

A Sea Worry

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THIS SUMMER our son bodysurfs. He says it’s his “job” and rises each morning at 5:30 to catch the bus to Sandy Beach. I hope that by September he will have had enough of the ocean. Tall waves throw surfers against the shallow bottom. Undertows have snatched them away. Sharks prowl Sandy’s. Joseph told me that once he got out of the water because he saw an enormous shark. “Did you tell the life guard?” I asked. “No.” “Why not?” “I didn’t want to spoil the surfing.” The ocean pulls at the boys, who turn into surfing addicts. At sunset you can see surfers waiting for the last golden wave.

“Why do you go surfing so often?” I ask my students.

“It feels so good,” they say. “Inside the tube. I can’t describe it. There are no words for it.”

“You can describe it,” I scold, and I am angry. “Everything can be described. Find the words for it, you lazy boy. Why don’t you stay home and read?” I am afraid that the boys give themselves up to the ocean’s mindlessness.

When the waves are up, surfers all over Hawai‘i don’t do their homework. They cut school. They know how the surf is breaking at any moment because every fifteen minutes the reports come over the radio; in fact, one of my former students is the surf reporter.

Some boys leave for mainland colleges, and write their parents heartrending letters. They beg to come home for Thanksgiving. “If I can just touch the ocean,” they write from Missouri and Kansas, “I’ll last for the rest of the semester.” Some come home for Christmas and don’t go back.

Even when the assignment is about something else, the students write about surfing. They try to describe what it is to be inside the wave as it curls over them, making a tube or “chamber” or “green room” or “pipeline” or “time warp.” They write about the silence, the peace, “no hassles,” the feeling of being reborn as they shoot out the end. They’ve written about the voice of God, the “commandments” they hear. In

the margins, they draw the perfect wave. Their writing is full of clichés. “The endless summer,” they say. “Unreal.”

Surfing is like a religion. Among the martyrs are George Helm, Kimo Mitchell, and Eddie Aikau. Helm and Mitchell were lost at sea riding their surfboards from Kaho‘olawe, where they had gone to protest the Navy’s bombing of that island. Eddie Aikau was a champion surfer and lifeguard. A storm had capsized the Hōkūle‘a, the ship that traces the route that the Polynesian ancestors sailed from Tahiti, and Eddie Aikau had set out on his board to get help.

Since the ocean captivates our son, we decided to go with him to see Sandy’s.

We got up before dawn, picked up his friend, Marty, and drove out of Honolulu. Almost all the traffic was going in the opposite direction, the freeway coned to make more lanes into the city. We came to a place where raw mountains rose on our left and the sea fell on our right, smashing against the cliffs. The strip of cliff pulverized into sand is Sandy’s. “Dangerous Current Exist,” said the ungrammatical sign.

Earl and I sat on the shore with our blankets and thermos of coffee. Joseph and Marty put on their fins and stood at the edge of the sea for a moment, touching the water with their fingers and crossing their hearts before going in. There were fifteen boys out there, all about the same age, fourteen to twenty, all with the same kind of lean, v-shaped build, most of them with black hair that made their wet heads look like sea lions. It was hard to tell whether our kid was one of those who popped up after a big wave. A few had surfboards, which are against the rules at a bodysurfing beach, but the lifeguard wasn’t on duty that early.

As they watched for the next wave, the boys turned toward the ocean. They gazed slightly upward; I thought of altar boys before a great god. When a good wave arrived, they turned, faced shore, and came shooting in, some taking the wave to the right and some to the left, their bodies fishlike, one arm out in front, the hand and fingers pointed before them, like a swordfish’s beak. A few held credit card trays, and some slid in on trays from McDonald’s.

“That is no country for middle-aged women,” I said. We

had on bathing suits underneath our clothes in case we felt moved to participate. There were no older men either.

Even from the shore, we could see inside the tubes. Sometimes, when they came at an angle, we saw into them a long way. When the wave dug into the sand, it formed a brown tube or a gold one. The magic ones, though, were made out of just water, green and turquoise rooms, translucent walls and ceilings. I saw one that was powder-blue, perfect, thin; the sun filled it with sky blue and white light. The best thing, the kids say, is when you are in the middle of the tube, and there is water all around you but you're dry.

The waves came in sets; the boys passed up the smaller ones. Inside a big one, you could see their bodies hanging upright, knees bent, duckfeet fins paddling, bodies dangling there in the wave.

Once in a while, we heard a boy yell, "Aa-who!" "Poon-tah!" "Aaroo!" And then we noticed how rare human voice was here; the surfers did not talk, but silently, silently rode the waves.

Since Joseph and Marty were considerate of us, they stopped after two hours, and we took them out for breakfast. We kept asking them how it felt, so that they would not lose language.

"Like a stairwell in an apartment building," said Joseph, which I liked immensely. He hasn't been in very many apartment buildings, so had to reach a bit to get the simile. "I saw somebody I knew coming toward me in the tube, and I shouted, 'Jeff. Hey, Jeff,' and my voice echoed like a stairwell in an apartment building. Jeff and I came straight at each other—mirror tube."

"Are there ever girls out there?" Earll asked.

"There's a few women who come at about eleven," said Marty.

"How old are they?"

"About twenty."

"Why do you cross your heart with water?"

"So the ocean doesn't kill us."

I described the powder-blue tube I had seen. "That part of Sandy's is called Chambers," they said.

I have gotten some surfing magazines, the ones kids steal

from the school library, to see if the professionals try to describe the tube. Bradford Baker writes:

. . . *Round and pregnant in Emptiness*
I slide,
Laughing,
into the sun,
into the night.

Frank Miller calls the surfer

. . . *mother's fumbling*
curly-haired
tubey-laired
son.

“Ooh, offshores—,” writes Reno Abbellira, “where wind and wave most often form that terminal rendezvous of love—when the wave can reveal her deepest longings, her crest caressed, cannily covered to form those peeling concavities we know, perhaps a bit irreverently, as tubes. Here we strive to spend every second—enclosed, encased, sometimes fatefully entombed, and hopefully, gleefully, ejected—Whoosh!”

“An iridescent ride through the entrails of God,” says Gary L. Crandall.

I am relieved that the surfers keep asking one another for descriptions. I also find some comfort in the stream of commuter traffic, cars filled with men over twenty, passing Sandy Beach on their way to work.