

Island Sketches

by Tony Beckwith

The thought of spending the holidays in Hawaii had sustained us through the busy month of December, and we were finally on our way. Our first stop was Honolulu.

The Royal Hawaiian Hotel is rightly known as the “Pink Palace of the Pacific.” She’s a nostalgic symbol of an earlier time, “complete with all manner of entertainment and distraction.” When she opened, in 1927, she stood alone, surrounded by palm groves and open land. Today she is huddled in an urban crush of modern high-rise hotels and apartment buildings. We checked in late, slept soundly in a splendid four-poster bed, and spent Christmas morning on Waikiki beach.

I had recently been introduced to the poetry of Langston Hughes, and was enjoying some of his work as I lounged on the warm sand. It struck me that a story, like a movie, provides a big picture, whereas a poem, like a snapshot, zooms in and captures a single scene. I loved the economy of Hughes’s style, the way he distills his observations down to just a few lines, a brief sketch, and decided I would try to follow his lead. Lillian noticed some people looking a little disoriented as they stumbled out of the hotel onto the beach, and I wrote:

Found a message in a bottle,
perhaps it came from you?
It said: Help! I’m on vacation,
and I don’t know what to do.

Later in the day we flew to Kauai and checked into a far more modest hotel in Kalapaki Bay. From our third-floor balcony we could see the beach across the road, complete with surfers riding the waves. It felt good to be at our final destination, bags unpacked and feet up on the railing. On vacation.

We headed up the east coast to the north shore, looking for the kind of beach that Lillian dreams of: a half-moon of white sand and a blue-water lagoon inside a reef where the waves never stop breaking. The name of the one we found is irrelevant because we all have to find our

own. The water felt cold at first but once our bodies acclimatized it was merely cool, and the fish swam below us, gliding in and out of the rocks just beyond where the tide forms ridges in the sand.

There's no one on the beach
but you and me;
we're as alone as we had hoped to be.
Our footprints vanish
in the curling foam;
we are so very far from home.

Behind the beach the cliffs rise hundreds of feet and disappear around the headland of the Na Pali coast. The ocean is beautiful and terrifying as it pounds the rocks with exploding waves that recoil and pound the rocks again and again and again. The inland trails lead off into dense, lush undergrowth and tangled trees. Water flows from somewhere far above and the ground is muddy and treacherous underfoot.

The mountaintops
are lost in the clouds today.
Here in the valley below
I am surrounded
by the glistening green silence
of a world far removed
from the brightly-lit cubicles
of my native habitat.

It is mainly sunny at this time of year, but clouds will suddenly appear overhead, some wispy and ragged, others full-bodied and menacing, sometimes accompanied by a restless wind that stirs things up on the island. Ocean squalls can catch you anywhere, and don't much care what you might be doing when they do.

Rain calls a time out
on a tropical afternoon.
The tourist herd scatters,
taking shelter
in a random helter skelter,
and we pause in our busy, aimless day,

sipping kona coffee,
reverently watching
the teeming rain.

Later on that day, in a different part of the island, it happens again:

A fine, misting rain
blows in off the ocean
and alters the mood
of the late afternoon.
The red hibiscus drinks and dances,
the long-legged palm
shakes her shaggy head and laughs.
In a moment the rain moves on
and the Earth seems new and still.

There was a time when a rainy day would have ruined my vacation, but that's no longer true. A tropical rain is only temporary, just passing through, and it allows time for the tranquil moments that youthful pursuits ignored. I suppose that, then, I was easily bored, but not today. And when the rain moves beyond us, we put the top down and wander on.

Driving our convertible
open to the sky,
tousle-headed lovers
spending Christmas in Kauai.
Could have stayed around the house,
came out here instead,
charging up our batteries
for the year ahead.

Chickens, which in most places are nothing out of the ordinary, are intriguing on Kauai. They roam the streets and sidewalks like pigeons do in cities all over the world, pecking at the ground and strutting about as though they owned the island. The cocks, splendidly attired in capes of brightly colored feathers, have a haughty demeanor, and will stare you down if you catch their beady little eye. A gaggle of them was milling about on the road along the south coast one afternoon, and we slowed down to let them decide what was best for

us all. Lillian suddenly pointed and cried, “A rainbow!” And what a rainbow! It was the most perfect one we had ever seen, anywhere? a magnificent arc sweeping across the sky from the highlands above the Waimea Canyon to the ocean behind us.

A warm rain had softly fallen.
Then, in a mist
as fine as a hummingbird’s breath
a perfect rainbow
spanned the sky,
a flawless band of color cascading
from the mountain
to the sea.

It felt good to say the names of the towns we drove through: Lihu’e, Hanalei, Po’ipu, Hanapepe, Wailua. As these unfamiliar words rolled off our tongues they confirmed that we were far from the mainland of our normal existence, far out in the Pacific Ocean, on a volcanic speck in the middle of nowhere. The stars there are so clear, so brilliant, and late at night at this time of year the Southern Cross hangs in the sky, sparkling below the Equator.

The ocean is never tired.
I can hear it working,
pounding the shore
as I lie in my room,
suns scorched and weary
from my vacation occupation.
The waves roll in from far away
yet they don’t sound tired.
Unlike me,
the ocean never sleeps.

We were traveling light on this trip, longing for the kind of footloose freedom that too much luggage will never allow. We had one rolling carryon each, and could hardly believe it. And yet we had everything we needed. Really needed. It was exhilarating to spend a few days unencumbered by possessions. Why do we accumulate so much stuff, so many things? Have we become genetically conditioned to

purchase, to blindly gather up consumer goods as though we really needed them? What manner of madness is that?

Smile! (click)
We're on vacation without a camera
so I'm making notes of palm trees (click)
the ocean as blue as your eyes (click)
the sunset, golden on your skin (click)
and you, smiling (click)
waving (click)
and laughing (click).
I'll be a few words short of a thousand
but I know we'll get the picture
when we're reading this at home.

We have trees at home, beautiful trees, and plenty of them. But, in my view, there is something very special about palm trees. We drove past tall ones and short ones, some with swollen trunks and some as svelte as a runway model. Some were in well-groomed gardens, and others were still in their natural state, rising up out of haphazard shrubbery and red dirt. The classic image of a remote tropical island always includes a palm tree or two. They evoke for me the antithesis of civilization as we know it.

In the coconut grove
the palm trees stand
tall and aloof,
long slender trunks
and green fronds rustling
in the onshore breeze.
Distinctly elegant,
the tall palms stand
silhouetted against the perfect sky.

And then, all too soon, we were on an airplane flying home. Carrying in our minds the images of our few days as drifters, beach combers, dropouts blissfully living on island time. Getting ready for a whole new year.

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