

Teijeira's Odyssey

When Columbus discovered the New World, it sent shockwaves around the old world. It was like the opening of Pandora's box. It has been claimed that he was not the first to discover the Americas, but it mattered little. He had been the one to discover it *this time* and this time it would not be a forgotten set of Vikings or other wayward adventurers, the time had come where Europeans would revisit again and again, would settle there, would plunder and remove much, and would take control of the land, the people and the animals. Not only people, but horses, rats and other new species tagging along to participate in the plunder and the settling.

One man who felt the reverberations was Teijeira. He was a merchant, but in his own mind, an adventurer - an adventurer not by experience, but by emotion. Could it be that everyone, no matter how passive and homely, is just a masked adventurer awaiting their call to arms? Teijeira had heard the call of the New World, and had sold his merchandise, divested himself of all his holdings, arranged an ample allowance for his family, and set about preparing his departure.

If you had asked him why he was doing this, he might have called it his destiny. If you asked the merchants, the acquaintances he'd had around town, a single word would have sufficed – gold. It's difficult to know which, if either of these narratives really rang true, but a deeply cherished inner vision that pulled him in some way. Perhaps not a destiny, but a feeling he had had in childhood, when he had been separated from his family in the woods. He was lost and alone in a vast stretch of unfamiliar, unsympathetic, indifferent shades of green, with any benevolent or malevolent animal or person prone to emerge and face him. He felt himself, in that moment, surrounded by unseen eyes, watched and judged. No doubt the feeling was enhanced by being so small himself. Eventually, his father pulled him away, dragging him onto his horse and galloping back to the rest of their party. Somehow, this experience had stuck with him – the danger, the feeling of scrutiny,

the thrill of the unknown, and the reprieve from his father. Though he may not have been aware, it was the desire for this kind of primal exposure to nature that was driving him on.

This feeling came quicker than expected.

They left the port as the day was breaking, slipping away from the old world into anonymity. His ship was well equipped, with a crew of 15 men, to navigate, to sail, to maintain the boat and so on. Within a few days, a strange sickness began to pass around the crew. Everyone had a swollen head and could see very little. When the first crewmate started to show symptoms, he was thrown overboard unceremoniously by popular vote. The next day, three crewmates woke up with swollen heads. At this point, the ship would not have had enough men to complete the voyage. Eventually, one by one the men succumbed to the illness. The pain was unbearable, they said. Some could no longer continue, and took their own lives, others, more pious and resilient, stuck it out for another few days. In this time, their insides swelled too, until, with the pressure in their guts, their organs no longer did their job, and they perished with a whisper. Only Teijeira was left.

He felt that this plague was a judgement from God. He was the last one alive, and seemingly in perfect health. His conscience said otherwise. God had deemed their mission aberrant and had exacted His revenge. He felt that he was supposed to die, and for the next few days, he would periodically place his hands on his head to test if it felt normal, as well as poking and prodding other parts of his body to check their robustness. Finally, he concluded that the Divine had a mission for him. It was not his to die on this boat, and something awaited him in the new world.

Whatever wisdom had landed him in this situation, he was certainly against the odds. It was not possible for him to row the ship, or to steer properly. And one of his crewmates had the expertise to navigate properly, a skill which Teijeira was entirely lacking. He made the guess of orienting the ship west, purely west. However, the sails caught nothing. He

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looked in all directions and saw a blue desert surrounding him. He felt the whole world underneath him, a world all his comrades had now entered. He was supremely lonely, like someone on the moon looking down on earth. The sea was still, and it seemed like the ship was drifting in the right direction, but at a glacial pace.

He was at sea for 117 days, a fact of which he was little aware because his understanding of time was so blurred. At times the sun would come up, and he would simply roll over into the next day. It took him so long to complete this journey because he could not properly control the ship, and even if he were able to, he did not know exactly where to go. Not only time, but memory, and direction had lost meaning to him. The great boon for him was that he had massively more provisions than he needed, although they were starting to show their age.

He would talk to himself, sing, fantasise, reminisce. He was filled with a creeping fear that everyone had been wrong about the world. Perhaps it was flat after all, and he was approaching the edge, or perhaps beyond the new world there was another world, all ocean forever, which he had reached. None of these things he could know with any certainty, though he speculated many disparate thoughts.

In the first 30 days he had drifted alone, he had determined theories, trajectories, and pieced together what had happened to his crew. Each subsequent day he would tear down the theory, disgusted at his naivete and replace it with the 'correct' theory.

But thereafter it was different for him. He had let go of this desire to identify the true cause and trajectory of his fate. He merely gazed at the stars, or down into the sea, and speculated. He found joy in the speculation – had he crossed Atlantis? Was his ship being slowly but surely guided by God Himself? Had Columbus lied to garner fame? He had no desire to know any of these, but he found himself enthralled considering the possibilities, and it took his mind away from the desperation he felt.

One day, after a particularly violent storm, he did not even exit the quarters underneath. He felt the stillness after the storm, with streaks of sunlight infiltrating gaps in the wood. He lay there for almost two days, dulled to passivity, until it occurred to him that even this stillness was too still, even for the calm waters.

He looked outside and he saw that his ship was still in the water, but lodged between two large, wide rocks which jutted out, creating a small angle where the bow of the ship had become stuck. The ship had had a sort of mermaid figurehead which was ground virtually to sawdust. The rocks rose about 10 metres above the sides of the ship, so Teijeira was not definitively sure that this was actually land, and not simply a strange rock formation in the sea.

He rummaged around the ship, and found a knife and some rope. He was able to find small indents in the rockface and thereby painstakingly hoist himself to the top to have a look around. He saw lush vegetation, palm trees, and thin trees with plumes of pale green leaves encircling the trunk. From his vantage point, he saw so many things that he could not quite process everything. Glints of colour darted around the limits of his vision, no doubt belonging to the birds he could hear, the sun beat down upon his head, but he was comforted to an extent by a cool breeze wafting over his brow. All felt calm, new and resplendent.

“By God, I’ve conquered the seas! Hahah, I did it!” The words scraped out, characteristic of someone who hasn’t spoken for a long time. “I’m probably the first man to reach this shore!” He yelled the words, jumping up and down, practically dancing for joy.

He caught himself, quickly, before he could get too excited, and took a minute to look around more. Had he reached an island, or was this, in fact, a continent? The land curved around in the distance, and he could not see any further. His examination of the coastline gave him a chance to inspect the new land more fully. Slightly off centre was a huge peak girdled with clouds, with an array of smaller peaks, or foothills surrounding it. The land

ahead was blanketed in thick forest, at least on this side of the mountain, and the forest consisted of trees with bushes showing underneath. It didn't look totally out of context with the land Teijeira had seen before. He thought to himself that any world – old or new, was bound to look like any other world.

In the distance, and in the foreground he saw unfamiliar birds, circling the canopies, delighting his eyes with their plumage - rich crimson, deep burgundy, regal violet. A flutter of emotion passed through him, and a solitary tear trickled down his cheek. That tear proved the harbinger of a deluge, his chest shuddering and his tired knees buckling as he heard their songs, promising mystery - mysteries of unparalleled in fathomable and unfamiliar allure. He had arrived, he thought, in paradise.

Satisfied with his inspection, and with his composure regained, he climbed down the same way into his ship, and grabbed a few things he thought would be needed. For example, he had some hard biscuits – as he couldn't know what was safe to eat, an arquebus, and a small telescope. After he climbed back up into the top of the rock, he looked around him, and saw, after a small drop, a gap in the foliage. It looked as though it had been cut like this, or worn away by animals approaching the water. In any case, he found himself disappearing into the forest, comforted, at least at first, by the cool air underneath the canopy of trees.

He had been walking for either five minutes or two hours, and had started to feel completely enclosed, but instead of panicking or retracing his steps, he just embraced it. After being a pinprick exposed in a universe of endless blue, even the eerie, confined intensity of the green abundance felt like the comfort of a blanket.

He found himself at a small clearing, and at the other side, his eyes clapped on a beast. It looked like a giant cat, black. Closer up, it was not really black. It had a sort of marbled pattern, like someone had painted black over a pattern of yellow and orangey brown spots. Its paws were huge, and protruding were claws like curved daggers. Every step, these

paws made a small impact on the earth, but in her slow steps she avoided snapping any of the twigs on the forest floor. Her languid gait belied the potential speed with which she might pounce when needed. The first word in Teijeira's head was 'beautiful', followed closely by 'monstrous'. After the ages of a few seconds passed, a new word came – lean. Every joint and sinew seemed to be flanked by granite muscles, up to her shoulder blades which protruded slightly. She looked fierce, and hungry. Even if he could have loaded his arquebus in time to protect himself, he was not inclined to do so.

He thought back to the forest tableau of his childhood. In this moment, he felt the significance of this moment he had yearned after. The reprieve of his father's strong, disapproving yet comforting hand represented that of his Creator, summoning him back from this primal Eden. Before, he had been afraid to die at sea. Now he felt no expectation of surviving the encounter, and that hopelessness freed him from his terror. He felt with certainty that this was how his life was always meant to end, and with a sense of bittersweet comfort he looked into the eyes of his beautiful, monstrous executioner. No light returned to him, only the cold calculation of an amoral predator.

He felt a strong arm pulling him. He expected to see his father somehow, but it was not so. He turned around to see a dark-skinned person pulling him away. He cast a fleeing glance back and saw the cat dead, with arrows protruding through her, one in her eye and one inside her mouth. All of the fearsomeness and awful majesty of that beast now seemed like a dream or a hallucination.

Teijeira looked back at the savage. He had given a lot of thought to these natives on his voyage. Were they another species? Were they humans like himself? He had thought that without Christ they could be nothing of the kind, but had reflected that they could hardly be blamed for their ignorance. He looked at his face, wrinkled, scarred but smiling, radiant, welcoming, and he felt love for him, an admiration of a certain dignity he showed. He felt a sense of brotherhood with this man, although he did not consider it possible that

their civilizations had ever met. He subtly congratulated himself on his high-minded stance, considering that he had been spared to bring the light of Faith to this man, and considered this savage to be a kind of Samaritan, whom he must love and shower with kindness.

Eventually, they had made it to a gap in the trees, where a tent was set up. The man handed him a leather coated flask with water.

To his surprise, the savage addressed him in Portuguese:

“Where did you sail from?”

Teijeira looked puzzled – “How can you speak my language?”

“We are in Portugal – in the Azores.”

“Nono – haha – I’ve been sailing for many, many days, this is the New World.” He said nervously.

His host said nothing. There was no need. He could see that Teijeira was becoming aware of the situation. He had not realised his destiny of reaching the Americas. He had not been spared from the disease, nor survived his voyage, so that he could share his faith with pure but heedless masses. He had reached a land that his ancestors had reached years before, a land well known and inhabited by his people. He had travelled 117 days to travel 10 days of distance.

His delusions of grandeur evaporated. As had his actual grandeur. He tried to convince a crew to join him and make the trip together, but there were not enough men, and he could not convince those who were there, particularly when they heard the fate of the rest of his crew. The depletion of his funds had not made matters any better for him. He knew that gold was abundant in the new world, and had really not considered it important bring extra gold with him.

In the end, he sold his (very damaged ship) and used most of the money arranging passage back to the mainland. When he got there, he realised that he could not return to his family, although it would have made matters easier. He would rather leave himself a mythical hero-adventurer in their eyes than shatter the illusion and live comfortably with them. He lived as a pauper and a vagrant for many years, hand to mouth. None of the regal air he had possessed before was present, and he seemed to have aged decades in those four years.

His family could never have expected that he was living among in their very city, an anonymous drunk. Would they even have recognised him? He would ponder this on occasion when he saw his gaunt face – his ginger beard no longer majestic and regal but instead unkempt and grey. His thoughts turned around and around his journey, trying to piece together a narrative that could allow him to recover a sense of himself. In time, he lapsed into a kind of monomania, obsessing about returning to the sea once again, this time not to be bested its interminable vastness and distance. He stumped himself, however, on the point of how to realise it.

Eventually, he decided to take a stab at the New World, once more. He used the only means he could – stowing away on a ship he had heard was making the voyage. Within only a few days, he was discovered by the crew, who saw no sign of his former high bearing, and had no place in their aspirations for charity. After deliberation of the crew he was thrown overboard.
