

Light Shot Water

by David Ackley

What sustains the figures in these images? Water? Or light? Or both at once, the light-shot water, the water-shot light.

* * *

Where I grew up, you did not venture casually into ocean waters. The New Hampshire shoreline was lapped with icy, sullen waves well into July. When the sun became too hot, you “went in,” the aching cold climbing your shins until blessed numbness set in or you could no longer bear it and retreated to the warm sand.

The zealots plunging into the North Atlantic in mid-February for the tv cameras replay a typical day at the beach in our climate, in water only a few degrees colder than on fourth of July.

Despite the New England tradition of seafaring, our relation to the North Atlantic is an adversarial one of plundering its riches in brief forays while trying, not always successfully, to evade its chill clasp, as in “The Perfect Storm.”

Or Moby Dick, that cautionary tale.

Whalers and fishermen often never learned to swim— the idea: If exposure is going to kill you anyway, why not drown and be done with it?

From the other shore, Joyce called the Atlantic “ the snot-green sea.”

* * *

When I was grown, the army sent me to Hawaii and there was opportunity to learn the sea- language these images speak.

* * *

Not at first.

Shy , alien and shunned, G.I.'s felt their way after dark to the colored lights of the bars on Honolulu's Hotel Street, or the safe, illicit shadows of the Porno Theaters down the block, night creatures by preference, ceding sunlight, warm sand, and the blue-green sea to the natives and the rich tourists who seemed to deserve or could at least afford them.

We didn't know, as the Hawaiians always had, that like life itself, the sun, sea and sand were there for the taking.

Not only surrounded, the islands are permeated by water. It's on cliffs like the great 1,000 foot Pali where the updraft is so powerful that stepped cascades descending the slick green face never reach bottom, exploding in clouds of mist. It's in the light, bleached and colored by the containing sea, braided with rain after a sudden torrent in sparkling, dripping twists. And there even in the liquid language, with cascades of separately pronounced vowels: O-a-hu; Mauna Lo-ah; and a favorite, Ka-a-a-va, the last ah dissolving in breath like the mist of the waterfalls.

One night, some months after I'd arrived, in a bar I met a civilian who'd lived long enough on Oahu to know his way around and who offered to show me a few spots.

* * *

Makapuu Point on the North Shore of Oahu is owned by the body surfers and the boogie-boarders. Off to the left, the locals ride the waves right to the line of jutting black rocks on which they burst like a white phosphorus grenade, the riders ducking out so close the eye can't follow, not until they pop up laughing and hooting back behind the white foam, so much in their element that what looks to be suicidal is something they do just for fun.

Away from the rocks I try a few modest waves, then move off the beach for a big one that sucks me to the top of the curl then drives my face into the sandy bottom and pounds me through an extended tumble and spin cycle, until I can't tell up from down and wonder about my chances of breathing air again.

* * *

Looking down from the parking lot above, Waimea Bay is a cross section of an amphora, narrow at the neck where it meets the ocean, widening as it extends inshore, the changing depths of the bay shifting colors from deep blue to azure to aqua and myriad shades of green, and other colors, Chekhov wrote, " for which there are no names in the language of man."

I want to stand and gaze but we're going snorkeling out near the point.

Once I've put on fins and mask and been told how to use the snorkel, Dave says, " Stay clear of that big rock. There's a moray eel lives in there."

I begin swimming violently before I even hit the water and keep going for another twenty or thirty feet. Safe, but shaken, I drop my face into the water, trying to breath through the snorkel and inhale a lungful of the Pacific. Choking and sputtering, I swim back to where Dave waits, puzzled.

" ... I don't know." For the first time that day, I want to go back to the barracks, hit my bunk and, like some of my squadmates, sleep the weekend away. " I hate to waste your time. You've got better things to do than watch me thrash around."

" Nah, don't worry about it," he says. " I know another spot. We'll try a little spearfishing."

* * *

"Another spot," is Diamond Head itself, a great iconic promontory, the dark prow of Oahu thrust into the Pacific. Gentle Waimea Bay is suddenly the object of nostalgia, the moray almost domestic compared to the gigantic carnivores I picture in the imminent deep.

We are on a low shelf where, because of the depth, the waves don't break but flood up the face and fall away.

As immense as the world now is, the whole Pacific stretching away to distant continents, the high, steep face of Diamond Head at our backs, it contracts to us, in this spot, talking about the immediate problem. When the waves withdraw the surface is four or five feet down, jade and semi-opaque. The higher waves slop over our bare feet.

"Just wait for a wave that comes up here and let it carry you out. Coming back, you want to do the same thing in reverse, wait for one that'll lift you up on the ledge. You don't want to come up short; you get raked down that coral, it'll tear you up...Okay?"

I shrug. He grins. " I'm goin' over this way."

He sits on the ledge, waiting for a wave until one comes and carries him off Why is it so easy for him and everyone else? But when my wave comes I push off and just like that it takes me away.

Breathing starts to come easier in the startling clarity beneath the surface; I take in swaying sea grass, the flickering shadows and green shafts of light. Below, at some indeterminate distance, the sandy bottom is scored with delicate curving tracks. The crossing swells make a gentle rocking. The water temperature is cooler than the bay but not unpleasant. It seems natural to be there, stripped to shorts and face mask, unfettered but for the spear gun that you're hardly aware of carrying, the flippers simple extensions that propel you effortlessly.

* * *

We are made of salt water, carried in water before our birth, amphibian in our origins, born knowing this place. In deep water you recapture an ease of movement in three dimensions, enfolded with the infinite plenitude of the sea, lending grace to motion, grace to the spirit.

* * *

Deeper are the shadows of fish.

Vaguely obliged by the speargun, I aim and let fly at the biggest one, the bolt slithers ahead and down, missing by three feet the spooked target. I've lost sight of the spear. Dave probably wouldn't mind; it's easily replaced. But the loss bothers me, recalling earlier failures; I need to get it back. I circle on the surface, studying the bottom minutely, finally spotting the dark narrow stripe on the light sand. I dive twice, deeper the second time, but still not close, and come up gasping, ready to say the hell with it. I'm alone in a very big ocean and if something bad happens no-one who cares will find out unless my body washes up on a beach somewhere. But leaving the spear behind still feels wrong; I give it one more try, down and down, past some level of fear, forcing my body into the fisted press of deeper water. My fingers touch steel, my hand closes over it, and in moments the surface bursts open for me, fragmenting the water-shot light.

Back at Diamond Head, I mark Dave's red daypack, and watch the retreating waves run down the coral encrusted rock he'd said would do a job on you. I turn seaward toward the incoming swells, remembering how they come in sets of seven. The third one out rises visibly higher, the daddy of the set: I let the first two go by, and on the third, drop my masked face into the water, and drive hard with the flippers, riding the wave forward and up the face, letting it lift me like the palm of Old Kanaloa himself until I am over the shelf and dropping onto it as the water falls away and drains back into the sea and I'm home free.

