

*NATURAL'S NOT IN IT*

Chris Sharp

One of the first things they saw was a naked man, trekking along by the break with nothing but a backpack on. Surprised, they'd forgotten that it was a nude beach, and, rapidly assimilating this reminder, braced themselves for the sudden, and, at times harrowing exposure of liberated male genitalia and the titillation of unconcealed tits. "What is it?" he wondered out loud. "What was the attraction? The appeal?" Neither of them could quite grasp the interest in nudism; it seemed like an anachronism, some enduring relic of early twentieth century utopianism, and thus, bereft of the constellation that had occasioned and lent it meaning, an ideological orphan. But the hotel was cheap. And the beach itself was known to be beautiful, beautiful and idyllic, to the point of being postcard implausible, absurd even. So they made the reservation without thinking twice about it and forgot about that one historic detail.

"I think they are all gay," she observed neutrally. It was an observation.

Something devoid of judgment but which tentatively stretched toward and wanted to contain fact. Were nude beaches typically gay? He had no idea. There did seem to be a disproportionate number of naked, bearded men (he too, however, was bearded). But that first day: that one woman energetically, nay, frantically doing yoga about twenty yards from them.

"That's not yoga." She narrowed her eyes.

Not an adept, by any means, he was not in a position to say. But it freaked both of them out.

"Maybe, it's a new form of yoga? The new yoga," he countered. "Yoga on meth?"

Whatever it was, like that one guy standing there, stark naked, inexplicably humping the air in the direction of the water, they unfortunately wouldn't be forgetting it anytime soon. For all the freedom such acts signified, they had a way of sticking around, lodging themselves in certain mnemonic cavities, clinging to the brain.

A routine settles in. They come to prefer the one restaurant at the end of the beach, not far from a rocky outcropping, where the waves were the calmest. With those what-are-they-called? The big umbrella things? He points. Palapas, she offers. She being Mexican often speaks in Spanish; he in English. Though he is struggling through Bolaño's *Estrella Distante*, silently mouthing new words to himself as he learns them. She is reading the Nobel Prize laureate, Patrick Modiano. She looks up from her book often, asks things like, "Is Montparnasse really that ugly?"

A former inhabitant of the city, he pauses, remembering how every time he found himself there, he just wanted to leave: "Yes; I guess, it is."

But they are at the beach. Where the hours and days pass in a blessed hebetude, shared by everyone, man, woman and beast—by which is meant the dogs. Above and beyond all the dogs.

They drink limonadas con agua mineral. Eat fried, breaded shrimp, other mariscos. Swim, rocking back and forth in hammocks, doze off.

They come to recognize neighbors, other followers of routines. Like the one taciturn güero (white) couple who seem to have taken a vow of silence. He stoically naked, proverbially letting it all hang out; she dropping her shawl only to enter the water, revealing a semi-classical figure. It turns out that she's pregnant, perhaps, he imagines, five or six months? Maybe that's why they are so serious? Rendered such by the gravity of the solemn duty entrusted to them, like Adam and Eve, Mary and Joseph.

Oddly or predictably enough, fertility or fecundity, or maybe just plain old concupiscence abounds.

One afternoon in the shower by the restaurant bathroom he notices two pairs of improbably conjoined feet rhythmically rocking beneath the door. Rather than being shocked by such an unexpected event, he immediately sets about trying to solve the anatomical riddle so unceremoniously posed to him. In vain.

The next morning they espy a pair of butterflies on the way to the beach.

Hear dogs howling.

“Are those flies fucking?” She asks, at one point, indicating a pair of frolicking insects near their plates.

Maybe libidinousness—no doubt aided by so much naturism—is contagious?

“This is the beach of Y Tu Mama También,” she explains to him. He blinks, turns away from her and looks at it newly, remembering the scene at the end, the woman swimming, giving herself to all “like the ocean.”

One day they decide to switch up the routine and try another beach a fifty peso taxi ride away. For the first time, he notices the general sense of under-constructed-ness, takes it in. Everything seems to be in the process of development. Some of it arrested. For what seems to be decades. Just abandoned, half-built buildings languishing on cliffs. An abundance of cinder blocks, exposed rebar, waiting, perhaps even pinning to impale someone. There is a caged parrot by the bathroom in the restaurant, a toucan, with a prodigious beak. Briefly he considers freeing it, but is not sure it could fly with that splendid, oversized object on its face.

At the new beach, the waves are calmer. In fact, there are no waves. But there are children. Many children. A bewildering quantity.

They decide to return to the nude beach, where, it turns out, there are fewer children. Barely any, at all. And there they continue their routine.

Describe the dulcet, metallic din of the crickets at night, a sound which always reminded him of “Green Arrow” by Yo La Tengo, a band she loved. The cocks. The cock-a-doodle-dooing cocks outside their bedroom windows in the morning, risible and implacable. They wondered if they cocks knew they were risible. Did they make those sounds and think, wow, that is ridiculous. I shall now laugh. Cock-a-doodle-doo! Maybe that’s the noise they made—laughter at how absurd it was. Which was why it couldn’t stop.

A vicious cycle. Describe the sunset? No, not the sunset. The owners of the hotel, a pair of Italian septuagenarians. The woman, who could be seen walking briskly along the shore buck-naked in the gloaming daily, while her counterpart, bald and fitfully withering, sat in the shade of the hotel watching TV, smoking cigarettes and hacking so vehemently, so riotously, that something, like his smoldering soul, seemed to be trying to leave the apparent corruption of his body permanently. The tatty-looking white kids with dreadlocks wearing t-shirts with “namaste” symbols on them, their bodies bearing tattoos of enigmatic Chinese ideograms. The hotel at the other end sincerely called “Shambala”... But the bodies. Large, small, fruit and vegetable shaped. Some of them quite impossible, really. Like cartoons. But not so impossible as those pornotopian marvels ostensibly destined for autoerotic two-dimensional consumption. Magnificent, really, all of them, in their heterogeneity. Even and especially the white bodies of Europeans. So alien to the sun that he feared that their total disclosure was somehow precipitate, too intense, as if they, like something trapped under a magnifying glass, might burst, at any moment, into flames. It was on the last day that it finally happened. They had joked about it a couple of times before, but only half-heartedly. Not even really amused.

“I’m going in,” he heard her say while he was reading, puzzling over the word *sobrecogedor*, which he just learned—well, the day before—but had already forgotten. When he looked up, the bikini he had come to expect was no longer there, her pale parts exposed. She stood there smiling, guilelessly, down at him.

Setting his book aside, he rose and in that same instant, pulled the string on his blue swim trunks, which gathered around his feet.

Together, they walked down the beach and plunged into the ocean.