

monoville

Volume I

“I've loved the stars too fondly to be fearful of the night”

Galileo

by Kenneth Lifshitz

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Book I
Chess

Able Was I Ere I Saw Elba

The sun never shines in here. Its OK. My father told me that it is good to stay in the shade. But, I don't know if he meant this interminable, infernal twilight. In the shade the snow cannot play hide and seek. It cannot find itself even when it's so close it could trip over itself, -it still can't. Because there is no place for it to hide. Not in crusty, overexposed photographs, not in the shadow of vengeful ghosts emerging from the blankness of slumber. Not when it coats my torso with its gentle powdery coating. Psssst! If it did stay, if it found itself there, well then, I'd have to say I am already dead, finished, kaput or one of the other words indicating a cessation of the insipid, persistent drizzling I call life. But that doesn't seem to be the case so, let's not jump to that conclusion-- not just yet anyway, shall we. OK?

-hey,

I just hope you won't distract from the confession I had to make. My memory is not that good. Something about an astronomer? What was it? Give me a hint. Redemption? No, not redemption, sympathy, no not sympathy, illuminations, no, oh ahh yes, about symmetry, yes,-- So,-- tha's what, wait! What was it anyway? Oh, umm, I should w-warn you? -What's that you said? Me? Stop shouting,-- shouting?

About the awful final inconsequentiality? Shouting?

There must be an echo in here.

No, that wasn't it, not it at all, not even close, it's just, you know s-s-sometimes I forget, forget about everything, even this, -but even then, since I am w-w-w-writing this all down, like now, so maybe I won't forget it, at least not before I f-f-f-freeze to death in this cave, or worse, come up short on the pieces, you know, - you know, like the jigsaw puzzle from Salvation Army, that one that comes with the frayed, struggling rubber band around it.-- just like, (wait a minute, JEEZZUS - it's so cold! No sympathy, I warned you!) -just like some old, chipped chess set with the naked wood color peeking through the knight's nose like an unstoppable booger, or, or a musty rectangular clue from the game of that name, hah!, (half sniffing), -Yes that was it, it was a warning, about, about that--about something, yes, something inalterably human, something I used to be. Hmmm! What was it you said? (Pause) What was it I was supposed to hold on to?

Something important. Even sacred. That's right, --. And now it seems I may have already forgotten it, lost it again, lost it in this serpentine, (something!), slithering fog of ice, damn, the piece, the, the pieces, the goddam important piece may have already slipped quietly thru my frost hobbled fingers and whisked away, whooshh! Gone!! Like a sled down a luge chute or as they say, the skeleton track, like fresh bologna down the sausage machine. Yes, I remember now! I needed to warn you, tell you, that, if you came seeking a corpse, you may be sorely disappointed -- cause there is this one thing that keeps me alive, unwaveringly intent on stirring this stew of meaningless chatter, so you may infer from its involuntary inertial whirlpool of indistraction, (driven by the spoon of this incessant shivering), that the precarious balance of the vacuous atomic murmur, the million tremulous decisions, none of which signify or gratify or mean anything of importance, except that the quietus, that indistinct something which underlies it all, is now perhaps literally, in any case is beyond my reach, escaped from my flimsy, ceaseless palindromic mental clutch, (Yes!) just like Einstein with his rusty Brownian particles, burrowing, winnowing into a tiny space, a window into an unseen world wherein one may, indeed one is forced to infer, di-s--ssect, and somehow render disss-s-s-tinkt, that which constitutes it, which is continuing it, driving it on and that which would be impossible, yeah, impossible! Without it --So?, Yes. While I'm still here. --(I assure you that I won't retreat, flee in some cowardly fashion before the empty cacophony of senseless disconnected imagery, no, I will stay here, if only to displace the enfolding nothingness, to demonstrate that this is one place I indubitably inhabit, a sooty point of an andiron whereon the central smoldering lie resides and around which my entire story revolves, wrapped in a manner designed to bring you closer to those reassembled forms, well, not really closer, not to the image itself, but to the shattered vacuity which underlies it, that's the thing,) that I can convey you across this entire random seeming river of words which is calculated, like any river, to carry you further from its source and not to deliver you thence and always failing in this, and so is (exactly like, though) not at all like life which goes like this; first you're here, then you're not, -or, as Pink would say, 'So fuh yack-kin' what?!' But then again, I wonder, what if it is just the broken pieces, the words creating me, controlling me, manipulating me, driving me along on this torrent, this Hoosyampa, knowing that with the same facility as Mozart spoke the language of music, I speak the language of lies and that if once again I gain such

dubious command, once the doubters have tamely dispersed themselves amidst the floating ice, holy, gliding impersonators, how should we ourselves like to glide above that flood, on rafts made also of words?, like tired skiers splayed astride as creaking chairlift, raising a thumb to their collective noses at us, or even spitting in passing like some untutored Eurotrash and the other way round perhaps, as if their purity had disappeared in enveloping shades of white, and then we ask, what would remain? If not a new equilibrium to be breached, a new border, a vast thermocline of morality and hope that we, like thermostats, can't control yet each of them somehow remains intent on indicating the degrees to which we have failed, but it is the other way round, really, –isn't it? I MEAN ISN'T IT?

And if so, indeed, Pink, if I, if we may elide it thus, this Chinese puzzle of 'SO FUH-KIN WAH??!', – if you agree, if only tentatively, just for the moment, that this is the fukkin' sum and substance of existence, and my complaint which echoes forth from these silent, grey-washed uncaring slopes of the mountains near Gravelly Ford Nevada must remain unheeded, -- from where I sit, even a corpse will neatly echo this last. 'So fuhh-huyckin what?', the final conjoint, 'why should I care?' will emerge right in a pirouette drifting downward like a drunken echo on a parachute, a cadence falling down the canyon walls to a gravelly, eternal, unfordable night? And what possible difference would it, or could it make to either me or them (or her)!?' – or for that matter to any caring people, respectable people, God-fucking-fearing people, those who should know better, people with some sense of structure and right and justice, up and down for chrissake. God! this is exhausting (yet somehow rewarding)!!-- and you who are supposedly possessed of this precipitate armor, this sense of structure and of right and sometimes even of real justice, to know that you are so only because it is so fuh-k-ckin' easy to lie to yourself and so, why (I ask you, putting aside the trivial Wunderkind solution of 'sofukinwot' for a moment because as every good con man knows), are there still indexed among even you some who ARE inherently, unquestionably 'GOOD'? Because if so, even those, if they haven't disappeared, even those have as their single fondest desire to be complicit in their own destruction, and indeed may have already done so like me, or are content to become mere tokens, absalomic counterfeiters of cheer, counterfeiters of emotion and concern, simply put, here, like the snow, a temporary carpet, only as ghosts, (albeit in rough triplicate), yearning desperately again for that one thing they know they

can indisputably accomplish, to be found complicit in one another's destruction. And that is the whole of it, - the whole, beautiful, vacant-eyed rest, - is just bullshit.

(minutes have passed, maybe hours)

But then again, what if that is not the whole of it? It is growing so late. Maybe I'm getting confused. What, I ask, if we ourselves are in fact those very ghosts we fear? Their body, this sea of white unconcern in which we float and then drown. I wonder. What if all the rest is not just arcane bullshit? And this monochromatic, diaphanous triptych of swirling snow confronting me not just reawakened Spartoi but really wounded snow bleeding intermittent arterial light, winking at eternity like poorly screwed lightbulbs. The truth is, (if I can borrow the word, if it is not reserved solely for those fashionable Corinthians who drag their dogsleds through crumpled, crinoline sheets, show bitches I call them-- sarcastically,) that these, like me, despite their casually proffered nostrums remain puzzled, and like me are careening directly into old age, a skidding outofcontrol bus, leaking red brake fluid and that I (that we) despite all precaution, despite all predilection, despite all howling, all railing against it, that we have at last become afflicted with this inescapable, encroaching sense of sameness that renders each day ever more inalterably like the last, each castrated moment a monument to itself, the comforting alternation of work and labor, even the pleasurable bourgeois distinction of weekday and weekend erased, the appetites themselves merging at some unseen neural intersection where one can eat sweet ice cream and savory steak, without it offending either the palate or the sense of propriety, yet the hunger stubbornly remains, informed by a disoriented desire, even sex, replaced by a single hydra-headed diagonal yearning, horse and rider in lunging piaffe (not Edith), melded into one drunken career , an indistinguishable all-encompassing monolith of unfocused hunger, cantering breasts, dressage nice hot bowls chili, fuckin' pink chili.

What's about people you say? Well, what about them ferchrissakes!! Granted, sometimes they smell nice but, beyond that they either no longer have the capacity to surprise me, or, I no longer have the capacity to be surprised by them, I don't know which it is, I don't care which; I only believe that God and experience will tell, will teach each in turn till they find themselves like me swimming, swimming, swimming plunging again into that churning current, this warm cassoulet

of morality and mortality and lies we call the end or, the beginning.--

Bishop Rock

It was that the clouds had for the moment lapsed their eastward jaunt, clinging instead to the tracted census of a sequestering morning, a mustering like of half-chewed hardshell candies, stuck there, as if scattered with vague intent, perhaps by the unseen, giant, careless hand of a spoiled child, suspended in mid flight, as if the time bought by the gooey quarter ladled into the mechanism had run out, the vast celestial machinery groaning to a halt, the only thing left unchallenged, and unchallengeable, a faint sense of expectation, an inalterable commotion, and a fainter confusion as to their destination, forced now to halt and take notice of something that had been scratched out, a mistake, an error in the seamless narrative of heaven.

At first what the scrupulously clean shaven, curly red-haired, involuntarily sneering steward should have noticed when he went belowdecks was that sound of hiatus; the soulless, incurious crescendo diminuendo, not a groaning exactly but the mindless chattering, the sound of the faded blue cabin door creaking ajar, clattering nervously shut with the hypnotic, hopeless regularity shorn of real intent, a damp match being struck repeatedly, each glirine glissando following the yaw of the vessel, followed by an abortively, giddy concerto of squeals brought to a close with the cadential slamming against the splintering jamb, an abrupt, disconcerting, iambic punctuation, the repetitive whole a lazy metronomic pulse keyed to the unceasing rocking of the boat, subdivided with the operatic tremolos that plumbed the intervening stillness that lay below. But all he heard at that particular moment was his own hollow rasp of breathing, like a carpenter sunk deep-in his dust mask sawing away with a dull blade.

The cabin and the cabin door with the faded blue paint in question belonged to one Archibald MacRae, captain of the coastal survey ship U.S.C.S. *Ewing* laying off the coast of Santa Barbara. They were not moving forward any longer, not making any further headway into the neck of bay defined by the channel islands and the cheerful regularity of the motion should have indicated to

any seasoned sailor that this was because here the *Ewing* had dropped her sea anchor. He approached and peered along the molding, his eye guided along the vacant green expanse of bulkhead. ‘Where was the picture that had hung next to the porthole?’ Gone? Like an indigestive gurgle, through the porthole came a palpable, accusatory absence, not a sound, but a combination of sound and absence, something disappearing beneath the agile, fleeting echo of the waves. And what he should have noticed next was the far more proximate but silent exiting cacophony of brains and blood splashed onto the cabin wall behind the bunk, an importuning whale-blow of gore. Involuntarily his eye fled downward to the overturned but unshattered teapot flooding the floor just inside the door, its very supinity commanding his attention, demanding something of him, ‘Shouldda brought some tea’ he scolded himself as if this was some Alice in Wonderland scenario with some murdering amphibious rabbit absconded through an open porthole, but “No, not that!” Was what he said aloud.

When he thought about it, everyting inside the small acre, aside from the blunt interrogative of the sanguinary decor, also bespoke an abject calculated imbalance, the tattoo, the unloaded gun, all were at root yelps of a bested dog, like the Sicilian defense, belated attempts at intimidation, conveying even in their plaintive submissiveness the concealed hope of eventual domination. The expressionless hand-carved tokens of power seemed now to stare quizzically as if suddenly aware of their own ponderous purposelessness, waiting expectantly—for something, plaintively, supinely, openly, scorning the now limp powerless hand, impatient for the next move. The upended teapot, the creaking hatch-, all were whispered, hesitant shadows inhabiting an abdicated intent, an intent from the start too vacant, abject or neutral to express itself unambiguously, most particularly the chair pulled up for his absent or departed opponent. The steward sat down in it heavily and began to weep.

Within the confines of the cramped cabin, hunched forward,-- on the bunk, dressed in a dapper, pressed blue naval uniform, was the slim body of the skipper, Lt. Archibald McRae, a rude gaping hole incongruously glued to where the back of his head had lately been, his left arm now giddily contorted so as to pneumatically support the point of most profligate carnage. In the palm of his

well-tanned, now limp, tattooed right hand, nicely balanced, lay a shiny colt navy revolver, the gunmetal blue exclamation point appended to his statement of mortal finality. The unpunctuated tip of the long barrel lounged dispassionately on the low table seeming in casual disregard of the destruction it had wrought. A knee was thrust askew to support the chessboard, pieces still set up for play, undisturbed except for the fact that it appeared black's queen was missing. The remaining pieces were configured in the classic Sicilian defense, the black queenside bishop pawn enticingly advanced to draw an attack that would never come.

The rather unremarkable tattoo on the Captain MacRae's pale right hand had been acquired eight years prior in Chile. It was a blue circular imprint divided into two equal hemispheres occupying the swaled geography just behind the thumb. Inside each half was inscribed a single word, – 'lima' 'sal', –salt and lime, twin predicates to a shot of tequila, or the geological composition of the Tufa towers found at Mono Lake, or to an ethnologist, possibly inferring the capital city of Peru in the Quechuan dialect, meaning literally to "To talk" appended to the Spanish imperative 'Go' or more aptly 'I said I'm leaving.' It seemed a strange name for a capital.

In any case the ambiguity, the slight asymmetry, it all was more enticing than it had a right to be. It echoed the message wrought in mother-of-pearl in the hilt of the revolver, a shimmering question mark. Now all of the possible answers were extinguished, or, if not, would, (if not), have been compassed, emphasized, inscribed in the formerly bright buzzing vibrant brain of Archibald MacRae as he contemplated the intricacies of the Sicilian defense, which brain now resembled nothing so much as an archipelago of poached fish chunks floating within a sea of spaghetti sauce.

The *Ewing* had been performing what was called a ladder pattern survey an area of open ocean called the Cortez Bank, off the Santa Barbara channel. As they had approached the site where an underwater sea mount stood, about one hundred miles off the inlet and twenty miles out from the flying wedge of rock called the Channel Islands, MacCrae had ordered they drop a sea anchor. A month previous, a yankee clipper *Stilwell S. Bishop* out of Philadelphia had carved a ten-foot

chunk of timber out of her hull when she grazed the top of the submerged rock which that day lay beneath a bare two and a half fathoms of water somewhere near to where they now drifted at anchor. The *Stilwell Bishop* had begun shipping water like she was the last teapot in England so the Captain turned her and limped into San Francisco harbor after dumping her cargo at sea, supplies bound for the small army garrison at San Diego. The debris from the ship had washed ashore providing an unexpected treat to a colony of elephant seals and the small band of Chumash that inhabited the beaches of Santa Rosa and San Miguel.

The owner of the *Stilwell Bishop*, a successful homeopathic practitioner in Philadelphia, State Senator, inventor of the curved toenail clipper and one of the founders of the new Republican National Party had personally insured that the unpleasant repercussions of the collision extended all the way to the ramshackle offices of Alexander Bache, Superintendent of the Coast Survey in Washington.

Bache, in an uncharacteristically scalding note had made his discomfiture known to John Alden, captain of the *Active* and head of the Coast Survey thus insuring that the collision of the *Stilwell Bishop* with the rock would endure in a palpable shock delivered to those he held responsible. It was this series of events had in fact precipitated the *Ewing's* presence here today in the Cortez Bank. As the heavy odor of tar wafted in through the open porthole, the steward could not help but notice that the *Active* had drawn alongside. Her heaving bulk seemed to reinstall a sense of gravity that had recently fled through that same opening, one that had been erased by the jolly, corklike bobbing of the grisly scene against the line of the horizon. 'Cuyler must have run up a distress flag.', He thought The sickening smell which now assailed him was not coming, as he at first suspected, from the engine of the *Active*. Since her boiler was coal fired it had to be emanating from the open bitumen pits onshore, carried here, a mile and a half out, by some malevolent offshore breeze.

Canny ships' captains would use the varying strength of the odor to navigate the dangerous channel when there was heavy fog laying in the passage. Even those skippers with an

accomplished sense of smell generally steered well clear of this particular area they found themselves in today. There had already been several costly wrecks. Since there were no good nautical charts of the area this fact had made supply of the small army outpost at San Diego an extraordinarily difficult but also profitable enterprise hence the recent incident with the *Stilwell Bishop*. Right now it just made him want to vomit,—again.

Despite Bache's anger, the rock's position had been carefully noted on the maps forwarded to Washington by MacRae earlier that year. They were intended for the as yet unpublished 1855 version of the USCS journal, but he had neglected to set a warning buoy marking the spot and the journal with the maps was still lying on the composing table at the government printing office when the collision occurred.

While it was true that MacRae had neglected to set the spar buoy, an aberrant lapse for the usually conscientious Navy man, the fact was that, on most days one did not even need either a map or a buoy to mark the position of the rock. Its location readily announced itself to any attentive sailor as the deep Pacific undersea swells suddenly confounded in mid ocean by the bulk of the undersea mount caused pregnant volumes of water to rush rudely to the surface birthing a complaining spray some twenty feet up into the air and spawning anomalous, mountainous waves where none could be seen before, a sight so patently remarkable and so readily visible for so a great distance that a buoy might have seemed both redundant and impractical. Unfortunately, what both MacRae and the skipper of the *Stilwell S. Bishop* both had failed to note was that on calm days, days with no wind, there was no telltale geyser, no huge waves, in fact nothing to indicate the deadly protuberance lurking just a few feet below the surface. It had been on such a day that the gut wrenching, snapping sound of splintering timber had shot through the oak hull of the skunked supply clipper like shit thru a goose and that being the identical shit that would soon shoot from the command structure of the United States Coast Survey which ironically had its fair share of assholes.

It was two weeks to the day after the *Ewing* had received orders from Washington to head back to

the spot and set the neglected buoy that MacRae had apparently shot himself.

Sphincter and Prolix

It was several hours later that the captain of the *Active*, James Alden briskly stepped aboard the deck of the U.S.C.S. Ewing. Though the survey generally eschewed formal naval pomp, on this occasion both he and the dress white gulls supplied it to some degree, the latter contributing an energetic but somehow mercenary cacophony while Alden, the trim and crisp figure with haunted grey-blue eyes decked in a recently pressed uniform, hauled himself up the equally sinewy ladder. As he heaved himself now onto the bobbing deck, scaling the gunnel with little apparent effort, the descending foot hovered for an instant before neatly and effortlessly meeting the rising planks; one instinctive motion from which it was, or should have been, apparent that here was a man well-accustomed to the rhythms of the sea.

Lt. Henry Cuyler had signaled the *Active* after sending the steward below to investigate the gunshot, first with the distress banner, then shortly after with a dead man pennant, news that a body had been discovered aboardship which news spread quickly to the rest of the little fleet. Curiously it was not Lieutenant Cuyler, but the red-haired, gnomelike steward instead who now greeted Captain Alden as he stepped aboard the smaller ship.

“Cap’n Alden. I’m terrible sorry for the inconvenience, ‘n fer that terrible ruckus we’ve had over t’here. Something quite bad I assure you. Quite horrific she’s happened. ‘N withall that exceptional ruckus and heat yesterday and now! this! What in the world of fink plamingos is it coming to? I shouldda knowed when the ship lit up like that, cracklin’ like a frog in a fry pan, somethin’ bad was bound to hah-r-pen.”

“Calm yourself boy, and stop whining about the damn weather man or whatever, for Chris’sakes! Now, calmly, what has happened, where is Captain MacRae and Lt. Cuyler?” Alden was used to the effects of inflated superstition on sailors. What he hoped the steward was describing, was a harmless phenomenon called St. Elmo’s fire. He hoped it was nothing more but he knew it was

not all that had occurred, not nearly enough to spook a man like this.

“What’s ‘at? Cap’n?” The steward tapped his ear with his pipe, seeming to indicate a slight deafness.

“MacRae?”

“Quite dead, I’m afraid sir. Quite.”

The reply did not seem to shock Alden but his eyes narrowed when he again fixed them on the steward’s face. Suddenly he noticed the man seemed to be sweating through his jacket, the crescent moon of moisture under his armpit disturbed him more than the man’s apparent deafness. It had not been that warm a day.

“It’s MacRae Dead?! N’ what about fuckin’ ‘ Cuyler. Where is the lard basket?”

“The Lt’s terrible upset. Hain’t hardly came out of his cabin since it happened.” At that moment, it was as if an unlooked for squall had run up o him. The steward’s face abruptly changed color, darkened then went white again. He leaned over the gunnels and began heaving violently. The pipe which he had fashioned and cached behind his ear tumbled forward as he decorated it and the surrounding water profusely with the chunks of regurgitated bread pudding.

“That’s the sign of it, it is, Cap’n. No more smokin’ for me.” he whimpered hoarsely. Alden now let his reserve drop and treated the steward to a look of contempt that he usually reserved for undercooked eggs.

Death was one thing, but a suicide, that would be considered an omen and fear could quickly spread through the unseasoned crew a wildfire through dry tinder. Most were already looking for reasons to desert so they might strike out for the gold fields. The steward winced as the gaze unfurled like a topgallant and then sought to envelop him, to coil about him, a thick hemp rope lacerating with its bristle, somehow distant, bracing and inspiring and yet inescapably proximate and annoying.

“Make a hole.” The steward yelled down the hatch. It was nautical language for clearing a ladder of traffic when coming through on business. Feuerstool had not been aboard ships long enough to learn the full protocol, that you only needed to yell this phrase when there was actually a man blocking the ladder passage, he thought it was just pro forma when going belowdecks in a hurry at

any time. Alden suppressed a superior smirk.

Alden's own nautical roots stretched back more than two hundred years. A descendant of John and Priscilla Alden of the Massachusetts Plymouth Bay Colony, both passengers aboard the Mayflower. There had been just three eligible women aboard the Mayflower, Priscilla Mullins being by far the most attractive. At the tender age of fourteen she had come to occupy the vertex of a steamily convoluted love triangle, (actually a quadrangle if you counted Standish's wife Rose,) consisting of herself, Miles Standish and Alden's relative, John Alden. Six months after their arrival, Captain Standish was conscripted by Alden, the cooper, to plead the latter's case for matrimony. The frequently absent but unfailingly passionate Standish, finding himself suddenly thunderstruck with the undeniable flowering beauty of Miss Mullins, on the spur of the moment, - had sprung himself into the position of suitor, hoping to enjoy the prize he was to ostensibly seek on another's behalf. The practical and steadfast Priscilla ended up marrying not the brash captain but the shy cooper.

In deference to this hyper-romantic heritage Alden had been given a special dispensation by the Navy Department to bring his wife along with him aboard ship. Sarah Alden at first had appeared entirely devoted to his welfare, the picture of a dutiful wife. After a few months at sea she began exhibiting some rather strange quirks. First there were her constitutionals around the deck in a dress ball gown. Then there was her insistence on bringing two live French Alpine goats on board, claiming her doctor had ordered she receive fresh milk daily for her present nervous condition. The goats had been a gift from an admiring French sea captain in San Francisco. Alden had taken it all with an enviable placidity and supreme equanimity. This only served to drive Sarah to adopt more extreme measures seemingly designed to embarrass him.

So, it was not surprising that recollections of an overheated past and torrid affairs were the last things on Alden's mind today. Rather, what had preoccupied him, at least before the *Ewing's* pennant had been raised, was what preoccupied him almost every day since she had joined him aboard the *Active*, - the icy indifference of the very present Mrs. Alden. In the sixteen years since

his participation in the American Ex-Ex he seemed to have gradually succumbed to the responsibilities of command. When added to the weight of personal tradition, his slumping shoulders, to her at least, told a story not of an argument lost to gravity, but rather of seeking to dodge it. To her, her husband's career had clearly charted the sagging contours of his posture. Sarah Alden looked on his posting out here, a continent away from Washington as an exile, not an honor. It was Sarah's implacable and vocal disdain for him and his utter lack of ambition that had been distracting him up almost until this very moment of stepping onto the heaving deck of the *Ewing*.

Aside from the impending slouch and wavering hairline, he otherwise could, if he so chose, look and act the part of a modern 19th century sea captain; steely eyed, intrepid, athletic and dashing, summon his faculties to focus unfailingly on the exigencies of the present moment. He stood now looking at the poor steward, shorn of all poetic hesitations, as a snapping turtle would if confronted by a curious dachshund.

The unutilized bosun's whistle had slipped out of the steward's pocket while he was retching and lay now on the deck, pristine in its irrelevance. To Alden, it was merely another rebuke, a sign of laxity. Putting the thought of the irritating reminder of Cuyler's insulting absence aside, he collared the steward who seemed to have recovered enough to walk (with some assistance) and without another word they went to take in the grim scene in the cabin below.

"Pretty much of a fuckin' mess.", Alden intoned flatly ducking quickly to avoid hitting his head on the low jamb. There was little in his expression to indicate he had not entirely expected the scene which confronted them now.

"Yea-ruh it is. What a shame! A good man. A fine captain, Capti'n MacRae, he was."

Up to this point, the conversation had been mentally rehearsed by both men. Now, forced by what confronted them, to set off into more tentative waters, areas where no buoys of convention had been set, they had to pause to get new bearings. At first there was a grave silence.

"What's that skimped in his left hand, Cap'n, -there?" The steward finally inquired flicking his dark eyes to indicate nervously what he took to be a yellowing scrap of paper.

“Looks like one of those new Daguerreotype imprints.” Alden speculated, leaning closer over the bunk.

“Must’a had made it when we made port in San Francisco last,---”

The steward gingerly edged between Alden and the body and removed the blood-spattered photograph from the unmoving hands of McRae, very carefully. It was the quarter size of the Daguerreotype plate, about three by four inches, and it portrayed a handsome young man of about twenty-five grasping a telescope in his left hand. At the bottom of the ornate silver frame was stenciled the caption; “Kirlew Hume, -Astronomer ” and on the back was written ‘Que bien te veo’.

How well I see you! The concept of ‘smiling for the camera’, aligning one’s face purposefully for a photographic portrait is a relatively modern one, (some might argue corresponding to a rise in affective stupidity and loss of muscle control). Most men of character, in the early days of photography, would have rather been shot dead than be immortalized grinning stupidly. The mouth of the man in the portrait appeared forcibly contorted into an almost macabre expression of happiness, lips held apart by some asymptotic contraction and then curled at the edges with a feral lilt. The same expansion, now echoed on the face of the steward implied contempt. It vanished as Alden turned toward him, but not quickly enough.

“Kirlew Hume? I know that name from somewhere.” Alden mused as he removed the bespattered object from the steward’s hand and placed it back on the bunk. It was a telling gesture. He evidently held some personal affection for MacRae that inspired this kindness.

“Really? Friend of Captain MacRae’s perhaps?” The steward inquired somewhat nervously.

“Yahhm–, yeah, yeh–yess!” Alden cleared his throat. It seemed for a moment he could not speak, grasping for something unseen, clasping his hands around some invisible object as if the dead man’s achievements and failings were both in danger of fleeing and he bent on preventing it.

“Kirlew Hume! If I’m not mistaken, wasn’t he the astronomer for the Gilliss Expedition? Died in Argentina so I hear, -sumkinda donkey, -no, it was a mule, accident. Poor bastard.”

“Mule huh?, Pit’yous.”, the steward echoed, releasing a long breath that turned mindlessly into a

hiss.

“And how is your wife anyway, Captain?”

“Oh quite well, err, well as can be expected.” Alden searched the man’s face for a hint of sarcasm but could find none.

“What a fine day this is!” Alden beamed incongruously, as if they were out for a walk on the promenade. The steward felt his knees go weak. The words might as well have been a sledge hammer and he a cow on the killing floor. His jaws hung slack, like an unhitched halter, face an unblinking mirror of the cloudless day. Under the circumstances he expected an outburst of grief or anger, directed at him by Alden. Instead there was this incongruous display of amiable chattiness. He attributed it instantly to the infection, the alchemical infusion of madness spread from his wife. He recalled the strange fulminating fire of the prior evening.

Alden realized immediately this remark had further undermined his authority with the steward. He had learned over the years that a Captain must retain the threat of potentially sudden and inexplicable violence and the hint of irrationality. MacRae had certainly accomplished that, he reflected. The contrast with his own behavior only pointed up his own failings once again. Despite himself and his efforts to appear potentially irrational, his native geniality and good humor sometimes reappeared bizarrely as they had now. This had led to a mood of suspicion and dissatisfaction among the crew who, lacking any other explanation naturally blamed it on the arrival of his wife on board, a point which MacRae’s act and the steward’s comments had this morning rather gracelessly reinforced.

The *Active* was a coastwise vessel. A large part of the problem in controlling his crew was due (besides the distracting presence of his wife) to the repeated news of gold strikes in the Sierra and their constant pull on their collective imagination. The presence of Mrs. Alden only seemed designed to exacerbate the sense that they were being constrained from unscoped pleasures available to other men and had formed a large part of the after dinner conversation speculating on the precise sexual position their Captain occupied at the moment.

The Gilliss Expedition had been the first major astronomical exploration undertaken by the Navy Department following the return of Wilkes and the American Ex-Ex from its three-year jaunt around the world. The second expedition had been dispatched by the Navy Department in the fall of 1849 to observe the parallax of Venus and Mars from the vantage point east of Santiago in the Andean mountains. Alden was correct. Both Kirlew Hume and Archibald MacRae had been members of it. Alden was personally well acquainted with it as he had at first been picked to head it himself but inexplicably replaced in favor of the plodding Gilliss.

It had been his part in the Wilkes Expedition that should have thrust a young lieutenant Alden into the hallowed lists of bold explorers. Alden happened to be the lookout aboard the expedition's flagship *Vincennes* on the fateful day when man first set eyes on Terra Incognita, the continent of Antarctica. In doing so, he unintentionally incurred the undying wrath of Charles Wilkes, who, a month later excised Alden's log entry noting the sighting when he added another entry incidentally proving conclusively they had found land ahead of the French expedition under Rear Admiral Dumont d'Urville. As Sarah Alden was inordinately fond of pointing out, rightly speaking, the portion of the new continent they had discovered should properly have been named 'Aldenland' and not 'Wilkesland'. Alden's sanguine reply was 'by rights it should be 'Urvilland'.'

It was during the course of the same expedition that the young, popular nephew of Charles Wilkes, Wilkes Henry, had been killed and eaten by Fijian cannibals. Alden, again on watch at the time, was unjustly blamed though the party had gone ashore against his orders. He was ordered by the vindictive Wilkes to personally carry out the retribution, probably in hope that a similar fate would befall him and save him the trouble of disciplining the popular officer. Leading a party of sixty sailors ashore Alden had burned the towns of Sualib and Arro on July 25th 1840, killing almost all the men but sparing the women and children, capturing their chief Veindovi. Instead of hanging Veindovi as Alden suggested, Wilkes decided he should be brought back to the Smithsonian as a 'living ethnographic specimen' but Veindovi did not cooperate, dying aboard ship just as they made New York harbor two years later. The mere sight of the great

bustling city, the plain evidence of the technological superiority of his avowed enemy may have killed him. It was Alden who discovered the chief's mostly naked heavily tattooed body crumpled on the foredeck just as they made port. His death would be looked on as a personal triumph by Wilkes and a tragedy by Alden but Veindovi, not seeing the difference between the two men, with his last breath had cursed them both.

Fiji, If I May

If one may take metaphysical advantage of Veindovi's curse to interject an explanatory gloss if I may, as our intrepid Captain contemplates his past, it should be noted, not all wilful moral blindness is quite as admirable as Veindovi's nor as despicable as Wilkes'. Einstein, you may recall, refused to play chess, claiming it was too violent; (this from the intellectual father of the atomic bomb!) I have found, like him, my work is also far too easily conscripted to the arts of destruction (and to self destruction). The scientist or explorer, like it or not, has always been intimately the unwilling facilitator fo both prophylaxis and destruction, whether on the scale of anaerobic methane eating bacteria, or that of the vast cosmos, they have always been at the forefront of a war with the universe, dedicated to finding ways to assuage the inchoate hatred of the unconscious toward the conscious and the unfeeling toward the feeling. There is, as Alden had by now begun to suspect, only the final betrayal in store, as we all find out eventually, that life is not even the cause of consciousness, but merely the fight against it. As for love? Well, he and Captain MacRae, they could tell you all about that I suppose.

The Far Hills Beckon Wanly

“Were'nt Captain McRae a reglar explorer, hi'self of the Ex-Ex and so forth?”

Alden seemed lost in thought as the question hung in the air like unmatched socks on a clothesline, but there remained in his visage and after image, the persistent impression of attentiveness that his grey-blue eyes gave whether true at the moment or not. The query promptly brought him back to the scene of carnage before him before the lapse was noticed. He drew a

deep breath before replying.

“No, he wasn’t, no--, just the Gilliss expedition, s’were he made his name. Yeah. Amateur astronomer and geodist.”

“Gee-ohh-desist. Or gee-odd-assist’ would it be?”

“Makes no mind. One of two Navy men assigned to it, -him and this Kirlew Hume fellow who was the official astronomer.

“Oh Hume yeah, I remember something about a mule, or the donkey, I meant mule contretemps.”

“Anyway it was Hume who ended up kissin’ cousins with an ass ‘n with Gilliss, crossin’ with ‘em both over the Andes. Made that mule into jerky in the end I expect.”

The steward now paused as if to make evident his circumspect reluctance to utter what he had to say next.

“Rumor is, Cap’n if I may be so sauterne, your missus clearly been complainin’ about the Active’s mess, so I’ve heard.”

“Indeed. Badgering the wait staff unmerciful. Lodged an official complaint with the survey office in Washington. Twistin’ Bache’s suspenders.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Objecting to excessive and intemperate milk consumption by the crew so I hear.”

“Milk? As from cows? N’Who’sit payin’ for the milk now, Mr. Bache hi’self if I might ask?”

“Well, yes, the Survey technically, yes,” Alden suddenly stiffening at the mention of his superior.

“And how is that this is my business you may ask, cuz it’s a miracle if I can serve a proper tea,”

The last was a searing whine following by silence during which an abortive motion revealed his momentary intent to pick up the teapot and set it on the table.

“Is there anything else on your young malleable mind?” Alden turned to stare at him irritably, fully expecting the steward would not answer. He now turned again to look down at the chess board which had remained both undisturbed and unsullied by gore continuing while glancing at the steward from the corner of his eye,

“Why would a man bother setting up a chess board and then blow his brains out? Doesn’t make

much sense. --” pursing his lips as he turned toward the other man.

The steward flushed crimson before urging the words from his strangled throat.

“Well, sir, --he had a game about every day just at eighteen hundred hours, just after mess.”

“And how exactly would you be privy to that information? Delivering his tea?” Alden pressed him.

“Well no sir. It was a reg’lar game,-- with me sir, on my wood.”

“Indeed. So then, he was found by you when you arrived here for your daily game?!”

“No doubt ‘e was, and deadr’n a Portuguese tuna. Musta started without me. Cap’n MacRae, he knew I always play the Sicilian Defense ev’ry time.”

“St. Cillian? Another Irisher I suppose. Very well then, since you are the mess steward, you might as well attend to *this* mess.” Alden supplied this as a weak attempt at humor. As he turned to go, he crouched and paused in the hatchway.

“--- somethin’ else then?”

“It’s just somethin’ rotten peculiar ’bou’that chess board.”

The steward now looked sharply again at the configuration of the pieces as if noticing for the first time.

“Blast my eyes,-- n’it don’t look normal does it? Like somthin’ carved from some kinda rock instead a’ wood like the rest.”

The black bishop he picked up and now held was remarkably light and painted with a black die that transferred to his hands and then his mouth as he wiped away a flume of inquisitive spittle. All the other pieces were indeed rough cut from wood, probably made by MacRae but the piece the steward grasped now seemed formed from some sort of pumice dyed, probably with the shoe black on the shelf.

“I’ll be damned. -- a damn good counterfeit. Musta lost it.”

“Lost what?”

“I meant lost track a time, close to dinner it is. I heerd the bell.”

“Huhh? Hadn’t you noticed that before?”

“Guess I mustta been, you know real preoccupied about dinner or something. On the *Ewing* we put some thought into our menus you know, not that we have no fancy San Francisco Eytalian cook to

shovel our mess.”

“Better clean yourself up as well. Wipe off your nig’rah fish breakfast.” Alden glanced skeptically and contemptuously at the remains of the vomit on the front of the Steward’s jacket and instead of allowing the display of disgust to form his parting gesture he now took an awkward step towards the other man.

“Could have been an accident you know.” Cocking his eye as if it were the firing pin itself.

“Cleanin’ ‘is gun cap’tn.” The steward backed, unsure of the intent of the forced intimate proximity.

“The Fijians have a saying. ‘There is no worse fate for a man than to die by accident’.”

“One more thing. Where is that black queen, -huh? The bitch. Or did you not notice that either>”

Alden asked now proffering the man his already blackened handkerchief with a look of disdain.

“Hah!,- there, she lay, quite as expected. Bitches in the queer steerage, ” The steward exclaimed triumphantly as if he had sighted the spout of a whale. The errant chess piece lay tucked under the bunk between it and the straw mattress. Alden was already irritated by the stewards unsolicited comment about the *Active*’s mess. Just as the steward bent over to retrieve it a fine salt spray spewed in from the open port hole soaking Alden which seemed to him as it were, only the latest in the series of premeditated insults to his dignity starting with Cuyler’s absence and the steward failing to pipe him aboard. He began cursing under his breath as he stumbled forward reaching for the towel above the bunk.

“Shut that, damn you, will you?”

“Sir!,-“ The steward, previously oblivious to Alden’s increasingly foul mood now seemed to be attempting to detain him by interposing himself between the captain and the door. In that moment Alden thought he comprehended the whole situation. There was no suicide. MacRae had been murdered. He himself was not a guest but a captive. A mutiny was underway. He felt for his Navy issue pistol before realizing he had left it in his cabin on the *Active*.

Mutiny Scrutiny

Ever since the news of the gold strikes in the eastern Sierra the Coast Survey had steadily been

losing crewmen. The beckoning charms of quick riches were too powerful an aphrodisiac to ignore. In October a group of men had make off with the *Ewing's* small flat-bottomed rig one night as they lay off San Francisco heading for the Sansone Street docks. Alden had pursued them in the *Active's* shallop to confront the leader, a midshipman named Israel Black. By the time he reached the docks, Black was standing there, vehemently waving off the approaching gig with a pistol. Alden had disembarked anyway and strode up within two feet of the exercised man and spit in his face, Black laughed juicily and then used the residue to groom his rather straggly moustache, "I'll have you hanged and gutted like Sunday dinner." Alden then said in a calm low voice clearly audible to all assembled in the hushed silence on the pier.

"Go back to your leaky ship and your looney missus or you'll be fish bait yerself fore the evenin's over Cap'n. Mark me!" Black, clearly drunk, had backed away and then garrulously leveled the pistol with a shaking hand. It was not an idle threat. When the passed midshipman Gibson attempted to stop them from taking the gig Black had stabbed him and thrown him overboard. To Alden the tense confrontation he recalled was more freighted with the ordure of imminent death than when he had faced down the cannibals of Fiji. It was then he noticed the young ship's porter trying vainly to hide himself behind a large coal stoker. The other men, seemingly more embarrassed than scared, also trying to blend into the background. The porter's canvas rain slicker had caught on the stoker's lid leaving him suspended in plain view behind the menacing Black, unable to escape the deadly parallax of confrontation. Alden, ignoring Black, now called out loudly directly to the man behind him.

"You there! Ivan Stepenko! What are you doing with this lot lad?"

The young, slight Russian with the strands of a sparse black beard slathering his pale chops and cheeks was combing what there was of it with his fingers nervously.

"Captain, I h(ch)yad a taste for a vuoman" Came the embarrassed reply.

The honesty of the response sparked an immediate ripple of laughter from the men on the dock, momentarily relieving the tension. Young Stepenko was well liked, the illegitimate son of a fur trader from Fort Ross, the abandoned Russian colony north of San Francisco. Alden had observed his unrelenting priapic condition the week before and expected something of the sort was up.

"And what exactly is the taste for a woman like, -is it like the gentle fragrant surf lapping at your

face.” One of the emboldened deserters squeezed out after catching his breath.

“Noo—it is a big vyte vave smacking you in the face again and again.” Stepenko replied seriously, - demonstrating with his hand. Hanging from the edge of the stoker, he already looked like a fish on a line. This remark delivered with such seriousness by the dangling, now self-abusive figure sent another paroxysm of laughter through the men. This was exactly what Alden had hoped for. The mutiny was crumbling. Black, sensing he was losing control of the situation, fired the pistol in the air then leveled the weapon again at Alden. Silence again reigned.

“Now what kinda nigger are you exactly Mr. Black?” Alden took a menacing step forward.

“He’s half Irish, half Hebrew” one of the sailors yelled out, adding “Name like Israel, got to be one or the other.”

“Tell you what, how about I cut out the Jew and leave the good Irish meat. How about that?”

Alden said suddenly producing a Bowie knife from beneath his coat and staring straight at the man with his sea-gray puritan stare. It was a bold move considering the man had a pistol leveled at him at the moment. In fact, with that, Black pulled the trigger again. This time the pistol, luckily for Alden, misfired. The terrified Black now threw down the gun and fled, disappearing amidst the bevy of curious longshoremen, night-laborers and drunks who had crowded the end of the dock in the mean time, knocking the poor Ivan Stepenko to the pier leaving his piece of his slicker dangling like a white flag of surrender. The rest of the would-be deserters now returned to the *Active* chastened, but still frustrated, most angered that they had been deprived of an opportunity to make their fortunes ashore.

On Henry Cuyler’s advice there had been no punishment meted out except to Black who after being captured was hanged from the rigging of the naval ship *Savannah* until he was dead. Despite this, or perhaps because of this, Alden for the next few weeks had expected another attempt at a mutiny and now, as the steward blocked his exit from the cabin, here it seemed finally it was. All this passed before his mind’s eye as he glared at the man before him. He searched the steward’s face for a sign of dissimulation. Feeling the suddenly intense scrutiny, instead of turning brazen as expected, the steward stepped to the side. His next remark was almost sheepish in tone.

“While you have a moment, and this may not be the most opportune time to ask, but I’ve been

meanin' to ask, would you consider transferring me to the mess of the *Active*. I don't mind telling ya, – Lieutenant MacRae, he said he was agin it, I should tell you, but, since he's gone now, obviously, still in all honesty I have to tell you, even with all the problems with the missus, I'll be siding with the men on this milk issue. Survey should be paying for it in my book.” The steward now straightened himself and nervously fingered the new pipe bowl he had been carving which still lay in his pocket.

Alden now realized the man's rudeness was not foreshadowing a contemplated mutiny but merely evincing his moral awkwardness and that his desire for a transfer had been vexing him sorely. Somehow, in the skewed equations of shipboard life, the two things, the milk ration and the death of MacRae seemed to have attained equivalent importance to him. Being thus forced to deal with a commonplace administrative issue, even under these bizarre circumstances, seemed to propel Alden into a calmer frame of mind. It also put the steward's recent comments regarding the *Active*'s mess in perspective. They had not been intended as insults but an offer to improve matters.

“See to it that if MacRae has any family, his things are sent to them. I believe he had a sister in St. Louis.-- What is that by the way? Do you know?” Alden flicked his head almost casually toward the bunk and moved back toward the corpse. The steward now beside him reached down and removed the photograph from where it lay beside MacRae on the bunk and carefully placed it in his yellow canvas waistcoat pocket thinking it the object of the Captain's instructions regarding effects. Alden making no objection to the steward's incorrect assumption pointed again, this time more clearly toward the actual object of his query. His curiosity had been drawn not to the portrait but to the tattoo on MacRae's hand.

Tattoos were not all that commonplace on officers as they were on crewmen. The tars and deck hands often tattooed a polar star on their forearms. On closer inspection this was clearly not that though the presence of any tattoo though was enough to confirm his suspicion that MacRae had most likely been promoted up through the ranks.

“‘*Sal y Lima*’. He tole me once. You make a fist and that’s where you put the dash of salt and a piece of lime on your fist, then you down Mexican hooch.” The steward demonstrated what he meant by an awkward pantomime followed by a look of abject surprise.

“Yer supposed to be able to suck the lime, lick the salt and throw down the shot all in one motion without spilling a drop. Sounds physically impossible but I have seen him do it on more than one occasion.”

“Yeah, got it. Jim Dandy.”

Despite himself the steward was now absently smiling at the memory of several previous demonstrations of what he had just described that had taken place in the cabin. Alden was well aware that Captain MacRae kept a bottle of bootleg Tequila stashed in the small compartment beneath his bunk. As commander of the small flotilla of survey ships it was his business to know these things. He thought of opening the drawer but dismissed the thought. He had no burning desire to drink with the steward though the situation called for it and doing so might provide evidence that MacRae himself had been drinking on duty. No need to sully a man’s reputation. Mickie had been a good officer. He deserved better. Instead he pulled a flask from his own breast pocket.

“Take a swig there boy. Calm ya down.”

“No, Captain, I be off the gravy for now. But thank ye much.” The man grinned stupidly in self approbation assuming correctly this meant his request for a transfer had been met with approval.

“Go and roust the sailmaker, tell him to stitch up the sailcloth for a body and we’ll give him a proper burial at sea off the rock tomorrow AM.”

“Sure Captain.”

“-and steward, just so happens, we just lost our junior mess steward today over the side--deserted, - you know, impossible to keep a good crew anymore. After you clean all this up have that tub of rancid butter Cuyler row you over in the shallop.”

“Lt. Cuyler, Sir?” It was an odd request as under the circumstances it would leave the *Ewing* without an officer of command rank aboard.

“He could use the exercise. Get him off his ass!” Then, as an afterthought, as if recognizing the inappropriateness of the last remark and seeking to dilute it Alden added, “And bring along

MacMurtrie as well. My nephew Madison has been itching to meet him you know.”

William Birch MacMurtrie had for the last year been employed by the Survey as the official artist on the west coast. His work had gained no small reputation back east when the watercolors of the Pacific Coast had been collected into a volume of chromolithographs by the prestigious Philadelphia publishing house run by Louis Prang. They were already in their second subscription.

Alden’s nephew, James Madison Alden having signed on with the survey after escorting Sarah Alden west from Massachusetts was something of an amateur artist. Officially he had signed up as a clerk but he hoped, under MacMurtrie’s tutelage, to become a ‘naturalist painter’ himself. Unfortunately, in his uncle’s opinion at least, he had no talent whatsoever for it, a fact though which MacMurtrie agreed with, he was somewhat reluctant to confirm to either to Madison or his uncle, perhaps wisely fearing the wrath of Sarah Alden might as a result descend on him as well. Briefly Alden considered having MacMurtrie sketch the carnage before them in the cabin before it was cleaned up but dismissed the thought.

When Alden had cleared the cabin, the steward reached down and removed the navy revolver from MacRae’s stiffening hand. The gun had three bullets remaining in the chamber. It would fetch a good price in San Francisco.

Lawson Eruptions

It was not that Captain Alden was squeamish. Far from it. On the Wilkes Expedition he had seen men chopped up like chipped beef and consumed by cannibals sporting the strange plumage of voracious, carnivorous birds. He had seen blue frozen bodies hauled from frigid Antarctic waters, bloated square and rigid, tongues swollen like purple eggplants or grisly overdressed ice cubes. No. Death itself did not disturb him in the least, yet, there was something strange in MacRae’s sudden passing, something he could not put his finger on. The following day the funeral had taken

a strange twist as well. Just as MacRae's body had slipped noiselessly over the side into the Pacific a loud exclamation ascended from amidst the assembled crew like a weather balloon, taunting the atmospheric embrace.

“Wipe it! Wipe it! ELEPHANT ASSHOLE!–SEE-YES-TAH!”

Captain Alden instead of instantly seeking out the perpetrator had just ignored it entirely. He knew instantly from whom it had come. The crew did as well. It was James Lawson, the recently arrived head surveyor.

Lawson and George Davidson had set out from Washington for the west coast together. Lawson had shown up in San Francisco a few weeks after Davidson as he had contracted malaria crossing the Isthmus. It had been euphemistically given out that Lawson was suffering from ‘tinnitis’. In fact it was a form of quinine induced Tourettes that caused these outbursts but Lawson had then gone on to compliantly develop a constant ringing in his ears as well.

That evening Alden lay in his bunk staring at the pine planks of the ceiling above. The mental images of the events of the day resonated, whiz-thump, whiz-thump, the trajectory captured as a disjointed narrative, jai-alai balls flung across the cancha court of consciousness, the atemporal circular rhythm of the cesta embedded in pine knots in the boards above his bunk.

He looked up. His wife had appeared in the doorway.

“Hello dear.” She was framed there, her neat hair taxed by the brisk breeze on deck. “I am a little concerned, John.” Her words only accentuated the wild look in her eye, as if her mind was busy elsewhere.

‘Setting ladders at the ramparts of sanity.’ as Alden like to drolly put it.

A quizzically masticating goat's head appeared in the door frame just below the outsize bow at her waist.

“Why my sweet? What is it?”

“With all the cloudiness I've heard there hasn't been a proper reading of our position in days. I am afraid we may be lost.”

“If it will make you feel better, my dear, we can head in for San Diego.”

“It would. I have been so nervous. What will you tell the men though?”

“Simply that we need to land a timbering party.”

“Neaahhhhhh” the goat bleated sympathetically.

“Yes Neah indeed.” Alden said aloud.

“Thank you my love. Terrible about Cap’n MacRae.”— She turned and vanished in the grey anonymity of the hatchway.

“Such is love,” he uttered then just as quickly as she was out of sight he wondered.

‘Is it?—Lost indeed’ he snorted.

His attention was recaptured by the intricate involute, spiral patterns of pine knots above his bunk. Somehow they began reversing themselves as if rotating, rooted in opposable tracks, like a carousel within a carousel. He wondered for the moment if he had somehow become prey to the same madness that afflicted his wife.

Then, it was as if everything went black. He heard the water lapping the side of the boat. As he fought to gain some perspective, as if coming from a faint, his surroundings somehow strange but familiar. He had been transported into a negative alternate universe where the polarity of black and white, good and bad was somehow reversed. The carousel of reverse memory lurched back into motion, twin phalanxes of frozen steeds this time each alchemically rendering the other strangely apparent as they passed each other unblinking, striving, leaping from their surging axes as rigid as a heart attack, reversed, insubstantial palindromes caught in a blind circular ballet of involute honky tonk gravity.

“Bastards!” The voice of his wife carried down to him through the porthole. The clack clacking of the goat’s hooves had stopped and at that moment all the images faded, sliding past his outstretched fingers, knots released, like a tackle that had slipped, forgiving its tension, rendering slack lines of authority, seeding the spaces with some newly transmogrified vegetative rot. In a parallel infiltration, where once certitude had stood positive and immovable as the hidden rock mount below, there was now the healthy-sick infirmity of open ocean, the spray shot up in the distance from the unmarked sea mount. He realized in the excitement over MacRae he too had neglected to set the errant buoy, both the sea and the mental buoy meant to demarcate the edge of his own sanity.

“Yes!”, he had startled himself. Speaking the single word aloud seemed to brace him with a cleansing resolve. He would call that young steward in for a talk sometime, sometime soon, very soon, -what would they talk about?,-not about MacRae certainly, that would be an accusation, but what?,-the milk, -, the issue with the milk! That was it! He could talk to him about the milk!

Captain Alden rose stiffly from his bunk and went over to his desk where a map of the shoal lay unfurled. He sat and poured himself a second straight drink from the flask now sitting there. Since his wife arrived, even with the rheumatism, he had limited himself to one drink a day, Whiskey mixed with goats’ milk. He rationalized this present excess, trying to wash away the persistent, cloying feeling of disquiet it portended, “shipboard life is hard on a man and sometimes changes him in an inscrutable way, even on coastwise vessels things can happen, strange things.” He now studiously ignored the fresh neat drink and took up the pen that sat next to it on the desk carefully scratching out the name which had previously indicated the position of the rock they had been charting; ‘McCarthur’s Shoal’, William Pope McCarthur had captained the *Ewing* before MacRae. His hand hovered above the sheet for a moment like a bird choosing the likeliest branch, as for a moment he thought about writing in the words ‘MacRae’s Rock’. Instead, in his neat hand, he inscribed two words, ‘Bishop’s Rock’, these right next to the cross-hair of the triangulation which established the precise position of the highest point of the shoal where the unfortunate *Stilwell S. Bishop* had struck.

Following the funeral Cuyler rowed James McMurtrie and the steward over to the *Active* as requested by Alden. The steward had immediately disappeared below to the mess. As they made way under stream north from the still treacherous waters of the Cortez Bank Alden’s nephew, James Madison emerged from his cabin to encounter his hero William McMurtrie now standing on the larboard deck of the ship as it lurched into the wind. They watched the smaller *Ewing*, still at anchor, disappear to their stern.

“Take a walk with me.”

The made their way into the clockwise sheets of spray toward the heaving bow. After an uncomfortable interval young Alden had turned.

“So.”

“Ahh---I just enjoy watching the ship slice through the water. It’s like a hot sharp knife goin’ through bacon, surgical, clean.” Remarked the older man,

“Indeed, it is the scar that heals itself, the sea, compliant and patient, certain it will be made whole.” The youth replied.

“And beautiful too, isn’t it? If occasionally violent.”

“Occasionally violent?”

“You’ll find out.” The older man nodded. After another silence McMurtrie turned to him.

“What’s a strapping young chicken hawk like you doing far out at sea? Aren’t there plenty of pretty young sparrows waiting for you ashore?” McMurtrie turned his back to the blank canvas of ocean confronting them in a vain attempt to light his pipe.

“Trying to learn art from you. Besides,--Not a one. Cold winter. The sparrows mostly froze dead in the trees.” The slightly delicate youth had replied, dolefully shaking his damp head as if to better align the twisted metaphor.

“Too bad!” McMurtrie replied, shaking his head sympathetically. “Really,-- really too bad. After a moment adding, “Now do me a favor.”

“Anything.”

“Fuck off will you!” MacMurtrie said under his breath when the slender youth was out of sight.

Of Whole Cloth

Since a year before his outing to Mono Lake, Twain had been working for the Virginia City paper, the Territorial Enterprise, first as a stringer, then a freelance reporter covering items of civic interest. He had achieved some temporary notoriety after publishing an account of the ‘petrified man’, actually a hoax about a fossilized corpse found supposedly seated in a niche in the mountains outside Gravelly Ford, the most godforsaken ass-crack of Humboldt County. Twain, it seemed, had acquired a grudge against the coroner of Humboldt County and this was his way of getting even, forcing the man, Sewall, to make an arduous five day journey through the dessert in winter to perform an inquest on a corpse that did not exist. The credulity of Justice Sewall was

both understandable and perhaps inevitable in light of the fact that paper after paper, including the New York Times had picked up the story from the Territorial Enterprise and reprinted it as solid, bourgeois, laundered tea cozy, curtained, drawn and shuttered fact.

The article had asserted as an ancillary claim, that there were upwards of three hundred people per day visiting this desolate outpost at the far edge of Justice Sewall's circuit where the figure remained, stubbornly glued by the butt through the miracle of limestone calcification to the surrounding rock. The figure (as Twain describes him), was naked, in a seated position with both hands alternately fixed in front of his nose in a wagging position generally acknowledged as a gesture of impudent disdain, this gesture, as events would prove, directed toward the credulous Sewall. He was using a fossilized proxy to get even, to settle a score after the judge had apparently earned Twain's animosity by threatening 'to whip him on sight' for reasons undetermined. Admitting in a letter to his brother Orion, the secretary of the new territory of Nevada, that his story 'was made from whole cloth', further noting that he had no idea whatsoever what the original source of the grudge between him and the judge and no clue as to why the man would want to 'whip him on sight', Twain, had drawn aside the curtain of time to the wonders of a past age appearing on a blank stage with glee born of a baseless animosity. He did not know that there was no longer any such thing as whole cloth anymore, but then neither apparently did Judge Sewall.

Planets and Stars

Yet, it is just as I suspected, some of this was true, the names, the dates the faces, the cornucopia of verisimilitude, it could not all be a lie, yet I know it to be different. Clearly those I seek to help are not, cannot be the same as those I transgressed against and vice versa. That is just the fate of a wanderer. So, when I look to the heavens for my answer I find not one but two equally valid perspectives, two sets of books as it were to account for my confusion; the stars which travel as an orderly monolith, no jostling, just a vast lexicon of fixed grammatic relations, splattered across the black dictionary of night,--- uncountable scintilla sojourning in perfect tandem, moving with

shared unfathomable, purpose, -neatly arranged as a well-set breakfast on a trolley, a billion Don Quixotes with Sancho Panzas, in servile obedient lockstep, star following star, following star. In these are reflected the blind obedience that afflicts unknowing heaven with obsessive fervor. Then there are the masterless ones, –the ronin, the planets who move seemingly at will.

If I may digress further (without moving), the word itself, ‘planet’, is derived from the Greek word ‘planeta’ or wanderer. The wanderers, are unowned, like words floating above all the pointillist certitude, motes in the celestial eye, confused, vacillating in their movements, see-sawing, sidewalk artists compelled to paint a portrait of uncertainty in chalk and sand, propelled by some curiously erratic energy. Perhaps one may attempt to gain from them some singular unwavering perspective, some tactical advantage, in any case a Herculean task, the distillation of experience flowing from their abstract motions, but that is just the same disconcerted labor as I find occurring in myself, - (and ultimately reflecting the same lack of clear purpose) and compelling, requiring some profligate faith in my eventual destination, even while the stars exercise their pretty, predetermined pirouettes of economy wherein not a single motion is wasted, no unconsidered step taken, not a movement effected but which has been choreographed in advance. Beyond them both what I have come to expect is only, Holbein’s ‘Dance of Death’, a legion of fugal antiphonies preceded by chromatic steps toward some inexorably determined end point, some preordained destination always, at least partially in view, rocks skipped on the pond of heaven by some unseen hand disappearing in the pools of caustic night. Stars, the unblinking counterfeits of purity and purpose, and even sometimes of hidden warmth, while the wandering planeta, planing, planning, skimming forwards and backwards ferrying unspoken palindromic contracts across the Styx, forging erratic motions with the appearance of purpose, energy and certainty, telegraphing indecipherable meaning,-- mocking my own cowardly vacillations, and incidentally also those of the United States Coastal Survey whose motions were sometimes similarly unpredictable. So there was at last, as with all puzzles, a choice,-- the lying, chummy, proximate beer of erratic planets or the merciless liquor of the distant stars. Like all good mariners I chose the stars.

