

MEMPHIS SHOALS

BRAD CRENSHAW

Greenhouse Review Press

ARGUMENT

PREVIOUSLY, Alfred Ison was found dead and dismembered under painful circumstances. The events of his burial at the Memorial Park Funeral Home and Cemetery in Memphis, Tennessee, have been described in *Genealogies* by Bartlett Smith, one of the family members attending services. After the burial, the mourners returned to the home of Alfred's grandparents, John and Sarah Elam, for the last meal together of the reunited clan.

During the course of that evening, Bartlett related the curious history of John and Sarah, who are not of the modern world. Elam was born in 1499 in London; Sarah was born in 1503 to native tribes in Florida. Together, they traveled to Mexico to assassinate Cortés, and thereby change the course of history in the Americas. On their journey, they were lured into the sanctuary of ancient creatures winged like angels, fought against troops of militant spider-women, and at last, battled against the invading plague of measles decimating most of the New World. They failed to shoot Cortés, however.

Once returned to Florida, in 1521, they were accidentally rendered immortal, and spent the next 359 years pursuing what came to be known as genetic research, selling their advanced secrets to Gregor Mendel, who profited by the knowledge, and who has become deservedly famous. John Elam and Sarah have lived henceforth in secret, more-or-less, out of the public eye.

Bartlett took off for California after Alfred's burial in late July, 1972, but returned to Raleigh, unexpectedly, ten years later in June, 1982, for reasons he is about to explain to his two cousins, Ricky and Brian Haden, over dinner and drinks at Miss Polly's Soul City Cafe on Beale Street, Memphis. Today is July 22, 1982.

In this he's being
dialectical, like
Nietzsche, out of
Hegel—and not really
honest with himself or,
therefore, with you.

1982 is at the beginning
of the AIDS epidemic
in the United States.

This beautiful
phenomenon can
still be witnessed on
L.A. beaches, and in
Santa Monica, Malibu,
sometimes Corona del
Mar. By contrast, never
in Long Beach.

The homeless are
close at hand, though
sometimes hard to see
when you don't want
to look. We might bet
they are the source
of fear that informs
our present cultural
fascination with
zombies.

Proverbs, 17:22.
Bartlett hasn't
forgotten his Bible.

On Muscle Beach on
the south side of the
Santa Monica Pier.

To precess is to change
according to precession,
which is itself to alter
the rotational axis of
a spinning body.

my way to California, with its brimming
coasts, its pools of disenchantment and
regret,

and those extravagant beliefs
in earthly reinvention, promises
of safe sex, not to mention transmigrating
joys, as witnessed on the glistening beaches
blanketed by actresses and beauties
browning in the sun of their ambition.
Pelicans offshore would swoop for food
on bent, pirate wings, while in the baseless
air, gulls dropped like raucous angels
tossed from grace. It takes me back, as if
I never lived in sight of tricks, or missing
persons rolled inside of plastic sacks.
I was roused, and rough in my instruction,
dazzled in the blue winds always
in the way, rendering the far-
away schooners blue at sea. They moved
me like an errand in an unknown land,
like promises, like rules I'd better try.
So far, so good. Near at hand, drag
queens were holding court in force against
the less-gorgeous mortals put on earth
obscurely, whose broken spirits dried their bones.
White men slept on graphic towels, and burned.
Meanwhile, movie extras practiced unexpected
love, and off around those fucking palm
trees, quarterbacks kept making plays
all day, and scored. Everyone auditioned as
adults. On mats, amid the pandemonium,
were golden body builders lifting their
eternal weights, and taking steroids sold
by lab assistants winging frisbees onto
precessed lyric vectors.

And well, yes,
since you asked, I was carried off
by whole cloth, and left not a rack
behind of Baptist trash, but worked on boats
holding melons, and manned the harbor tender
when I could, escorting visitors
to shore for tips. One time, late,
with weather coming in, I ferried to
a ship the size of dreams a shimmery, drunken
star bestrewn with jewels and ropes of pearls,
but minus shoes

—of whom was born, of course,
a famous trail of love, not unusual,
and who would later drown unfairly, I
should add, in another season, near
a Channel Island—

years, however, after
I politely heaved her lithesome body
into bed inside her reeling cabin,
feeling generous and grandiose,
as if I had new teeth. Whereupon
I lurched precipitously, pitched backwards,
and was thrown away entirely as
the schooner slued round, hugely, as
I heard it, in the mounting wind. I hurtled
like a lost comet, crashing on
a davit, while a deckhand madly slipped
the anchor, and we plunged away like horses
into foam and swell, with me in tow.

What may not be wonderful about
abstraction? what is this world? to be plucked
from one dimension, and deposited
with bruises innocently in some midget
cosmos run by half-deities,

This was crazy, to go out
in high weather. Bartlett
was merely a deckhand
on the tender, and so
the decision was not his
to risk the boat, and
all on board.

She drowned in 1981
near the coast of
Santa Catalina. One
conspiracy theory
argued she was silenced
by the CIA before
she could reveal all
she knew about the
assassination of JFK.
Another theory
suggested that her
husband pushed her
over board.

Also, sadly, she was
intoxicated.

To slip an anchor
means to release the
anchor and its chain
from the windlass,
thereby abandoning
both to the seabed.
This is a costly
maneuver because you
have lost both your
equipment, and your
capacity to anchor next
time you want to.

As an aging king of England, Lear once enjoyed a related spectacle, whose thoughts were similarly affected. He had a pagan attitude, and welcomed the obliterating chance for vengeance.

Ocelots are commonly nocturnal, so Naomi was up running about at dusk, and during the night. When scenting their territory, ocelots squirt urine backwards, with admirable water pressure.

Insofar as the schooner had just weathered a violent squall, no one on the boat was interested in provoking anyone or anything into another storm. Just be cool.

Bartlett was an inconvenience. He had only the clothes he was wearing when he fell on board, as the schooner left. He had no place to bunk, no defined task, and ate like a starved horse from the finite stores onboard. So Naomi represented his chance for redemption.

half of whom were sickened by the yaw and ocean roll engendered by Pacific squalls—which usually are marvelous when seen from land,

but in their ardent midst, I'm here to say, the morning blew its smokes on board, and thunder followed close on thought-executing fire, the sum of which de-magnetized the common sense of Hollywood. Someone brought an ocelot they called Naomi, who escaped her cage, and once the winds decayed a bit, the weather settled, she would climb the masts, and slink along the yard arms stalking sea birds as they roosted. Lavishly, she pissed backwards in the rigging, which appalled the yardmen when they reefed sails that simply reeked of pheromones designed to carry miles inside a jungle, and arouse erotic promise, for a price. A tactic old as war, if truth be told about it. If truth pertains at all. Honestly, you wouldn't either want to risk inflaming the illiterate ocean gods, a volatile lot by history, nor rub the nether spirits up to rock your bones with animal abandon, in your wooden shelter, bobbing on the insubstantial elements.

And since, to some minds, by closely defined reasoning, I was a stowaway, and hoping to have all charges dropped, I peaceably agreed to clamber to the topsails, trailing strings of bloody sausages, and lumps of steak,

with which to tempt Naomi to her cage.
On balance, little could be easier.
Conceding how I cut my teeth on Elam's
garden creatures—for instance, his invisible
snakes coiling in the basement, the winged
fish or something, plus the family wolves,
which were often vicious—, well, I wasn't
discommoded by an ocelot.
Aloft together, we were clearly without
secrets when Naomi leapt symmetrically
to the crosstrees, with her jungle eyes
lighting up the red meat I
extended. I made her reach across me, and
adeptly show her teeth to draw the ligament
of raw beef away. And so it was
I fed her appetites. She slipped into
my lap, her demon body purring like
a tractor, and licked the wisps of blood between
my fingers. I took her collar off, which let
her swallow,

and from the main top watched the chief
navigational stars we followed spark
around me in the changeling darkness, vast
and starlit. Once I started getting cold,
I led Naomi down below for water—
where I peed into her litter box
to dominate her thoughts, should cats have thoughts,
such as they are. At heart, we both were built
from parts of blocks of sapience and feeling,
so it was alright. Naomi played like Rilke's
phantom in her cell, where I fed
her by hand, by the way, daily—

and to
the point, we neither one were disinvented
from the schooner once we sighted islands

The invisible snakes
were especially a
problem, and in the
end all they could
do was go down with
the sort of fire
extinguishers that
use dry ice, and
spray liberally
around them to
freeze everything
alive. Then Elam
stomped around
to break the frozen
snakes like glass
figurines. The
pieces were swept
up with brooms,
and dumped into
the compost.

Even so, an
unknown number
escaped into the
wild to interbreed
with native species,
and for years
afterward, the
region was haunted
by translucent
pythons that ate the
stray dogs, and an
occasional sheep.

I don't know where
he gets this stuff:
Rilke wrote about
a panther, not an
ocelot.

The *Islas Marietas* are a collection of small islands outside of Puerto Vallarta, and are renowned for their beaches, and the snorkeling. They also are home for the blue-footed booby, made famous by James Tate—though he imagined them on the Galapagos Islands, where they also nest. They're birds: they get around.

The cook was Don Otto, a kind man and mentor, though he had nothing to say about chickens. He said *chicas*, which Bartlett has misunderstood, given his insecure Spanish.

His Spanish was improving.

Black pearls were a natural industry in some of the remote lagoons of the Cook Islands, where the black-lipped oyster was native.

off the blessed coast of Mexico:

Islas Marietas, each about the size of any whale that breached around us. Pods of dolphin following, we ghosted to the gateway port. A motor launch collected our celebrities, and sped away to parties, and exotic matters prearranged by fame—which left the rest of us to shave, and draw our wages. The bosun promised he was going straight, and disappeared. I was given to the cook, who took me off to market to replenish stores of ostrich meat, more beef, vanilla pods and chocolate, tons of onions, abalone in the shell—and who relentlessly was preaching. There were rules against stealing chickens, I remember. He was strung out on a man, and left me with the avocados, and my awful Spanish, while he looked him up, returning with a brilliant dancer, whom he introduced with loud, resounding empathy, as usual with him. They wandered way beyond their destiny, while I foresaw our market purchases on board, and stowed within our many-benched vessel—

though it was another year, another boat, and in another port before I understood the rules regarding chickens. By then I'd beached in Polynesia: let's see, Cook Islands after pearls, and Samoa twice, where I sacrificed at shrines to the sea-goblins. I weathered older furies in New Zealand in

the winter rains, representing to my mind a truly vengeful beauty. White sharks struck at table scraps and butcher's offal I tossed over for the spectacle. Big-winged birds suspended in the wind in my line of sight for miles. Otherwise the latitudes were lonely—bright, for sure, as every source of light would scatter oceanic glitter, but we were on our own. Below us rolled a rogue wave now and then, exposing unexpected wrecks, and drowned roots of islands. From her golden throne, the moon-faced goddess watched for small mistakes.

Those who know about my seamanship have said I'm upward man, and downward fish, but I was unresigned. Most cooks aren't lost at sea, maybe one in ten some years, out in haunted waters. Nonetheless, in Mexico again, on land, when I was struck down by treachery and shark ceviche, and shaken empty,

I was light-footed for a month, pyretic, purged as angels—about which I can fill you in on details later dealing with denatured worms. I took my leave from galley work, and lived on broth, no smoked penguin, nothing made of squid, no scallops, nor dishes out of urchins, seaweed, sea bass, tentacles, nothing to affront digestion. All said, I was a model vegetarian, purified within, and thought I'd try a therapeutic gesture with the mutant

Bartlett surprised himself with an unexpected taste for Samoan foods, heavy on taro root, breadfruit, yams and bananas. Also turtle, but he pretty much skipped that one: the meat was too purple.

Measuring the height of a wave is uncertain as there is no stable referent. The largest wave ever surfed was proposed to be 100 feet high. The waves to which Bartlett refers are higher yet.

Milton said the same thing about John Elam.

Ceviche is a traditional Latin and South American dish made with chunks of raw fish marinated in lemon or lime juice. There are many variants. The pathogens in raw fish, however, include microbial hazards, and larger parasitic creatures.

Bartlett's love of vegetable soups began at this time.

women marvelously spread across
the beach, meaning no harm, but I never
got in range. I lacked words for what
I didn't feel about relationships
with strangers, even in utopia.
Knowing what I know, I wandered inland
after ocelots, and soon was hunting
caves, with bats like tiny demons squealing
from the core of solids all about
illegible truths and prophecies, reminding
me of home.

The power of
telepathy requires
constant focus,
and mental will.
A person's mind
is organized by
individual, organic
structures that are not
necessarily legible to
an outsider looking
in. For instance,
think of the many
different ways you
might store your
recollections of a cow:
by color, by size, how
they smell in a barn,
as a food source, by
economic indicators
of milk produced, by
images seen in Gary
Larson jokes, as a
source of methane—
as well as by abstract
scientific categories,
such as *vertebrate*,
or *mammal*. You might
have an entire zoo,
populated only
by cows.

I wish I saw that coming.
When I let her—if I ever was
receptive, Sarah with her painful psychic
sparkle clarified my shadows, and sometimes
planted hints that worked like bars of sun
illuminating features in the general
spreading plain of thought, which I would find
with emphasis inside my conscience. I
would hear a sighing door moving open,
and could smell her mental body on
the other side, out of sight, but emanating
tendrils of the native perfumed scent
of her, insinuating in the room
to root me to the spot, or tie me to
a kitchen chair with promises about
my life and after. I always felt her hands
were rough.

Oh man. I brought all I had
away, dead or alive, and fled the cataclysm
moving me in Raleigh. Let the heart
of them rejoice who never have been wrecked
by sexual nature, wiped out, blasted,
never snagged by fascinating bait,