorn, 2026. The audio tour is available on the Paleis Het Loo app and on location. Curator: Anna Bitkina. Sound design: Genesis Victoria. Graphic design: Mia Kivinen. Images: Iconographia Zoologica, University of Amsterdam.

Entrance

It's the year 1687, and we are in the heart of a storm.

It's Sunday, the palace is quiet. In the distance, the clicking of steps from a servant on the stone floor. Outside, the clapping of hoofs from a horse in the courtyard.

Paleis Het Loo is a haven, a place of quiet for the royals, far from the tumult and chatter of the city. But outside the palace, there is a storm. Like a global hurricane it tears people, plants and animals from their roots and throws them around like seeds. The palace is a portal: every item is connected to distant places and far away struggles.

It's 1687. Outside the palace, forests are felled, cities are built, new lands are conquered. Everything is on the move. Fleets of ships sail from Fort Elmina to the Cape of Good Hope, from Batavia to Ceylon; from the Ivory Coast to Curacao; from Amsterdam to Spitsbergen. Goods of all kinds are sold on the expanding markets. The labor of hundreds of thousands of enslaved humans is turned into profit in the hands of the merchants who see little difference between the sugar cane and the hand that cuts it, between the elephant tusk and the back that carries it. All God's creations go into the hold as sacred life and come out as commodities.

This is the miracle of trade.

But it turns out that life itself is uncontainable. Everything has a will of its own. Even the smallest of creatures play a part in the unfolding of history. Behind the human story of conquer and liberation there is another story: that of the elephant and the shipworm, the shark and the tiger, the whale and the bird of paradise, each of them an equally important protagonist in the building of our world.

What follows is a journey through these untold histories.

1. Hunting

Outside the palace, the forest is a home for creatures of all kinds. Deer and wild boars live here, alongside wolves, badgers and doves. Hunting them is a sport, and a practice for hunting big game in the colonies. In Dutch Ceylon, it's possible to hunt the most magnificent creatures.

Grazing on the grasslands and lush rainforests, elephant mothers and calves move together as a closely knit group. The clans rely on a matriarch to carry on intergenerational knowledge. The earth resonates with their low, infrasonic growls. The young are taught well, and loved-ones are grieved deeply.

For the Dutch, who have conquered the vast island from the Portuguese, elephants are a lucrative item of revenue. They are a much needed labor force for building forts and pulling logs across the West Indies, and valued gifts for diplomatic purposes.

The Dutch develop the ancient tradition of hunting elephants into an industrial practice. By the means of the Kraal, whole herds can be trapped at the same time. The process is elaborate.

After detecting the herd, hunters approach at a distance from all sides. Drumming and gunshots drive the herd away from the threat, and into a large triangular enclosure. Once inside, already disciplined elephants - kumkies - are brought in. Kumkies restrain their newly captured kin with their bodies, while their handlers, mahouts, tie a noose around their legs. Kumkies then force the captives into smaller enclosures, where their will and their hope for freedom is broken by beating, starvation and restraints.

In the late 1670's, seventy percent of the Dutch East India Company's total income at Ceylon comes from the sales of elephants. The income would be much higher, had not so many of them died at the stable during their period of taming. By the first half of the 18th century, one hundred elephants are sold annually.





2. Ivory

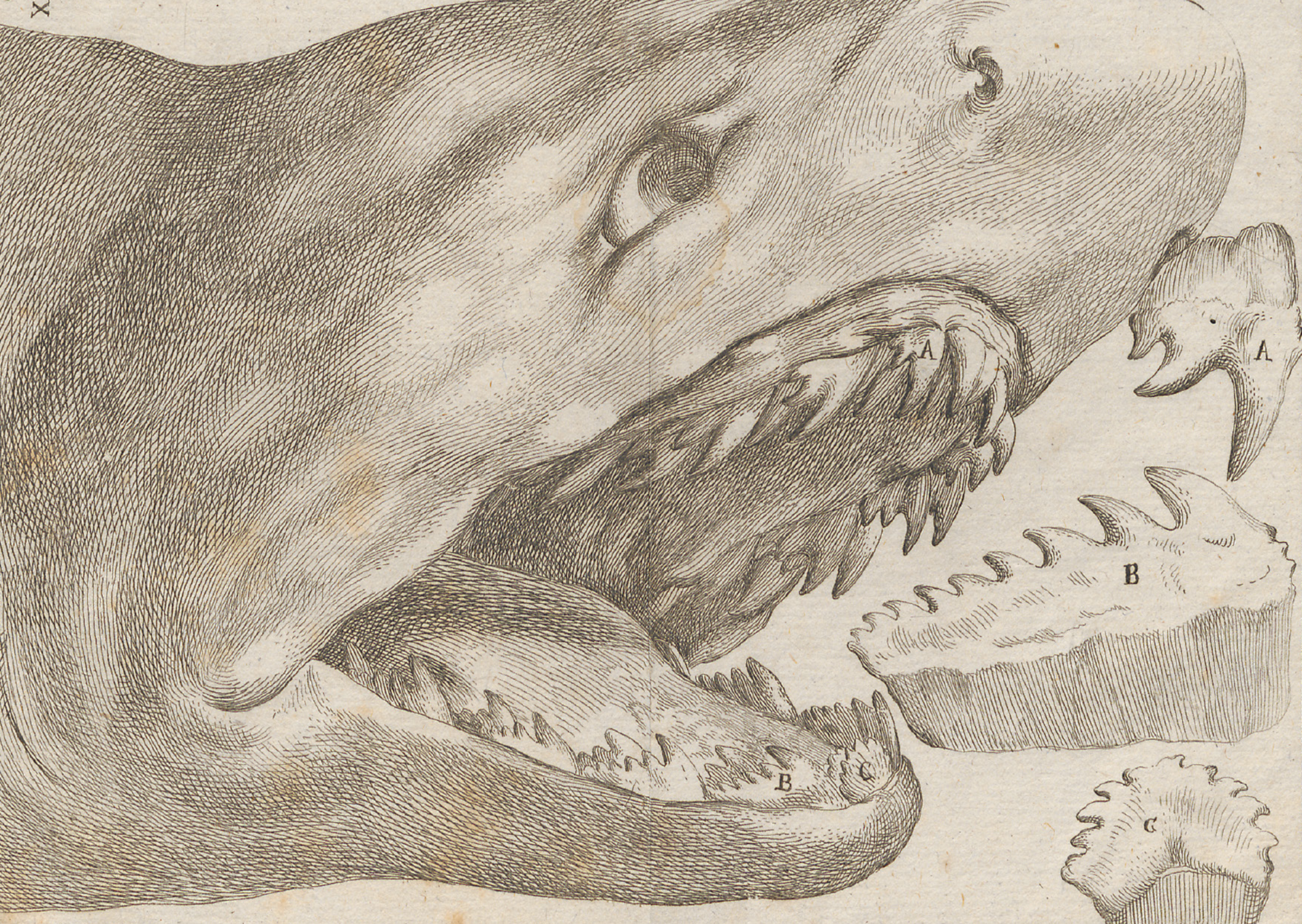
While live elephants build infrastructure in the colonies, ivory becomes a luxurious commodity for global elites. Its malleability makes it a desired material for production, while its colour is associated with social class and whiteness. Intergenerational, matrilineal traditions are rendered into cutlery handles, billiard balls, piano keys, buttons and jewelry.

The trade networks of ivory and slavery are inseparable. Slave ships carry ivory between continents, using it as currency to exchange for enslaved people, and to fund the enterprise. When the hunted elephants escape deeper inlands from the West and South African coastlines, more people are captured to carry the tusks back to the harbour.

These are the laws of value accumulation. The flows of capital require the flow of life to be harnessed, tamed and redirected. Isolation, naval alienation, social death and learned helplessness aim to break the will of the captive without killing its productive force of life. Only then can it be put to work. Cages, chains and enclosures tie bodies of all kinds to the enterprise. This is a destiny worse than death.

For the human captives, the ocean becomes a horizon of escape. Choosing death in the abyss is a final declaration of free will, and an insult to the power of the slaver. To prevent this, he recruits the shark.





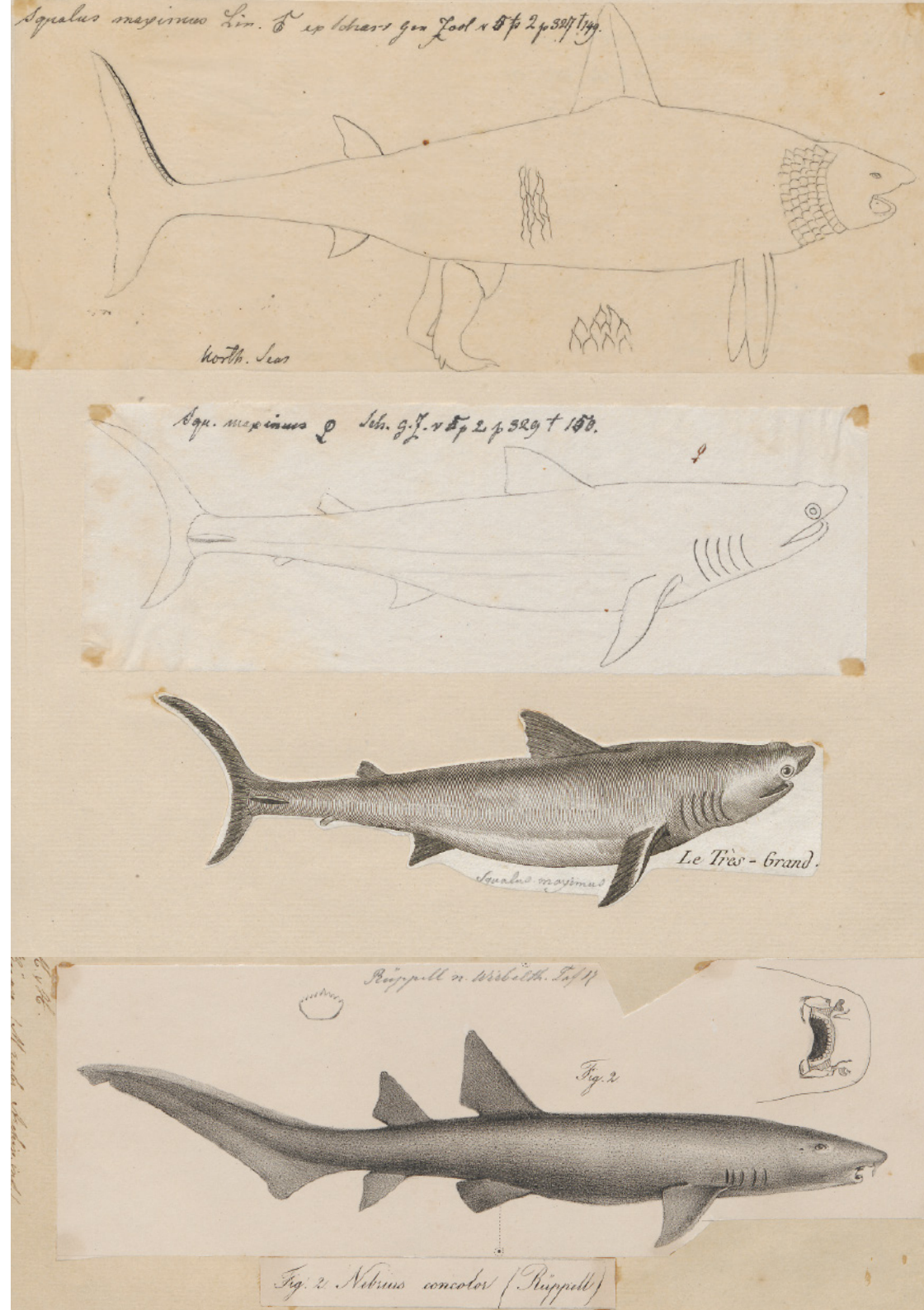
3. Shark

The slave ship is a floating factory for producing racial supremacy that can be turned into labor power, that can be turned into capital in the harbours of the Caribbean. The mission relies on the will of the captives to survive in the un-livable conditions of the hold. Often, their will to escape is stronger.

Circling around the ship, awaiting for a meal, the shark is turned into an instrument of terror. The technology of the shark ensures that no one leaves the slave ship, not to escape, nor to join the ancestors. For anyone who tries is torn to pieces before laying to rest deep down on the ocean floor. The guard dogs of the sea are fed food scraps and human remains. Executing capital punishment is the new occupation of these ancient predators. Shivers of sharks follow vessels across the Atlantic, sending trembles of fear throughout all continents, soon becoming both a tool for human trafficking, and a symbol for its brutality.

It is estimated that nearly two million human bodies are devoured by sharks during the four centuries of the Middle Passage.

For the sharks, the ship is a floating reef with endless food supply. Small fish, too, seek shelter under its belly. But as human trafficking across the oceans reaches its end, sharks are no longer needed, and lose their status as allies in racial supremacy. Floating reefs are replaced by trawling operations that empty the oceans of edible fish. Populations plunge, whole communities disappear. It is the sharks that now face capital punishment as a daily threat, with one hundred million of them killed annually by our times. The bull shark and the feared tiger shark all turn into ghosts in the wake of the slave ship.

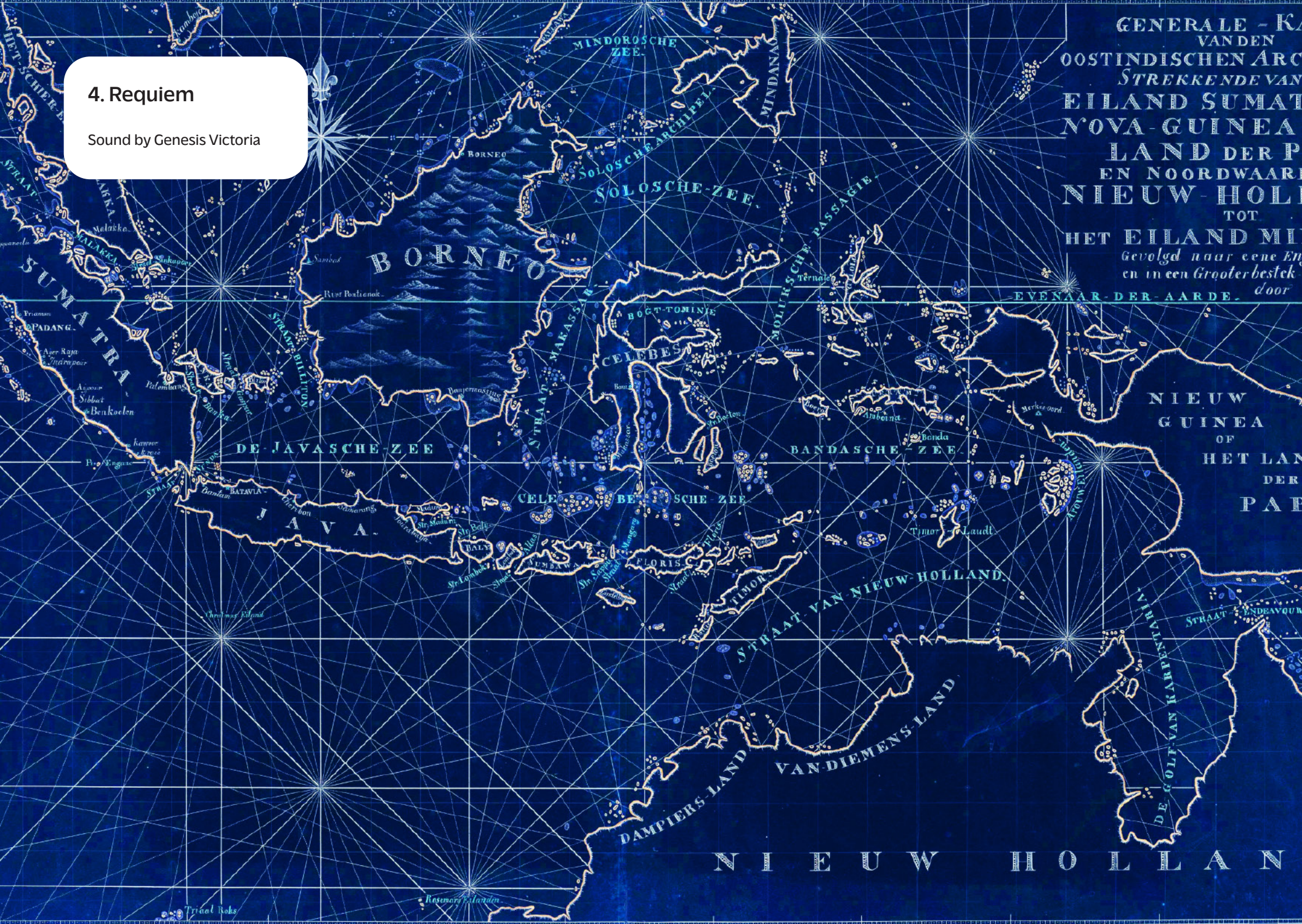


4. Requiem

Sound by Genesis Victoria

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Sound by Genesis Victoria



5.1687

It's 1687. In the quiet corridors of the palace, distant tragedies remain distant, appearing merely as tales, written in letters from far away. Here, life is supported, carried, served the best fruits, and offered the most beautiful music. There is safety and space to think, to love, to desire and to learn. Everything in the palace and in its proximity exists to support the lives of its inhabitants.



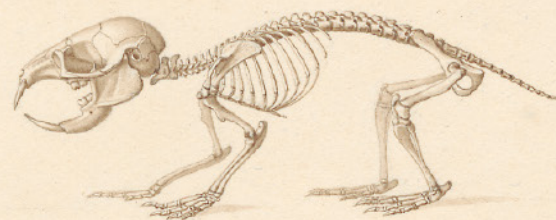
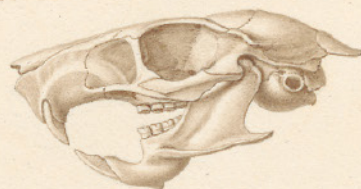
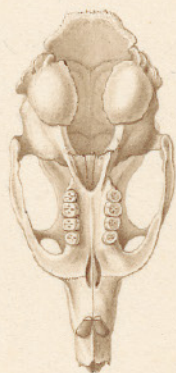
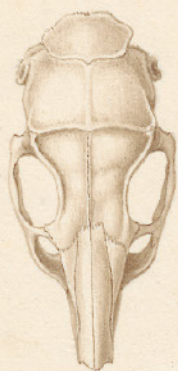
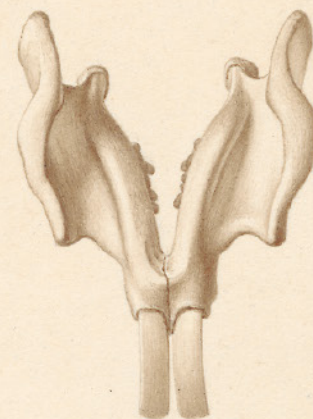
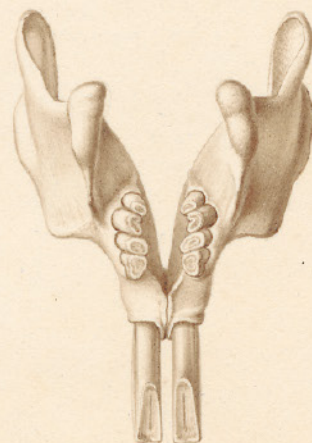
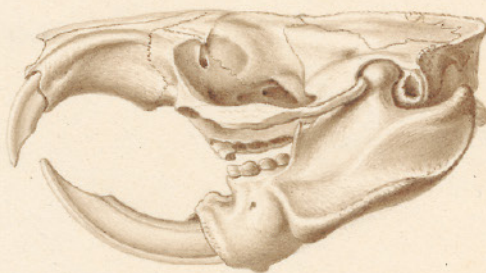
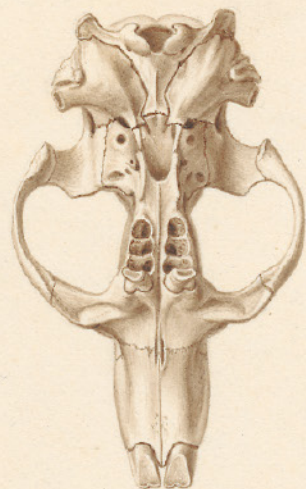
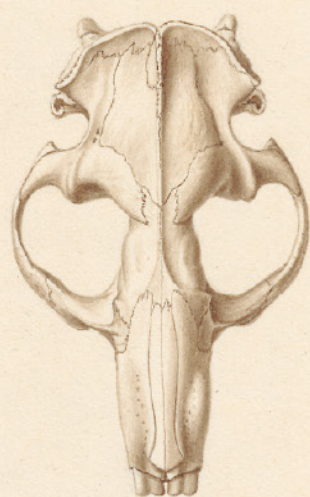
6. Pests

The quest to conquer is guided by a belief that knowledge is power. Specimens are exhibited, theories debated. Organising the tree of life becomes a civilisational task. The unruly nature in its totality needs to be tamed.

But life itself does not submit to colonial logic. Creatures have their own agenda. Book worms destroy knowledge carefully gathered. Colonies of rats dominate human colonies: raiding trade posts and eating their way into barrels and bags full of vegetables or wheat, cinnamon or tea, contaminating water and bringing disease. Cotton textiles, bought from India and on the way to be exchanged for enslaved people in Ouidah or Fort Elmina, are destroyed by moths, rendering future profits obsolete.

Everything is edible to them. What is progress for the critters is regress for the trader. They would happily eat away all surplus leaving nothing for the slavers. It seems that the smaller the beast, the more it aligns with the abolitionist agenda.





7. Paradise

Larger creatures are easier to control. Trade in the Indian Ocean World relies on diplomacy as much as brute force. The creatures of the animal kingdom manifest humanity's power over them, and thus serve well as diplomatic gifts. These are necessary for building trust and gaining access to local markets.

As ships sail across the oceans, they carry with them precious offerings. Tiger cubs, cassowaries, white lion dogs, ducats, elephants, cockatoos and lories lubricate negotiations. Ostriches, camels and white Bengali oxen, with their horns gilded and decorated with ribbons and bells, are re-purposed as symbols of good will. Every ship becomes an arch of Noah.

But whatever is on the move, is also on sale. In Amsterdam, the Dutch supply much of Europe with exotic animals. The menageries of the Dutch stadtholders lead the trend, and the bourgeoisie follow. Scientists use the remains of the animals for research, and painters portray them.

1623 a leopard, and a request for an elephant and a cockatoo for Stadtholder Mauritz.

1629 a speckled deer, a wild goat, two cockatoos, a young elephant, and two cats of the south land perish in a fire on the ship, on the way to Stadtholder Frederik Hendrik.

1633 an elephant, a leopard, a deer and a cassowary.

1651 2 rhinos, 4 deer, 3 eagles, 50 monkeys, parakeets and parrots leave from Batavia, together with 200 pigs, 8 cows, 80 sheep, 50 goats, 600 chickens, 300 ducks, 60 geese, 25 Indian fowls, and 200 Indian chickens for subsistence.

An Indian antelope, a greater slow loris, two Asian elephants, two Seychelles blue pigeons, a parrot, a cape hyrax, a Cape genet, a southern bald ibis, a Secretary bird, a greater kudu, a male and female white-tailed gnu, a springbok, an eland antelope, two quaggas, and a warthog for the menagerie of Princess Anna of Hanover.'

It's the dream of having both the paradise, and the fall.

In 1777, the young female orangutan, who was captured in Borneo and brought to the royal menagerie, survives only for a few months. The cause of death is said to be insufficient diet. But it is known that great apes, who lose their family, can die of a broken heart.

Three centuries later, exotic animal trade is the fourth largest illegal trade globally, valued at 20 billion dollars. Tarantulas, axolotls, capuchin monkeys, sloths, pangolins and lions migrate on old trade routes.



8. Shipworm

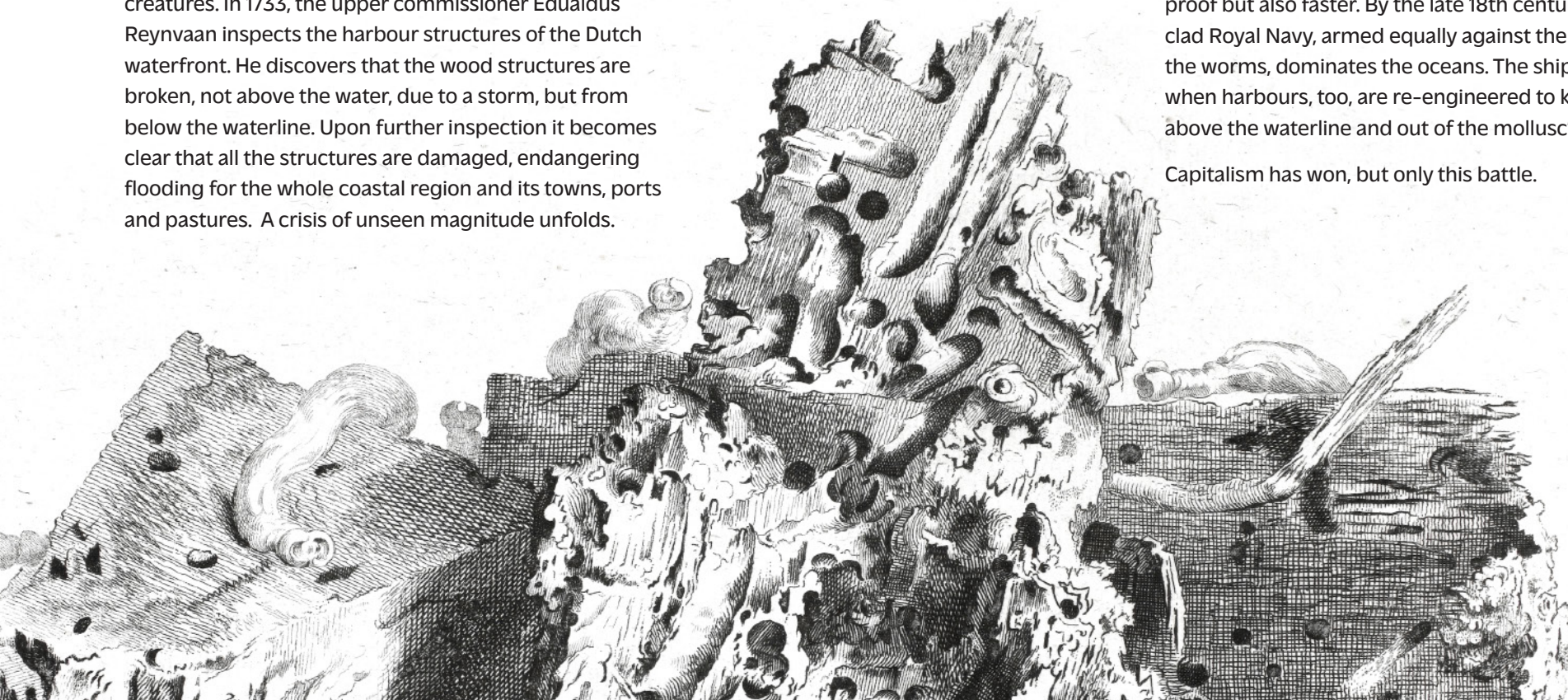
But as fleets of ships carry their cargo from port to port, a quiet resistance is at work below the surface. While the shipworm is hardly longer than a man's finger, its strength lies in its numbers and its chosen strategy. Their armies probe into submerged wood, growing in length as they chew their way deeper into protective burrows. As they progress, the once solid material vanishes into the ocean. Whole vessels can be chewed to pieces in just a few months.

For a while it looks like the shipworm just might sink early capitalism. Christopher Columbus loses a whole fleet to the minuscule pirates. The Spanish Armada is defeated by the British, after being weakened by these disloyal creatures. In 1733, the upper commissioner Edualdus Reynvaan inspects the harbour structures of the Dutch waterfront. He discovers that the wood structures are broken, not above the water, due to a storm, but from below the waterline. Upon further inspection it becomes clear that all the structures are damaged, endangering flooding for the whole coastal region and its towns, ports and pastures. A crisis of unseen magnitude unfolds.

No-one knows how to fight this anarchic creature that emerged from nowhere like a punishment from God. But praying does not help, yet neither does hammering nails to the wood poles, tar, or burning the surface of wood. The shipworms win every battle. The cost of repair is catastrophic. Whole forests are felled in search of wood that can resist this curse. Drought and erosion follow on the barren landscapes. But fir, oak, spruce, all are chewed up.

After nearly two centuries of battle against the curse of the seas, a solution is found. Lining the ships with copper seems to give protection, and the British excel in this. It turns out that copper lining not only makes ships worm-proof but also faster. By the late 18th century, the copper-clad Royal Navy, armed equally against the Spaniards and the worms, dominates the oceans. The shipworms retreat when harbours, too, are re-engineered to keep wood above the waterline and out of the mollusc's mouths.

Capitalism has won, but only this battle.



9. Interlude

Sound by Genesis Victoria



10. Whales

In her bed chamber is Mary, dressing up, being helped by a chamber maid. Her corsets are tightened, the hoops of her dresses adjusted. The corset and the hoops are made of whale bone. Her human body, on this dry land, is supported by bones that once supported the life of another mammal, in the deep of the ocean.

Bowhead whales move slowly in small pods, in the cold waters of the Arctic. Their life span can reach over 250 years - more than two human lifetimes. Low frequency sounds are used to communicate and navigate the vast distances of the oceans. Mothers and calves move separately from others, while the young ones socialize.

The Dutch arrive in these waters in the early 17th century, racing with the competing powers. Whale oil is in demand: this precious substance can be turned into candles and burned in lamps that illuminate European cities. The bones of these massive creatures are crafted into fishing lines, baskets, tools and figurines, and sold to the rising bourgeoisie of Europe on the expanding markets of the continent.

Mothers and calves in shallow breeding bays are easy targets. Sometimes whole pods panic and swim to shallows, distracted and easier to hunt. What is for the whales a new kind of terror, is for the investors a new kind of opportunity.

In only a few decades the Arctic is turned into an industrial zone. Whaling is essentially a vertical integration operation, the whale ship, a device for extracting raw material, a factory for processing it, and a means for circulation.

The industry grows rapidly. 70 ships in 1654. 148 ships in 1670. In 1680, 14,000 seamen are working on 260 ships across the northern sea.

In the heyday of Dutch whaling, 32,000 whales are hunted in the waters of Spitsbergen in just fifty years. All together, 120,000 Greenland whales are killed and processed off the coasts of Spitsbergen, Jan Mayen and the Davis Strait, most hunted by the Dutch.



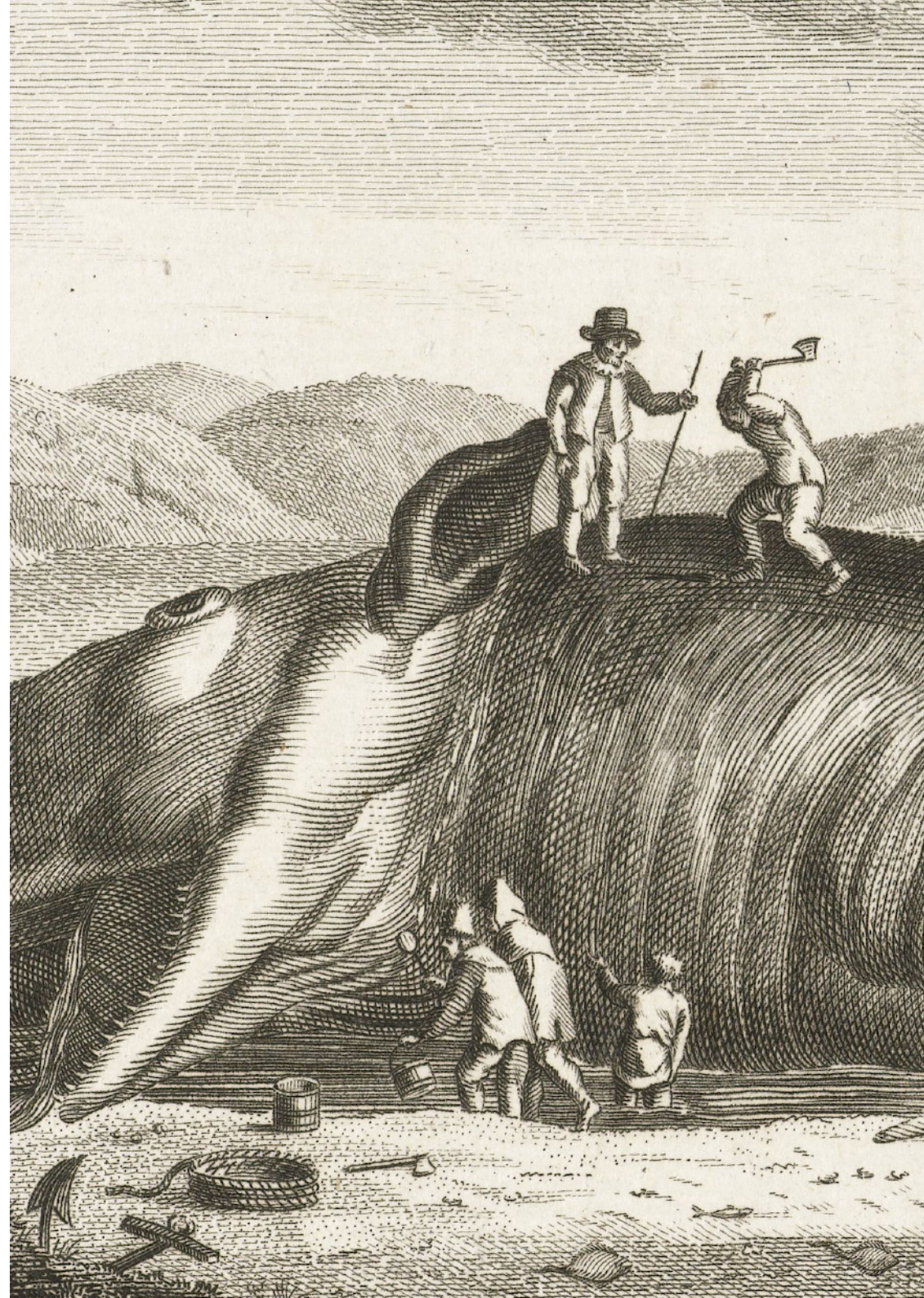


11. Industrialization

The factories at sea serve the factories on land. Oil is needed on both continents for lubricating the new inventions of the industrial revolution. On the new continent, the cotton gin drives a massive expansion of the cotton industry.

On the old continent, whale oil fuels lamps that help extend the working day of the growing proletariat, and lubricates the water frames, spinning wheels and power looms of Manchester's factories. With the help of whale oil, more cotton can be processed, more textiles produced, more people enslaved, and ever more cotton picked, in an ever expanding cycle. In every transaction money trickles up. What is in motion is in itself like a machine, all its parts working together, across oceans and continents. The substance that once supported oceanic life by providing echolocation and buoyancy control for the giants of the sea, is effectively rendered into abstract value in accounting books.

The death of whales marks the birth of energy as a market of extraction and circulation. This market would later be substituted by an even more lucrative substance: petroleum. Only the discovery of petroleum and electricity saves the whales. In the deep, tales of the centuries of terror are passed down generations to generations, as clans slowly recover.



12. Resistance

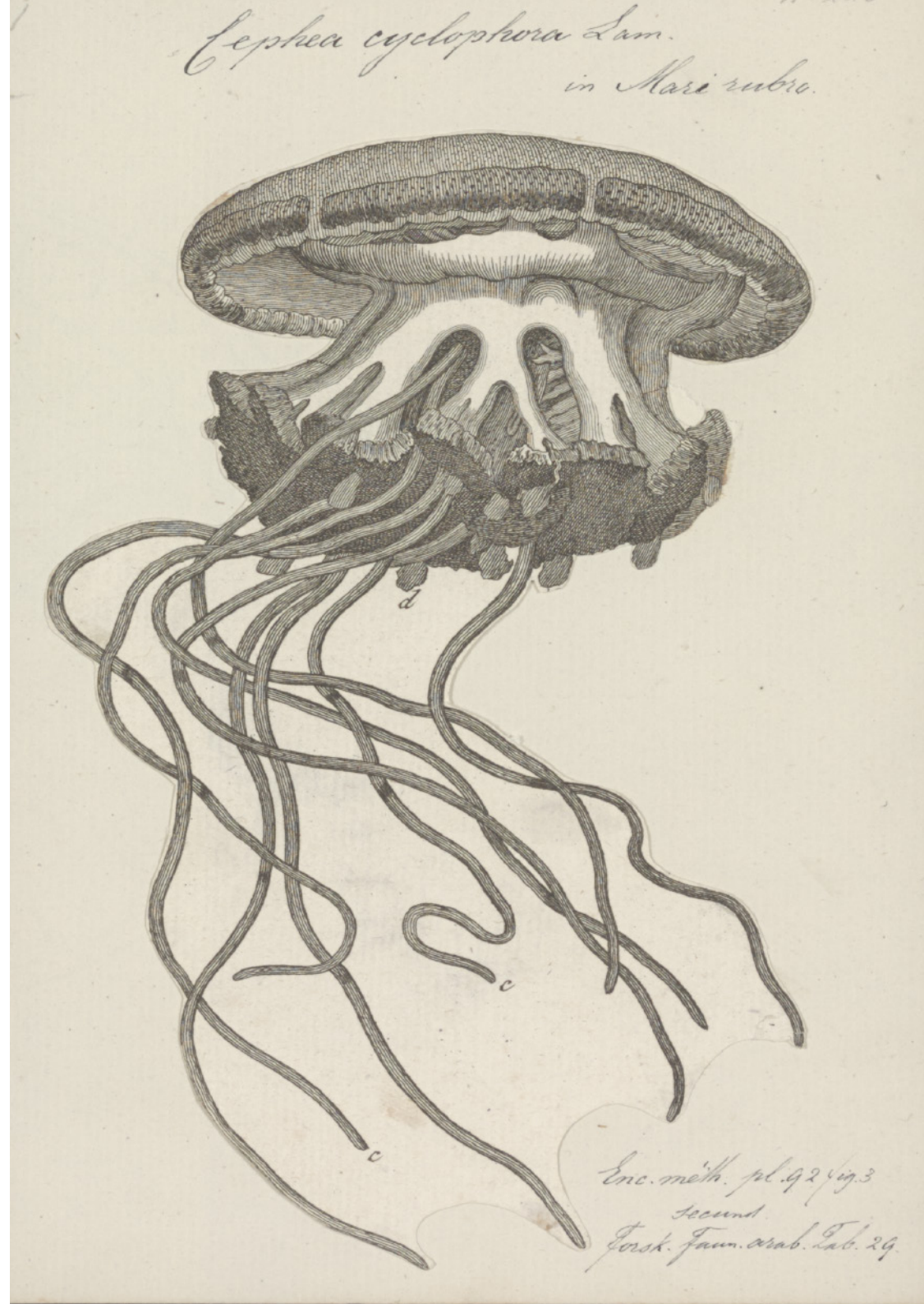
We are in the heart of a storm. Here, it's quiet, secure. But outside, everything is on the move. Cotton from India, cobalt from Congo, nickel from Indonesia, tea from Sri Lanka. Iowa pigs sail to China, Brazilian cattle to harbours in Turkey, New Zealand sheep to London. Tiger cubs in suitcases from Thailand to New York, parrots from Borneo to Russia, snakes from Ecuador to Norway.

But the resistance is also planetary.

Orcas turn over fishing boats. Elephants trample their capturers. Cows refuse to work. Pigs escape the slaughterhouse trucks. Rats colonise the colonisers, cockroaches, pigeons and seagulls rob the robbers. Jellyfish thrive.

Eventually, life is uncontrollable. Everything has a will of its own.

This text is the script for an audio tour as part of the exhibition State of Wander at Paleis Het Loo, Apeldoorn, 2026. Curator Anna Bitkina. Sound design Genesis Victoria. Graphic design Mia Kivinen.



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