

11/20/09 - An Elongated Tear: Culebra

Culebra is an American Virgin island with a fierce sound for a past, a sound that still hollows it out and leaves it damaged. Culebra is full of sun and charm, but beneath that, there are the ghosts of empty shells, the whisper of the firing range, the rusted shrapnel blown over with sand. The bombs had to be tested and they were tested here; the soldiers had to be trained and they were trained here, on Culebra and Vieques, two tropical Caribbean islands off the eastern shore of the main island of Puerto Rico. Here the U.S. military dropped literally tons of bombs from every angle. Here they practiced on long and short firing ranges and the ships tossed their refuse and when they were done, there was little "nature" left except the weather. It is still there, weather and shells. You will find the barnacled shapes of those bombs and missiles settled in the currents at the floor of the surrounding ocean. There, scaled and ribboned with green weed, these elongated teardrops rest with all the guile of war, decades old, on the bottom of the sea.

In 1975, the U.S. military finally left Culebra. The western part of the island became a highly controlled nature preserve, though not necessarily out of the will to preserve?the natural flora was mostly destroyed by shelling or threatened by non-native species. Rather it was protected because there was so much unexploded ordnance, so much in the testing that had failed and that may or may not have, depending on which side is speaking, created a mysterious residual that affects the health of the island and its people. But the ordnance itself is no mystery. It can be seen, pointed to, and occasionally even deadlier evidence of its existence reverberates off the coast.

When you drop a thousand bombs, a few fail. When you drop a thousand times a thousand, trying to get it right?how to aim, how to target, how to make destruction work?how many then fail to explode?

These are the waters of Culebra.

Still, some areas were never bombed, and some have been declared clear. And we weren't thinking about ordnance the morning we didn't go to Flamingo Beach on the north side of Culebra, having heard it was one of the most beautiful beaches in the world. Even if we didn't know what "live ordnance" meant yet, we knew what "most beautiful" meant. Even on a distant island like Culebra, overcrowding occurs because it is so close to Puerto Rico. The prosperous people of the larger island

sail to the smaller island to enjoy the peace and quiet, but in the process, (as happens everywhere) peace and quiet packs up and leaves and what's left is a big party.

Puerto Rican coffee is a kind of brown sunshine, filling David and me with the northern energy that the islanders shake their heads about. At our guest house at Villa Fulladoza, we abandon breakfast in our outdoor kitchen scattered with novels and notebooks and half-eaten toast, climb into a rented Volkswagon Thing the color of moldy butter and head, grinding gears the entire way, for Rosario, an isolated beach on the far west side, tucked into a protected cove that nurtures a still living reef laden with tropical life.

We have come for one of my favorite worldly experiences, shallow-water snorkeling.

We park at Flamingo but walk the half-mile over pitted terrain to Rosario's. We snorkel all morning, saturating ourselves with this alternative existence of underwater wilderness. There, we watch a school of blue angelfish swim among hovering yellow tail, float with parrotfish and blue striped grunts and all the tiny ones whose names I am still learning but which are petals burned on my brain. We swim among brain coral and fan coral and delicate kitelike creatures barely visible in the golden water.

When I snorkel, my five reliable senses shift, alter in their purpose. Due to the nature of the mask, smell and taste become sealed; sound is dulled to hollow signals like the clipped tap of the grunt banging its hard mouth on the coral or the distant almost dreamlike thud of a powerboat. Sight is paradoxically narrowed through the tunnel of mask. One must turn the head deliberately as though casting a beam. Short sight is heightened because the light, while truncating distances, seems to pierce the water so that certain colors turn golden, and others nearly disappear. My tactile sense heightens because other senses tamp down. The warm all-over touch of water becomes super-luscious, recalls the forgotten time of swimming in the womb. We float in the contradiction of security and flying.

Gestures become words?because one must use hand signals. Pointing is paramount. All is gesticulation, a clumsy charade of jabbing fingers. Look that way. The spray of weed dotted with orange. Look there. A school of yellow-striped wonder. There. Swift iridescence scooting under coral. Creatures so alarmingly lovely that I would gasp if I could. I know, suddenly surrounded by a million tiny

silver arrow fish, this is where life must have begun.

We snorkel until, unbelievably in these balmy waters, we became cold, and we have to give up, swim back in, rise clumsily in our fins, and shuffle toward the warm shore, saddened to abandon dream flight.

We snorkel until the boats roll in with their throaty engines, and even this more isolated beach becomes a popular destination. Only then do we walk back over the ridge to Flamingo to brave the crowds after all, thinking they can be no worse than those invading Rosario's.

I discover that Flamingo is a deceptive beach, as is this island. It appears to be one thing but is another.

Traipsing across the makeshift unpaved parking area, I notice that the sand of Flamingo appears similar to the beaches along our beloved Lake Michigan, sugary and light, soft to the step. And as at many Michigan beaches, one walks over a low dune to a wide view spreading out left and right to the horizon. Flamingo is similarly elegant, a graceful horseshoe with distant points, the eastern one rocky, the western a sandy spit pointing to the reef where the surf breaks.

At first, walking over the sand toward the water, I think well... so it's true...there is nothing as special as my own home beach in Leelanau County. And then, I hear the surf in its roll, turning in slow sleep. I near the water, and the air, always heavier in this part of the world, takes on translucence. Then the sand's texture becomes velvety cream, but firm, like walking on fine silk stretched taut. Over that, swirling in for hundreds of feet, waves shallow as chiffon. David takes my hand and we walk farther and the sand is a fine palm of sensation for our tired feet, a long shivery song of foot sensation. Ocean scents, flower scents, mist, the envelope both clear and laden with moisture. Without thinking, we drop our gear in a pile and walk the slow walk into the shallows. We take on a dazed look because dazed we are, breathing this yielding light. That first time, we walk east a long way, then sit down and doze, tangled in each others arms, tired from the long swim with fish, but now gentled by this beach with its warm courtesy.

Jorge is a young Adonis, slim and muscled, with long dark hair. His black eyes are bright, his voice deep but not loud and almost Patrician in its pronunciation of English though he slips into Spanish effortlessly. Like so many here in these islands, he is originally from the mainland, though now settled a decade into the island culture, long enough to claim it as his home. He stands behind the small counter in his art shop and speaks softly of his friend, a poet who is being sued for speaking out against development of the island.

It is he who tells us about the tanks.

Wherever we go, I seek the local art. It is not easy to find in Dewey, the main town on Culebra. Many shops import the usual mementos created by sweat labor in other lands, and though it's advertised as "handmade," it has the look of multiplication. I look for something made with local hands and local resources. I'm willing to pay a fair price for an honest piece of art, something lovely and clear that will bring memory back to me and will offer pride to the maker. After walking the streets lined with tourist shops, I find Jorge's little shop on a side street, just down from Mamacita's, our favorite bar. "Arte" is one room, open at the back to a workspace that is really a kind of tree house over a ravine. The front room is full of paintings, high quality photographs, jewelry of Culebra's signature green stone, some hand cut mother of pearl? I pick an amulet with seven peach pearls still imbedded in it. Jorge also sells me a hand-sewn chapbook of poems by Paul Franklin, the friend who is in trouble. The proceeds support his court case. The poems are angry rhymes with great passion hidden beneath the language of distrust.

I wander the shop, come upon a series of simple block prints on delicious paper. The print I am attracted to is enigmatic? part fish, part slim dancer, part skeleton. Its colors are dark, purple and black, set sharply on white Strathmore. I notice the pencil signature is his, Jorge Acevedo.

"Tell me about this one," I ask.

He picks it up, turns it once? it looks like a skeleton, half fish, half human. He turns it again. Now like a dancer. Again and it becomes a diving fish. "This is my symbol for what's happening here."

He begins talking about the turtles. "They are endangered, the leatherbacks and loggerheads. Scientists are monitoring the nests."

I look at the print, trying to make the connection between the art and the turtles.

"We are the only place in the Caribbean where the sea turtles' nests are on the rise." He tells me with quiet pride.

I look at him skeptically. "And that's because...?"

"Live ordnance."

I look so startled, he chuckles "It's the only way we are protected."

I stare at his young serious eyes.

"They are rising from the ashes like this dancer, " he says. "Sea turtles, fish, even parts of the reef. We were dead, bombed to nothing, and we are coming back now, for a little while, because they do not want to touch the bombs."

He sounds like a young messiah offering a quiet sermon.

After the guns quieted, Jorge tells me, the terns returned; long after the ships withdrew, the bright fishes found habitat in the sunken ones. The waters settled, and with the military gone, the village industries, after trouble with unemployment and alleged corruption, returned, at least temporarily, to local subsistence. The tourist trade, small but energetic, grew and now, in the last few years, has developed a thriving ecotourism. The significantly wealthy, Jorge says, they are silent and withdraw to their villas overlooking the distant shores. The significantly poor squat in tin camps in the remote hills. And there are the villagers and the ordinary people who love the island, their home, and cherish its slowly returning beauty. The island planners, up until recently, have been discouraged from developing large resorts because the live ordnance is still there. The old bombs are not just in the water, but in the soil, the rocks and crevasses. Culebra and its cousin island, Vieques, are not untouched paradises; they are, rather, a jumble of destroyed and rejuvenating ecosystems held in shaky truce by a sunken, living danger. This is what, to some small degree, has kept island development in check.

In Culebra, you must always stay on the designated paths.

You must listen closely to all warnings.

The next day David and I hike down one of those barely designated trails to a north beach called Brava, *rough one*. At the makeshift trailhead, we park next to a half-finished hut with goats and a dog who barks obsessively. It's a long trek through gullied terrain. We climb a horse trail through dense thicket up over a long ridge, then down into a winding swamp.

Like Michigan, Culebra has mosquitoes and biting flies. They rise as we move through the grasses. The little lizards rustle in the underbrush, the sun comes and goes as clouds scuttle across a sky filigreed by the canopy of scrub forest. We scramble over sections of the trail washed out in spring rains, sinking now and then into a dry gulch eight feet deep. We get lost in the scrub where the trail splits and then fades. We backtrack to the main trail, pass the ruins of a Spanish well centuries old, skirt a wild bee hive, cross near a stagnant lagoon graced by a pair of egrets. Finally, hot and scratching, we reach a place where the trail opens onto the beach, totally empty, which in turn opens to the wide expanse of ocean. We stash our packs against a rock shelf that offers some shadow.

We look around. We are delightfully alone except for the surf, a whale of surf. Huge and distant, the waves shape themselves far out, gathering enormous size as they roll over reef. They are so large that they seem like the giant backs of clumsy creatures shouldering slowly through the distant deeps. They are enormous, but they wheel in leisurely, breaking heavily against the long sloping arms of the beach.

This surf is not something we think about.

Because there are the cooling waters, there that translucent air laden with iridescent mist tossed up by the roll of the waves. We are hot. We want to be refreshed. We do not hesitate. We run out a spit of sand and into the water to stand in the ebb and flow.

We do not yet understand the reach of the waves, the unchecked force of Brava. We are in up to our ankles, leaping and playful. I throw my arms open, sighing at the coolness. Way out, a distant wave rises, teasing at first, washes in slowly around our calves, tasting. It rises again, enough for us to splash each other and aren't we glad we came all that way and now we can swim? And then we are in to our thighs, and how did that happen? We didn't walk out into it, it came to us, didn't it?

We are drenched and laughing.

And then we feel it, the inner pull, the deep insistence, the weight of water against the backs of our legs and knees. It is immense. We are standing in it, only a few feet apart, laughter dying. I realize what is happening. I know, by every alerted sense in me, that it could simply take my feet out from under me and sweep me out. Rip tide such as I have never felt in my life. We look at each, and David feels it too and the wave is rising again. This time the sound alerts me, the mounting thrum of wave, intensifying like the inside of storm.

We have taken this place too lightly.

Suddenly I am reaching for David who is reaching for me, and we lock hands and turn and push ourselves hard away, slipping in soft bottom-sand that pulls out from under our feet so fast we can barely keep footing but must keep it, keep moving, stumbling, struggling out of the grip of a current stronger than anything we have ever encountered in any of our travels.

That kind of power. Brava. Rough one. Greedy one.

When we finally get clear, I stand well up on the beach with my arms crossed, holding myself and gasping, *oh my god, oh my god*, astonished at how close we have come to disappearance. David shakes his head, chagrined. He reminds me we had been warned not to swim. And I snap that no one said it was *too dangerous to wade*. But we both know we have been foolish; this is a beach of such isolation that if we had gone under, we could not have been saved. I am in awe as I work out the physics of this long wave. We stop now, see its guile, how it imperceptibly gathers force over rocks and reefs way out, how it garners ruthless energy, how it would be impossible to surf or swim or live long in this kind of rush. It is majestic and hostile and unrelenting and deceptive. The *rough one* is now an understatement.

This surf, this current, this force: this is what the turtles swim through.

After the adrenaline has drained out of us, we walk the hard wet swash, cautiously letting the small waves lap our feet just enough to keep cool. Now that we know them for what they are, we are not really attending the waves, but simply watching where we are in relation to them. What we are really paying attention to is the high

water line, examining the sand surface near the scrub edge. Sure enough, only a few hundred yards down the beach, we come to the first one.

The pattern is beautiful in the damp sand leading from the water's edge to the scrub thicket, over a hundred feet, a yard wide and serpentine. The indentations are a script, a topography of will and instinct and necessity, deep and regular corrugations with the furrow down the center where the tail drags as a kind of rudder. It looks like a replica of a complicated mountain range, one where the hills follow a miniature faultline of volcanic moraines.

These marks were made by a female.

Sea turtles are made for the water, not the sand. It seems counter to everything in them except the survival of the species to drag those heavy bodies over the soft sand to a place where they dig with appendages meant for swimming. They dig out the sand to a deep bed, then turn and force out dozens of eggs. I have heard they make tears while laying their eggs. Then each turtle turns, covers the eggs, turns again, and crawls back, slowly grooving the sand with this instinctive text, back to Brava, the rough one, and through that hellacious surf.

They do this in the dark.

Each morning, the new nests are marked with stakes; the orange tape dated the night the nest was found. When the time comes, scientists, ecologists, nature lovers watch for the hatch, counting and trying to help the tiny turtles reach the water. If they make it that far, more of them will live. But until they hatch, the most important thing is for them to remain undisturbed. We stay the designated six feet away from the nests, look admiringly at the hollow that remains even after the covering up, at the intricate pattern of tracks, then move to the next one. We find no new nests to report. All the nests we find have been staked, but it is early in the season. We visit close to a dozen nests during the slow hike down the beach. We count every nest as a blessing on the future. With each one, I am more and more awed at the mother's journey, at the tenacity of this internally driven quest through the grip and treachery of Brava. I better understand Jorge's symbol, the death, the dance, the dive and resurfacing.

Our last night in Culebra we return to Flamingo Beach. We have learned much about this island that we have come to appreciate. The wide and lovely beaches,

the fish-laden waters, the constant and generous warmth?not to mention strong coffee and excellent rum. We have snorkeled every calm day for it is the bath that renews the soul, a baptism of regeneration, this swimming on the surface, looking down into the sea. We have never seen the elongated tear of a bomb still resting on the bottom, or the tears of the great sea turtles, but we have seen plenty of other industrial shapes: pipes and rebar embedded in fractured concrete, parts of tools we cannot name, enough to convince us that there was another world here once, and it was not beautiful.

But superimposed over those shadowy shapes, we have seen the fan and bright flash of coral and its inhabitants. We have hiked hills and drunk cheap island beer, eaten fresh fish and conch, and listened in bars late at night to the island mix of drumming and jazz. We have learned which of the small makeshift eateries are run by people who know the native way of food. We have gone back and talked to Jorge who has told us more about how the island is inevitably threatened by development and how the locals are becoming demoralized by the shift in policy that will allow more devastating shoreline resorts, resorts that will encourage erosion, silt, pesticide run-off, waste water that could tip the balance for the reefs, fish, and turtles to a death watch.

He has given us this last set of directions.

It is dusk on Flamingo. Because this is a beach that faces north, it is the most stunning moment of the day. The sun drops behind the beach, not on the water, and an even pink light spreads out. It does not have a source; it is just there, resting on the water and sand. Artist's light. It is quiet at this time of day; sunset buffs go to the ferry launch where conventional sunsets dazzle, where there is ice cream and beer. Flamingo is at its empty best. The low surf rolls lazily and the spray drawn off the breaking waves rises and floats, an echo of the wave it has abandoned.

We walk west toward the sandy point, knowing what we are going to find. I am wondering if this is how I want to mark my last evening on Culebra. We pass the picnic and camping area where a distant radio plays a fast salsa, and then the last buzz of campers, beach parties, humanity fade away. After a long time we round the point of the horseshoe, and there it is, visible but still a long way off. Unmistakable. We keep taking the steps that will lead us to this dark shape in the sheer warm light of the evening until at last we are standing a dozen feet away.

A historian could tell me what kind it is. I need know only that it is a World War II tank, half-buried in the warm sand, its hatch flipped open and partly blown away so the rims still reaching resemble the horned antennae of an enormous insect. It is

covered with rust and pocked with holes. Its tracks, strange corrugated runs. This is the tank that the military used as a target, this tank, still here fifty years later, at which they aimed and fired and aimed and fired. Sometimes they hit, sometimes they missed, sometimes the shells exploded, sometimes they didn't.

Stay on the paths.

But I also see what Jorge wanted me to see, that this destruction?the way the tank was damaged and then eaten by the salt and years and trade winds?has softened it. It is melting, losing shape, a monstrous blossom gone soft and brown with rot.

And then there is Jorge's symbol.

Painted across the turret, smoothing the surface with bright colors, the emblem of the rising dancer. Jorge's Sea Phoenix, the figure that has been adopted by the activists, young and old, native and transplanted, the symbol of the dancing fish, a creature rising from the dead, diving and dancing and swimming, human and fishlike, painted on the side of a tank so old and rusted it has ceased to be frightening and is being transformed into something else, a paradox, coming to mean the opposite of what it once was.

Irony stretches out in the light around us, for the tank and Jorge's Sea Phoenix are the two protections for this delicate place. We stare at this artifact of defense and destruction, we touch it, this mechanical creation maimed by its maker, and we finally turn away to look again to the forgiving ocean, watching for the hope that rises from inside the surf, catches a current, struggles forward hard-shelled with need, to make a nest out of sand in the amazing night that permeates this small and fragile paradise.

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