

A Chambered Nautilus

I

In the winter of 1992, deep in the claws of workaholism and fatigued to the bone, I intention a break, therapy of a sort, a venture away from my desk and into a world unknown – lyrical and timeless – the fabled South Seas. I imagine seaplaning to remote villages, drinking kava with chiefs, surfing new breaks, tanning on sparkling beaches, journaling my heart out. I haven't taken a vacation in eight years, not even a weekend. The lure of islands proves a magnetic force, a siren's call, and I decide without hesitation on a sojourn in the South Pacific, among islands of shadowed history, of monarchy, colonialism, war, cannibalism, mutiny, as well as the romantic escapes of noble savages, traders and scoundrels, lovers, painters and the writers who have created the myths of paradise. Sailors, surfers, artists, colonialists, famous and infamous, have traveled to these islands, searching for gold, copra, waves, muses, sirens, inspiration, spices, women, fame...and fortune. I am in good company. Lured and charmed as were Matisse, Gauguin, Stevenson, London, Twain, Michener and Melville, Theroux, Brando...Captain James Cook, I book my trip to Tahiti and beyond. A week later I spend the flight in a state of hyper alertness, aware of the accents (French and Polynesian) taking place all around me, while enjoying wonderful French wines and champagne. I begin the detachment from my life of work and experience a mild anxiety.

Sometime in the middle of the night I look out from my window seat to view, for the first time ever, the Southern Cross. It disconnects my

breath. The Milky Way, spiraling across the winter night, stretches from the Southern Cross to



Orion. Then the Dog Star appears, Sirius, the brightest in the night sky (being the closest to earth and the most luminous, twenty-five times more than our own sun), this star that is actually a star system, a cluster, the night-light that more than any other guided Polynesians for generations as they spanned the Pacific Ocean. They navigated by this star. And so, I thought, would I.

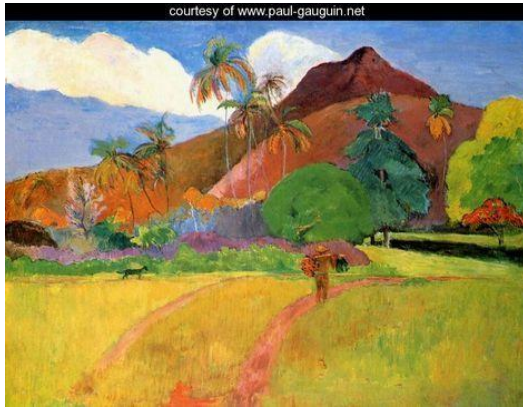
I arrive at dawn, seven hours later, to the joy of tiaré and night-blooming jasmine, air that is



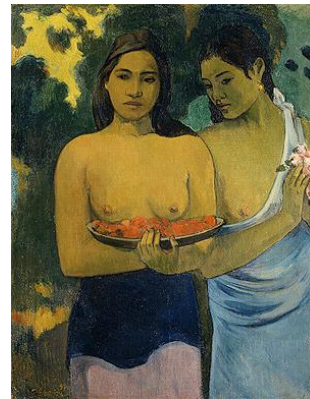
palpable. ‘Ah’ settles instantly somewhere near my heart. The heat and humidity of December’s solstice wash over me, relaxing fibers held taught for years as I process deeply perfumed air and catch the wholly new sensation of this place, both stunning and strange. Quickly clearing customs

and immigration, I hail a taxi into town where I wander along the waterfront for awhile then ask the driver if he will circumnavigate the island to help me get my bearings while shaking off my jetlag. We make our way out of bustling Papeete, dodging chickens and ‘le truck’, heading east past government buildings and seaside hotels, inhaling the sweet air of the countryside and its breathtaking vistas, a greenery so lush it assaults my optical nerves. A turquoise lagoon, the color of my lover’s eyes, hugs the right side of the road while we drive in silence, soon arriving at the Gauguin Museum, a small compound with its grounds a bit overgrown, leading to a building which wears its years as shabby chic. The entrance fee is small, about US\$3.00, but I have yet to stop at a bank, so my driver pays then retires under a palm to nap while I take in the exhibit, its lone visitor. I pause to reflect on a previous trip to Amsterdam for a Gauguin-Van Gogh exhibit, where curious and anxious lines snaked around the block for this blockbuster celebration of the artists. From 1881, Paul Gauguin lived and worked in Tahiti, nursed in the bosom of Impressionism, leaving the world of business and western culture behind, escaping a wife and

sons and a living in Paris for a life in these islands until his death in Hiva Oa in the Marquesas of French Polynesia in 1903. Here he was consumed, pursuing artistic freedom and his need for self-



Tahitian Landscape (1893)



Two Tahitian Women, (1899)

definition; he fell in love with Tehaamana, a girl of 14, with whom he found sweet contentment. Did Gauguin observe the Dog Star in its home in the constellation of Canus Major (big dog)? Did he know it as 'Tua-ua', the Marquesan term for the navigation star? Was it the primitivism he sought in these islands? The new? The irrational? The vibrant colors and scents that scream at the senses and which colored his own creations and expressions in this paradise?

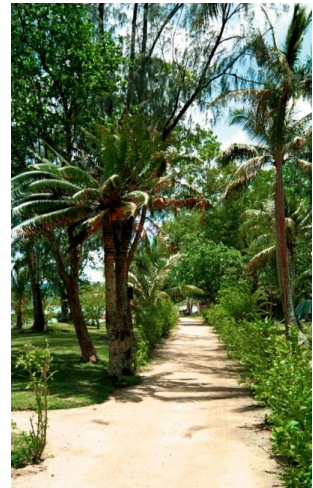


D'où Venons Nous / Que Sommes Nous / Où Allons Nous

Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going? (1897-98)

Arguably Gauguin's most famous Tahitian painting (and according to the artist, his masterpiece), this work addresses his existential struggle. Solid and embodied, these islanders represent a dark world, grounded, earthy, unlike the Parisian society he knew. He takes the events and scenes of island life and, against the back-story of leaving civilization, work, and his stock-broker life in Paris, questions himself into a moral corner. His postimpressionist style evokes a mythology for island life. Gauguin asks (in his letters and *Noa Noa*) that we read this piece from right to left, from the babe to Adam and Eve (and their apple) in the centre, to the old woman facing death on the far left. The blue figure represents religious concepts of life beyond death, the unknown, the mystery. This tour de force invites the viewer to contemplate the meaning of life through symbols and structure, past and future, known and unknown, through the lens of mystery, and I stand motionless for half an hour, lost in that contemplation.

Another hour and I am dropped at the ferry landing where I board an afternoon passage from Tahiti to its sister island, Moorea. I climb quickly to the top deck and secure a space to enjoy some sun and the scenic views of both islands as I pass from the teeming city of Papeete to the quiet bay at Viaré, where before long the ferry enters the draw as clouds play over jade peaks. Manu meets me, and we drive in silence to Les Tipaniers, where Tiaré, the proprietress of a small



beachside resort, greets me on arrival, leading me to a small bungalow (faré) which will be my home for the first week. Somerset Maugham noticed the excitement of islands and the new; “it was not the beauty of the islands that took me...what excited me was to meet one person after another who was new

to me.” Tiaré was new. And lovely. Stranded by her French industrialist husband with two young babies, she made her mark first serving home cooked meals for island workers and later as her children grew adding a bungalow here, another there – all built on a wild piece of family land gifted by an uncle who took pity on her plight. Tiaré invites me to dine, and we feast and converse together, with the help of English, Italian, French, and sign language, enjoying poisson cru, a Tahitian appetizer made with raw, local fish, caught this morning, ‘cooked’ in fresh lime juice and dressed in coconut cream. It arrives with crunchy baguettes and a lovely white Bordeaux. A marvelous seafood lasagna (specialty of the house) follows, along with more wine as we indulge in conversation and courses of island foods and French wines for nearly two hours, finishing with a variety of cheeses and chocolate truffles, at which point, overcome by fatigue, I retire to my faré and sleep fitfully, dark dreams asking for attention.



Awakening at dawn, I saunter down to the pier. Two fishermen, hip deep in the lagoon, throw nets, silhouetted against a lavender dawn; no one else ripples the silence of early morning as light comes in fingers over the motu, finally turning the water sapphire and making shapes of things on shore. I break for a late breakfast at the small café which hangs over the water, lost in the view, smothering fresh croissants with a succulent jam, made of some unknown fruit, and washing it all down

with island espresso. James Michener says of Moorea, "it's a monument to the prodigal beauty of nature." I settle into easy agreement, working for hours, focusing and framing, observing through various camera lenses the changing colors and action, intoxicated with the erotic sensuality of the island. The air is heavy with the fragrance of tairé and frangipani, as I walk on, drawn by



the subjects in my lens. I spend lunchtime over a salade niçoise and Jack London's

South Sea Tales (1911), a paperback I'd backpacked, filled with stories set among the islands and



atolls of Oceania and its magical places - Bora Bora, Pukapuka, Rarotonga, Nao Nao, Vatuvara, Nukutepipi. Over the next week I visit One Foot Island, Aitutaki Lagoon, Saturday markets and hidden beaches; I watch quick-hipped dancers, hear tribal drums, feast on coconut cuisine, and taste the essence of island places, island lives.

II

I soon discover that getting to islands is half the fun, whether by seaplane, helicopter, outrigger or launch. So is the welcome, whether by chiefs and a kava ceremony, a gay butler with chilled peppermint face cloths and impeccable mai tais, or simply a mango dawn scribbling on a broad stretch of pink sand. Once transported to Bora Bora I paddle a small outrigger across to a nearby motu and pull the canoe onto a sandy cove. An old thatched hut stands lookout on a promontory where a small path ascends alongside. Wet grasses caress my bare legs as I climb to the top of the island, their scent wild and unlike the flowers on the main island which I had come to know already. Primitive and brash I hike on till I stand sentinel, looking over the bay, a turquoise glass, framed in islands and motus. Small overwater bungalows jut out from the point on the closest island where the rich and famous hang out year round, enjoying a lifestyle envied by many. Come to relax, they stay close to the beach or café while I immerse myself in the local culture, adventuring beyond the pool/bar confines to explore an ancient lookout on an undeveloped motu and stand as warriors from another time, scanning the horizon for movement in the water foretelling the approach of tribal canoes. Paddling across to another motu, I rest on the warm sand under a palm, listening to the slap-slap slap-slap of the lagoon, and in the distance a background roar of waves, breaks on the reef. Timeless, rooted, primitive, my senses awake.

The rhythms of islands surge through my veins – skin alive, limbs easy, mind here and everywhere at the same time, and for timeless moments I lie like odalisque, so still my breath feels like an earthquake, then I swim until I am transformed by the magic of water.

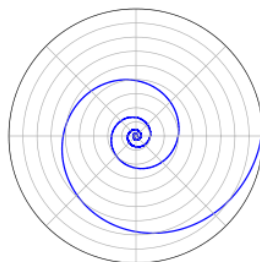
Robert Louis Stevenson, treasured Samoan icon, describes the transition I am going through just a week into my journey – “a spiritual change or perhaps a molecular reconstitution.”

Would I mutiny, I wondered? Would Bora Bora end my career? Could I stay, growing old among the island’s wild colors and night-blooming jasmine? Its sweet souls? Can I lose myself in the simple pleasure of Puanangi Nui Market where people and



plants, borne of the rich earth and nurtured by mother sea, smile and laugh, infusing an overcast morning with a sunshine all their own?

It was here on Bora Bora that the 1789 Mutiny story was filmed in 1962, Marlon Brando playing First Lieutenant Christian Fletcher. During the shoot he met and fell madly for his third wife, Tarita Teriipia, a Tahitian princess, and in '65 he purchased Tetiaroa, an atoll of thirteen islets where he spent as much time as possible, which he preserved as a bird sanctuary, and on which his Tahitian son, Teihotu, lives today, managing a small ecotourist resort. A neosomaniac within two weeks, I'm already mad about islands. Like *Moby Dick's* Ishmael, 'I am tormented with an everlasting itch for things remote...to sail forbidden seas and land on barbarous coasts.' Eugene Burdick says, “here a man can live the life he is supposed to live: the life of the body, the life of the mind, the life of the heart,” like the heart of a Chambered Nautilus (Nautilus



pompilius), with its pearl-like lining, displaying a nearly perfect equiangular spiral, like galaxies and tropical cyclones, biological structures or the approaches of hawks to their prey or insects to a light source, the organic path a dog takes to find its spot, where content reflects form in the endless designs of nature. It feels as if I have circled my entire life to arrive at a chambered core, a natural, protected embrace of life and beauty. Is this my nautical journey?



On my last morning the sun comes gloriously out, and riots of color and large smiles infuse joie de vivre all over the island as I take one last circumnavigation by moped, stopping at the market for a couple of freshly-dyed pareaus, some simple shell necklaces, melons and music

and infectious laughter. Seasonal produce is piled high on every table and hanging off the back of pick-up trucks: fish - just pulled from the sea, oranges, lemons, avocados, starfruit, mangoes, papaya, lady-finger bananas, figs and ripe tomatoes.

Mata gives me a head lei of hibiscus, tiaré, and gardenia, wishing me a safe journey. Tomorrow I leave for home. Tonight I flirt with the drummers and



dance the tamuré with the tamara, then stroll the beach back to my faré and tuck in with a nice French Bordeaux to polish some words – words like beach pebbles, precious little pebbles found at the mouth of Hinano stream where she kisses the sea. Before entering I turn to look back across the lagoon, sparkling under a cloudless sky. The Dog Star sits on the lap of a cheshire moon, illumined with magic, hanging over paradise.

