

DRAFT

monoville

by Kenneth Lifshitz

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Book I
Elizabeth

Able Was I Ere I Saw Elba

Bear in mind I am only writing this down, you know, so I won't forget it, and I already may have carelessly forgotten some of it, but it is only fair to warn you, if only to distinguish it from the rest of my ceaseless palindromic mental jabbering, and, so that I don't use up all my assigned words before the important parts, (not that there's really anything to say anyway), this story, in common with all fundamentally heuristic journeys, indeed in keeping with things in general, has a beginning, a middle and an end,—not like life which goes like this; first you're here, then you're not,—and so 'F—n' what!,

and,

'SO F__N WHAT??!', (the intrepid reader at this point may rightly fear that they have borrowed, stolen or purchased a volume of inane gibberish may echo), and if by this exclamation it empowers them, which I hope is the case, wonderful —and I would agree, if only tentatively, for the most part, echoing forth from the silent, uncaring snows of the eastern slopes of the Sierra Madre where I now sit, 'so what', why should I care? What difference does it make to me!?!—Well I'll tell you, because empowered, caring people are generally easier to live with and incidentally also to lie to. and about, simply that,—plus, they're all here, mostly, if only as ghosts.

When I use the term 'heuristic', it really has nothing to do with clocks or time, or anything remotely in the French sense of 'le heur', which since we have been talking about time, an existentialism might leap to mind,—it means rather a result arrived at through the assumption of a known lie to reach an unknown truth. Rather simple; a single presupposition which amazingly somehow provides an unparalleled fruitfulness of results and it may be supposed, if only for the sake of argument, to be true, and therefore you understand, anything I say is apt to be possibly a lie, and that is why, and thus I

further caution you, particularly if you find you are inordinately enamored of the myriad polite social conventions that usually underlay and propel a story like this forwards, true or not, that what you might expect and extrapolate from this nod at structural probity, hence, (since it is not what you may have at first may have presupposed but now something quite different that), it merits a fair warning, a shout out, if you will, and that is the case, that my family has always consisted of marginally talented but incorrigible criminals and liars, liars and criminals, but such as (and I may be the sole exception to this genetic imperative), if I may say so, nevertheless subsequently somehow managed to contribute some great thing, something really remarkable, but, (and I almost as usual omitted the most important point again), we have also always been wanderers too, whether on land or on the sea, forever seeking a new horizon, a unspoilt vista, a virgin eye or ear,, so more often than not, the societies that have benefitted from us have not always necessarily been the same one against whom we have committed crimes. This however has made life difficult and made beginnings more difficult, because always, somehow, they feel also like an ending,—like an ending.

And as I tell you all this all now in confidence, (if for no other reason than to save you the trouble of finding it out later), and so you will know that despite all dissimulation, that I have always personally believed in the possibility of personal redemption, not as something that may be achieved, but as something which can occur in the heart,—that is, once we know where the heart is situated, or will be, or where it was, once,—as a heuristic supposition of course. I mention therefore ‘things in general’ as a particular heuristic class to distinguish them from ‘things of the heart’ which, unlike stories, unlike things in general, may or may not have a beginning or an end, or middle though they may share a common thread,—a thread that may both bind and distinguish as much as Brahmin wrist thread. But, what both have inextricably in common is that, they will pass, nay must pass, a pivotal moment; a vertex; a point of no return, whether based on a lie or not. You may dismiss this also as trivial, or blather, or perhaps, ‘only common knowledge’

and consider that I have descended once again into the mental jabbering I have ostensibly eschewed, but I put it to you, dear patient reader, apart from this structure, tell me,-- what is the the thing that ultimately characterizes this journey,--any kind of journey?, even a journey toward redemption, if not motion and perspective?, and is not this very motion, forward or backwards, critical both to its identity and its lack of identity? And just as every artist worth their salt understands this, every sea captain too is informed on this point, indeed, it was ever clearly marked on all the old maps that in the operations of motion and perspective there is always a certain point , a vertex,--a hinge so to speak which once passed brooks no return. Captain James Cook in traveling to Antarctica denominated it on his chart aptly and emphatically as ‘ne plus ultra’,--‘go no further’ which on the preceding ancient maps was generally followed by the phrase,--‘here be dragons’. If so, then for those who stubbornly or stupidly persist further, beyond this juncture of the heuristic subject and and deterministic object, what follows, is called by philosophers, ‘fate’, or alternatively, by post-modern physicists, ‘collapse’ and whereas it becomes only then inescapably defined and in turn defines, whatever occurs before, as mere circumstance, or quanta and that whatever follow is an inescapable result.

Therefore, ‘So What!’

notwithstanding, I put it to you, that what is not assuredly common knowledge is that this vertex, this juncture, this point may at times coincide with what is called otherwise, ‘the middle’ of things and sometimes it may not,--it floats, it dances above the staid structure of story and history independent of implied sequence like a sprite in a vent of steam from a desolated lake on a moonlit night. And what is certainly also not common knowledge therefore, and to make matters worse, this ‘so called’ vertex may even at times coincide with the point of beginning in which case nothing following will change in the least, --IN THE LEAST! and in which case also the question of excitement too is moot, or quickly becomes so, or sometimes so, unless it also coincides with the endpoint in which case someone or something, must die, crumble, or as they say in Mono Lake, dance away,--and the whole becomes just a dance of death and who can survive that,--if

not perhaps an artist?. It was an artist after all, (not a scientist or philosopher), serving not on Cook's 'Endeavor' but on the far more humble United States Coastal Surveying vessel 'Ewing', William McMurtrie, to whom I am related (not by cosanguinity), who came to understand this all perfectly, and that exactly where, or when this vertex impinged depended solely and entirely on those two elements; -- momentum and perspective or, what is designated by the Chinese as, 'the will of heaven' and in modern terms by the phrase 'shit happens'.

Those observant water color painters assigned aboard seagoing survey vessels in the 19th century off the coast of California, spent a good deal of time experiencing both momentum and perspective as they could not perform their assigned duties past the setting of the sun that their eyes turned to that other feast, the night sky, (which to they found, for both professional and recreational purposes) so infused with ancient truth, that they railed against its unfailing silent judgment of human frailty. (This of course was and is a lie), but if you will bear with me, it also becomes apparent to the trained eye, that are which emerge from this profound unalterability, two distinct and different classes of items therein, distinguished by the two capital modes of motion, one class being called planets and one, stars. It is the stars, one finally notices, that move as a monolith, a vast vault of fixed relation, splattered on a black canvas, with uncountable scintilla sojourning in perfect tandem, moving with some common, unfathomable, purpose,-- like a well set breakfast. Then there are the planets. The word itself 'planet', as you may know, is derived from the Greek word 'planeta' meaning 'wanderer'. The planets, seem to float above all this pointillist certitude, like motes in the celestial eye, by comparison confused and vacillating in their movements, sometimes going forward, sometimes back, propelled by the same curious erratic energy, the attempt to gain perspective, the same as I find occurring in myself,-- the same lack of purpose evinced to the observer, 'wanderer', I have found therefore most aptly describes their erratic motion,-- and my own as well.

As a curious parallel, there also have ever been, from time immemorial, two types of beasts (and men); predators and wanderers. Predators in general form what is called for lack of a better word, 'society', and this is true whether it be on board ship or on the land. They, like the stars, travel in a world of fixed orbits, spending their lives in predetermined circumscribed territories wherein not a single motion is wasted, no unconsidered step taken, no motion exercised but which has been choreographed in what the great artist, Hans Holbein portrayed as, this 'dance of death', the endpoint always at least in view. The wanderers by comparison seem to move without focus, without plan, without territory, ranging at will. What however appears as confusion or a lack of purpose, to them, is also however instinctual, they are following other, unseen currents, other genetic imperatives— therefore when they move it is appears at least to us, as sometimes having a jerky motion, like specks in the eye of some unseen cosmic observer. The truth that we have supplied through this analogy, this tale, therefore is that those who wander live before, and those who prey on us, live after. All this is very confusing. Shift happens.

Bishop Rock

The first thing the young curly haired steward noticed when he went below was the creaky sound made by the cabin door belonging to the skipper of the Ewing. It was slightly ajar. The next thing, as he approached and peered past the vacant jamb was a great quantity of brains and blood splashed onto the cabin wall behind the bunk and an overturned teapot on the floor just inside. Within the confines of the cabin, on the bunk, hunched forward was the schooner's skipper, Lt. Archibald McRae with a rude gaping hole where the back of his head had been and his left arm contorted back to support the point of most profligate carnage. In his sun tanned limp tattooed hand was a nice, shiny colt navy revolver with the gun-metal blue barrel and sitting in front of him on a low table, seemingly undisturbed, was a chessboard with hand carved pieces that had been just set up for play. A chair was pulled up for an absent opponent. The first move had apparently been a doozy.

The tattoo on the dead captain's hand was one he had acquired while traveling in Chile. It was a circular imprint, just behind the thumb divided into two sections. Inside each section was inscribed a single word, – 'lima' and the other, 'sal', –salt and lime, the two major constituent components of the Tufa found at Mono Lake, –or course not the fruit variety of lime, but calcium carbonate. The 'Ewing' had been surveying in an area of open ocean called the Cortez Bank, an underwater sea mount about one hundred miles offshore and twenty miles out from the flying wedge of rocks called the channel islands, a bank of rocks protecting the coast of California. A month before, the yankee clipper Stillwell S. Bishop had carved a ten foot chunk of timber out of her hull when she hit a rock in the Cortez Bank which lay in two and a half fathoms of water and she had begun shipping water like it was the the last teapot in England. She had limped her way into San Francisco.

Had the Stillwell Bishop possessed the latest charts of the United States Coastal Survey she might have avoided the rock as it had in fact been discovered and carefully noted on the charts two years earlier. On some days it's location was easily visible as it would send a spray a good twenty feet up into the air. Since this anomalous sight in the middle of the ocean was an apparent warning of danger evident to any attentive skipper, perhaps this was why they had not bothered to definitively mark it with a buoy. What they did not know was that on some days, there was no geyser shooting up, nothing to indicate its deadly presence just below the surface. It had been on such a calm day that the gut wrenching sound of splintering wood had suddenly echoed through the hull of the Stillwell Bishop as she made her way toward the army garrison at San Diego.

The Ewing had been ordered back to the spot, after the incident with the Bishop to set the neglected spar buoy, and to ward off any other shipping from a similar fate in the meantime. This sternly worded order came directly from A. D. Bache, the superintendent of the Coast Survey and through him to Captain James Alden, thence to the now recently deceased Lieutenant Archibald McRae of the Ewing. The owner of the unfortunate Stillwell Bishop evidently had friends in Washington

An hour later, the captain of the steamship 'Active' stepped briskly aboard the Ewing. He was a trim and crisp figure with humorous eyes and the beginnings of a receding hairline. Captain Alden of the US Coastal Survey was a direct descendent of John and Priscilla Alden of the Plymouth Colony both of whom had been passengers on the Mayflower. In fact these direct forbears had been immortalized in the Longfellow poem, 'The Courtship of Miles Standish',—and it had been his great great grandmother, Priscilla Mullins, who had formed the vertex of a puritanically repressed love triangle consisting of herself, Standish and the barrel maker John Alden,—this at least, according to the poet. In any event, Alden clearly looked the part of a sea captain, intrepid, athletic and

dashing, he had inherited the haunted look poets like to portray. As he heaved himself onto the bobbing vessel he did so with little apparent effort. Scaling the gunnel, his descending foot hovered for an instant and then neatly met the rising deck. In this one motion and in his bearing it was made apparent to any that cared to notice that he was well accustomed both to authority and the rhythms of the sea. The Ewing had signaled his ship when the body had first been discovered. As Alden now went below with the steward to take in the grim scene there was little in that expression or bearing that changed.

“Pretty much of a mess.” he intoned.

“What’s that in his left hand, Cap’n?” The dark eyed curly haired steward indicated nervously what looked to be a yellowing scrap of paper.

“Looks like a Daguerre.” Alden speculated, drawing closer to the bunk.

They’ve started doing them in San Francisco,---” the steward replied

He gingerly took the blood spattered photograph from the hands of McRae. It was the quarter size of the Daguerrotype plate,—and it portrayed a handsome young man of about twenty five grasping a telescope. On the bottom of the silver frame was engraved the name, “Kirlew Hume.” The idea of ‘smiling’ for one’s portrait is a rather later concept in photography, so, it was noteworthy, the mouth of this man in the picture appeared anomalously, almost forcibly, contorted into an almost macabre expression of joy.

“Kirlew Hume? I know that name.” Alden mused as he placed the object back on the bed next to the corpse.

“Really?”

“Yahhm--, yeah, Kirlew Hume, he was the astronomer for the Gilliss Expedition if I’m not mistaken.” Alden was, as usual, at least when it came to Naval matters, not mistaken. The Gilliss Expedition which had also been called United States Naval Astronomical Expedition had been assigned to travel to Chile and Argentina in 1849 to observe the parallax of Venus and Mars. There was a reason why Alden was so well versed in the personnel of Naval expeditions. Before joining the survey he had been

himself a member of the Wilkes Expedition, also known at that time as the American Ex Ex. Alden in fact had been the first person ever to lay eyes on, terra incognita, the continent of Antarctica a fact which Wilkes conveniently neglected to note in the ship's log.

"Wasn't Lieutenant McRae also a member of that expedition as well?" The steward asked

"Yes he was. Only two navy men,—him and Hume, well there was another, passed midshipman called Hunter, but Hunter was sent home once they hit Chile. Some kind of disagreement over the food. Didn't really make much sense.." Alden paused again and looked down at the chess board which had remained remarkably both undisturbed and unsullied by gore. He made an abortive motion to right the teapot upended next to it but then thought better of it.

"Looks like Lieutenant McRae had a game planned. Why would a man bother to set up a chess board and then blow his brains out. It doesn't make sense to me. -- curious, wouldn't you say". With this the steward flushed.

"Well, sir, —he and I had a game about every day at seventeen hundred hours."

"So he was probably expecting you specifically to find him then?" Alden pressed him.

"No doubt. Sir,"

"Well since you are the mess steward, you might as well clean up this mess." Alden said wryly, and turning to go. He paused in the hatch.

"Wait! That chess board,--- something is wrong."

The steward now looked at the configuration of the board and realized immediately what it was.

"Yes you're right, I'll be damned, the black bishop is in the queen's spot. It looks like it's carved from some kind of rock." All the other pieces were indeed wood and the bishop in question was carved a some sort of grayish stone.

"And where then is the queen?" Alden asked.

“There, she lays.” The steward exclaimed as if he had sighted the spout of a whale. The chess piece lay tucked under the bunk on the deck. He now went and retrieved the vagrant Queen. As he bent over a fine salt spray blew in from the open cabin window. It seemed to infuse Alden with some vague purpose and ignoring the recent find as coincidental he once again turned to leave.

“Sir,—“ The steward, now attempted to detain him. “While you have a moment, and this may not be the most opportune time to ask, but I’ve been meanin’ to ask if you would permit me to transfer to the mess of the Active. I don’t mind telling you, – Lieutenant McRae was against it, but since he’s gone now.” The steward asked straightening.

“Well,—as a matter of fact, we just in fact lost our junior mess steward today--the fellow deserted,—.” While the request might have seemed callous, the Survey was constantly losing men by desertion to the beckoning gold fields. Five years earlier there had been a wholesale mutiny aboard the Ewing when sailor named John Black had taken the shallop of the Ewing at gunpoint to convey himself and a large portion of the crew to San Francisco to head for the gold fields. The shallop was a small two masted flat bottomed rig that ferried the surveying crews between the Ewing and the Active or to the shore to carry on their surveying activities there.

“After you clean this up then come aboard. Have Cuyler row you over Feuerstool. He could use the exercise.” Then as an afterthought Alden added, “And bring McMurtrie as well. My nephew has been inquiring when he could meet him.” Alden’s nephew, James Madison Alden, though signed on officially as a clerk was hoping to become a ‘naturalist’ like McMurtrie, an artist assigned to portray the coastal areas they were mapping. The steward reached down and removed the photograph from where it lay on McRae’s bunk and carefully placed it in his waistcoat pocket.

“I’ll see to it if he has any family this is sent to them.”

“What is that tattoo. Do you know?” Alden inquired. Alden had seen many tattoos but usually not on the officers. The presence of this one therefore indicated that probably McRae had come up through the ranks of the navy or possibly served aboard merchant

ships before joining the Navy.

“Sal Y lima”. Yeah, he got that tattoo in Mexico on the campaign. He told me. You make a fist and then it’s where you put the dash of salt and a piece of lime on your fist before you down a shot of tequila.” The steward replied. “You’re supposed to be able to suck the lime, down the shot and lick the salt in sequence, all in one motion without spilling anything. I’ve seen him do it. Quite a trick.” Despite himself the steward was now absently smiling at the thought.

Alden took in this piece of information somewhat more solemnly,—he knew that Captain McRae before signing on with the coast survey, had been involved in the annexation of California and also that he kept a bottle of Mexican Tequila in the small compartment under his bunk. It was his business as head of the small fleet to know these kind of things, especially about his officers. He dismissed this now. There was no evidence that McRae had been drinking on duty and he’d like to keep it that way. He had been a good officer..

“Go and roust the sailmaker, he can stitch him up in sailcloth and we’ll bury him tomorrow morning after mess .”

When Alden returned to his cabin aboard the Active that evening he was still disturbed by the events of the day. He had seen many men die in his long career, by their own hand or by other’s but there was something about McRae’s suicide that he couldn’t put his finger on. The image, now an afterimage, recognizable as such only because the polarity of black and white, good and bad was somehow reversed, the residue of non-deisomerised rhodopsin remaining in the moral retina now anti-transmitting the image of mental stability he had of the loyal Captain of the Ewing, or was it his visual cortex providing the unasked for continuity, a negative shifting ‘grundform’ for his formerly unshakably positive moral equation,—whatever the source the distance between the two images had drawn closer, just enough to lend an entirely new perspective, stereoscopically fused by his mental moral glasses into a picture of unimaginable depth and clarity. Yes, he would call that young steward in for a talk sometime soon,—what

would he talk about,—not about McRae, that would sound like an accusation, but what,—the milk,—that was it, he would talk with him about the milk. He went over to his desk where a map of the shoal lay unfurled. His wife lay asleep in the bunk. He noticed she looked peaceful for a change. He thought about rousing her to discuss matters but he realized that it would be futile. Somehow the discussion would come back to her problems which always centered on George Davidson, the Survey's Engineer and how he had swindled Alden out of co-authorship of the Mariner's Bible. As he sat and poured himself a drink, he reasoned thus to himself, "shipboard life is hard on a man, even on a coastwise vessel such as the Ewing", he thought, "—or on a woman", as he glanced at the sleeping form of his wife. He took up the pen and carefully scratched out the name on the chart which had indicated the position of the rock, 'McCarthur's Shoal', McCarthur had commanded the Ewing before McRae. He thought for a moment about writing in the words 'McRae's Rock' but instead in his neat hand he wrote in the words 'Bishop's Rock'.