

## An Academic Goes Surfing

The world was against him the day Peter decided to surf for the first time. His wife in the States had driven him to the airport, rushing more than usual in the Newark traffic, snorting at the fellow drivers (“Jesus!”), then bumping into the curb with a start at Terminal 3. She said nothing about the impending divorce she planned, but simply handed him a brown-bag lunch at the security gate, kissed his forehead coldly (he had not remembered her lips so feeble), and—as he turned to watch her move away—lowered her head and raised her hands to her cheeks, covering—he imagined—a sudden whelp of pain.

The airline naturally lost his luggage, including the sixteen books on Egyptian Hermeticism that he had expressly brought to study in the hotel for his upcoming article on Greco-Egyptian syncretism.

A man prone to positive thinking, his response was simple: “I suppose I will just take a break.” All he needed was to buy a bathing suit and thongs: the heat in Mexico, he had been told, would be unbearable.

Two weeks with nothing to do. As the taxi dropped him off at his cabana on the beach, he peered out at the ocean and saw a blank slate.

It was an intense green-blue-purple color, and were he a painter, he would have had to sprinkle it—the entire stretch of rectangle—with millions of white-silver dots, all of which would come to a frothy head on the shore.

But it was not the look of the thing that fascinated him. It was the thunderous roll that began in a bass hush and receded to a twisted up treble arch. He noted the sound could be diagnosed as a particularly low-pitched wind, a wind with a major illness, a cough or a bug in its throat that it was trying to eject on the shore.

While he settled into his thatched room—with white sand on the floor, and a hammock hanging by a fish-line—all he did was listen.

It is a huge sound, he thought, at least ten thousand miles long, and with that he went to sleep, having forgotten his wife, his suitcase and the erudition of a dozen scholars.

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When he woke, it was not to the sound, but to the feeling of brightness on his skin: there is something strongly yellow in Mexico, he thought, yellow and green. He opened his eyes, and through the cabana windows, he saw stiff upward palms lifted in the sun.

How interesting, he thought: my body recognizes a different palate before I even open my eyes.

He squinted as he stepped out to the sand. It was difficult to distinguish between what he saw and what he heard: a few bird chirps, an isolated rooster caw, a hooting of sorts, a thick cough of waves, and the movement of tropical green far out in the horizon.

It was difficult even to think—to carve out a separate space for the rational analytical verbal pronouncements that he was used to as a soundtrack in his mind. The sounded sight overwhelmed him. “How silly that I think so much,” he commented to himself—one of the only thoughts he could devise in the sluggish heat—as he pressed his bare feet into the burning sand. He quickly raced paddle-footed to a patch of thatchy grass that grew, intermittently, on the deserted beach.

The proprietor of the cabana, a quick-limbed Mexican lad, whose jerky movements went along with his fast-tongued Spanish, had promised to lend him a surfboard, if he met him at the one “restaurant” a kilometer down the beach.

How tightly knit this young man was, Peter marveled! The sinewy tattooed arms trembled with the breath that swelled in the tightly muscled chest—and as the ocean breathed beside them, so did the boy’s jerky bursts of laughter. The boy was amused that Peter, white-skinned, a bit flabby in the belly, with two fishy flat feet, planned to learn to surf alone.

“Just give me a quick lesson HERE,” said Peter, pointing to the sand under the thatched roof of the restaurant: inbetween two plastic tables where a few quiet *gringos* were eating grilled *camarones*.

The boy produced a fat piece of wax from his swimming suit pocket, jumped to his knees, made love to the board with wide gestures of his hands, chalking away, and filling the air with a sweet lumpy thick smell that reminded Peter of being a boy washed in the sink by his aunt, naked bottom first..

Then the boy tied a bright yellow leash around Peter’s left ankle.

“This will be your back leg,” he pointed. He explained how Peter would lie on the board—chest to a scrawled waxed line  $\frac{2}{3}$  up the middle—and, at a certain rush of speed in the wave (“you will hear it,” he said)—was to jump sideways, bend his knees, and keep his balance to the shore, arms waved left and right.

“That’s it?” said Peter, who had mastered quite difficult exams in Arabic, Aramaic and ancient Greek, as well as the arcane small-print of customer warranties for his numerous gadgets (computers to Ipods) in his suburban New Jersey home.

Out he went, the sand hot in his eyes, the ocean leaning forward as a cool promise.

Anything will be easier than carrying this damned heavy thing! He thought, at the bulky Styrofoam resonated against his hipbone, bumping along.

And into the first baby warm waves, he went.

The boy had warned him: the currents will be tough. But anyone knows, Peter thought, that you don't go against currents. He cleverly waded sideways to some rocks, until he saw no ripples in the water—the water was, as they say, “clean”—and there—with huge jerks of his arms—he waded out.

The water was cool in his mind, and seemed, without much ado, to clean it of his former wife. She seemed—indeed—to vanish from one lolling wave to the next. Quite quickly it was just Peter and the wet plastic under his chest. *Paddle, paddle, paddle.*

Then he stretched his chest up, in the yogic cobra pose, and listened.

He listened to the pause. The ocean had paused. Who knew what it would next provide—what size of water would rise, what force, or where Peter, who had so strenuously achieved the half-kilometer distance from the shore, would next find himself?

Crashed under a huge mountain of water. That is where. The board flew out of his grasp, and the rope, now a noose, jerked his ankle sore. What was interesting as well was that Peter could not breathe. Where there was once a huge expanse of sky was now a huge expanse of thick wet substance entering all his open orifices, his nose, his mouth, even his anus, it seemed. The water spun him like a brand new washing machine, and then clobbered him into the sand.

And still he could not breathe. My goodness was this interesting! It surely beat hours of planned study at his desk. It also was far more unpredictable than his wife's lunar moods and regulated critiques of his personality defects (which were always met with a shrug by Peter; he did not take much stock in his personality himself—assuming it to be derivative of his education, genetics and upbringing—and felt a detached bewilderment when others, on the other hand, took it so seriously as to make it something to take to task!).

Still he could not breathe!

His lungs now were amazingly heavy, his body sinking, and his arms crawling with instinctive fury—but look, how faithful!, that surfboard was still flying powerfully about somewhere on the surface, a stable, protective mother who kept her little boy on a leash with a make-shift umbilical chord. The cord was digging blood into his ankle—quite a far-away foreign event, thought Peter, who now felt divided into three parts, tight ankles, heavy lungs and scrambling arms.

They say, in the olden days, that one has to die in order to be reborn—this Peter, an Egyptologist, was well aware of. Indeed his specialty was Osiris rituals and their later adaptation into Dionysian ceremonies. To be more precise, his specialty was the linguistic rendering of body parts: the ancient Greek for “feet” changed, for example, once Osiris had been dismembered into a word signifying “stableness at bottom of leg”.

What rubbish my life has been thinking of such things! Peter reflected, still the reflective sort, now as his throat twisted left and right, seeking a passage to the outside world.

It would have made more sense to become a geographer: an expert with the compass. Perhaps then, as he twisted up and down, scrambling, he would have a notion which way air was, and which way more earth.

The ocean kicked him in the butt and drew him up, dashing a thick hail of rocks at his head for good measure.

He coughed out a huge stream of brine, and rested his arms on the board.

Boy that was fun, he thought. Perhaps not surfing in the conventional sense, but for him it fit the bill.

The next day he went out again, at the crack of sun, to see if he would be a bit more balanced when the waves were darker and sharper, not yet blazoned white.

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Peter did not go back after his two weeks on the coast of Mexico. For one thing, he had lost his watch, and he would be hard put to measure the day in New Jersey, without the sound of the Mexican ice cream truck, blaring with its megaphone in the palms after lunch, the ding-ding-ding of the water seller on his bicycle at midday, the faster bird chirps as the sun descended and finally, the stiffer, higher sound of the waves at dusk.

For another, he could not imagine walking. The surf-board had become his prosthesis, and it was with this board, that he felt the movement of the earth going round and round beneath his feet. He could not imagine what it would be like to be a land-rover again.

This must be what people feel when an arm has been amputated, he thought, the one day when he did not surf (a headache from the sun) and instead just pattered along from café to cafe, sipping on *chelas* and chatting with the visiting surfers, all like he, prone to soundless conversations of thumbs-upping at the waves.

His body seemed shortened, somehow. His feet tingled with the need for the missing limb.

And the next morning, he was out again, waiting for the “lip” to rise, then feeling with his body the sound of the rush, and up on his feet!

Up!

The board, body, and wave became one high-pitched dry movement to the coast.

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They never did find Peter’s body, although—alerted by a rather peevish wife, a few months down the road—the authorities did try. “We don’t have helicopters out here,” the Mexican commissioner explained to the over-industrialized wife. “It is not our sort of budget. But we have good men, *salvuardias*, who can swim out miles into the currents. We will even send out our boats.”

The one clue was that Peter’s orange surfboard—smelling like lavender soap—never came back to shore as well.

“Strange!” said the wiry jumpy Mexican surfer cum proprietor of cabanas. his tattooed arm reading “Magia es dios, Dios es magia” glowing bluish in the sun. “The surfboard ALWAYS comes back.”

Soon rumors began to spread. The villagers affirmed that Peter had been unusually smiling those last few weeks: perhaps happy that he had made it to the Zicatela beach, the most challenging waves in Mexico, indeed worldwide, where only world champions would go. Although, of course, he was the worst surfer in Zicatela, always returning with an injury—a sliced foot from the fin, a smashed shoulder from a rock, a purple head-bump from the board itself—but he had been smiling.

Perhaps he had taken on one huge wave too many.

“No, I think not,” said the wiry Mexican surfer, staring solemnly into the waves, a small curious smile on his lips.

Although he kept it to himself, he had lately—ever since Peter’s absence—noted a huge turtle that would come out, early in the morning, press its thick front gnarly paws into the sand and then crawl back out. A very confident turtle.

He had also noted a long leash dragging behind the tail. Bright yellow.

But what, he wondered, had happened to the surfboard?

The wisdom would have it that Peter did not need it anymore.