

Paradise on My Mind

The weather made her feel as if there was no point to life: whether you worked hard didn't matter, whether you found someone to love didn't matter, because even if you worked hard and found someone to love, a day like this would come, when a strange damp coolness seeped in through the windowpanes and seeped in through you, make you see that everything was meaningless.

Brian Morton *The Dylanist*

And then there was the weather. I am done in by the winter. It virtually immobilizes me. The cold, the frost, the wind. It is vicious. My hands turn black, then white, than blue, or white, and sometimes all four simultaneously. Actually, it is rather colorful. And painful. My fingers become numb and I have trouble typing. I often wonder what is wrong with me. Yes, they have a name for it. But why did I fall prey to its effects? No one knows much about its origins other than it is brought on by the very conditions I experience each winter.

I see men outside walking without a cap, bald men, men who have shaved their head. How can they do that? Do they eat more, have different genes, or are they simply braver? At night there are movies or lectures that in the summer I take pleasure in walking to. In the winter, that is unimaginable. I know I am missing a lot of good stuff. Where can I find the good stuff all year round? I have been asking myself that question for years. I know it isn't to be found in Miami, although I am beginning to understand why so many move there.

But one dark and cold winter I decided to go to Maui. I had wanted to do that for years, having little idea what I would find or if I would like it. But I knew it would be warm and I was totally fed up with having to deal with the winter in a place that was by no means a winter wonderland. Besides I was about to begin my seventh decade so I took to heart the wise counsel of the ancient poet:

*Tomorrow I will haul down the flag of hypocrisy,
I will devote my grey hairs to wine:
My life's span has reached seventy,
If I don't enjoy myself now, when shall I?*

The Rubaiyat Omar Khayyam

I needed no more justification than that! Lo and behold, I was surprised by how much I liked it once I got there. As usual, it was all about the warmth. On Maui it was warm, in the eighties every day, cloudy or not. On Maui the world was inviting. It beckoned. I wanted to head out. It didn't make me cringe. It wasn't an ordeal. Instead, I felt welcome. It was not an alien place. No suiting up there. No hat. No dark and numb hands. Not much of anything really.

You develop a relationship with the place where you live, not unlike those you have with the people you know or those you would rather not know. On Maui it was one of approach, not avoidance. I am *one* with the world. It is congenial. I am in the groove. Some people click with other people; I seem to click with warm sunny days. It is a type of harmony, yes--vastly different than the relationship I have with the place I left. I cannot walk about the neighborhood where I live with such delight during the winter. Indeed, this is true much of the year. All I can do is hunker down. In fact, I don't do much of anything in the winter there other than hibernate.

In her latest novel, *Arlington Park*, Rachel Cusk captures well the divide between the outside and inside world on a rainy day in suburban neighborhood outside London:

In the hall she took their wet coats and bags and umbrellas. They prised their water stained shoes, muddy, perilously garnished with soaked leaves, from their feet. It was messy work, the unending struggle to maintain separation between outside and in.

There is nothing like this in Hawaii. You don't have to close the windows. You don't need to turn on the heat. In fact, most homes do not have a heating system. You don't have to dress warmly. There is no border between in and out. There is no need to hibernate. One by one the layers are peeled away until you simply are. The are that you are is utterly content, pure and simple. No wonder they call it Paradise.

I entered the seventh decade of my life on Friday, February 2nd. My mother used to say "Never start anything on Friday." Her admonition lent an ominous cast to the day, along with all the other portentous signs associated with it. And then as we were celebrating at an outdoor restaurant looking out at the island of Lanai, I was startled to hear the person sitting next to me exclaim: "Just the other day I realized I was now married to a 70 year old man." That was that. Nothing more was said. It was a telling statement. I am still expected to be the 20 year-old curly headed boy in khaki pants and tweed sport coat that she married long ago. The fact that I am no longer that person is the nub of all matter of things.

One hot day in Florence I wondered if I could ever find a place in my own country that was as warm as it was then in Tuscany. I realize now there is. It is in Hawaii where they speak English and where the temperature is close to 80 every day of the year. I had found it! I never thought I would.

I was shocked when I first arrived, stunned by the warmth, stunned by the peace of mind I began to experience. How could it be like this in January? Could it be like this every January? Why not make it permanent—January, February, all year? And so before long, I hatched a plan to move to Honolulu. What an excellent idea, I thought! Why not? Why would anyone want to live anywhere else? Well, there are good reasons, of course. They have a job elsewhere; I don't have a job anywhere. They have a family in their hometown; I have no family in the place where I currently live. They are attached to their hometown; I have never been particularly attached to my "hometown." I felt there was utterly no reason to remain there any longer. Not one, except that A likes it and is

reluctant to leave. What is one to do?

I wondered what kind of life I could create in Honolulu? At least, I would be able to go out. What kind of life can I create anywhere for that matter? Would I tire of living there? Would being able to go out be sufficient? Would I want to travel to Italy each summer? Would it be necessary? “He divides his time between Honolulu and Florence.” Yes, that was the plan. It sounded pretty good to me.

I would look for a really fine bookstore, a first class market, a delicatessen to rival the one I had been going to for years. I would determine the quickest route to the university and get a library card upon arriving. I wondered if they had a magazine store that had the literary periodicals that I enjoy reading. Where or where was the foreign movie house? Did they by chance have more than one? I would begin exploring at once. It would be an adventure.

In the *Times* recently there was an article about the sizable number of Germans who are leaving their homeland. An engineer said it all: “I asked myself, “Why should I stay here when the future is brighter someplace else?” Truly! While the future may not be very long in my case, surely it will be brighter in Honolulu. No doubt about that.

Many years ago, perhaps as many as 25 or 30, I recall coming to Waikiki for the first time. I have never forgotten a person I saw then--an older man sitting alone on a bench by the beach, looking out at the ocean and the young surfers on their boards. He was tanned, wearing only sandals and shorts. I imagined he had come to Hawaii at the end of his life's work. And strangely, I imagined right then and there that one day I would become that person. I had no idea why the thought came to me then. But it did and I remember it vividly and every now and then it comes back to me. Oddly, it seems, I might actually become the person I imagined myself becoming 25 or 30 years ago. How often does that occur?

I will delete winter from my life. I won't have to think about it any more or to deal with

it. The effort to stay warm during that time of the year is such an effort. It preoccupies me throughout the day. My closet is full of clothes that are supposed to keep me warm. They don't. I will discard them now. I will finesse winter from my life and begin to live again. I wonder if I will be any more or less creative, wiser or productive where it is warm than I am in the cold and soggy town where I live. I often speculate about the effects of weather on individuals, especially how it affects their thoughts and feelings. Unfortunately, there isn't really much research on this topic.

So one day I took a look at where the Nobel Laureates in Literature were from going back as far as 1901, the year the prize was first awarded. Alas, the vast majority were from cold weather climates. Only 9 of the 116 (8%) were from warm weather, usually tropical countries that fall within that band of nations below the Tropic and Cancer and above the Tropic of Capricorn and where one-third of the world's population is said to live. Of course, that is precisely where the Hawaiian Islands are.

Many fine novels have been written and much important scientific and humanistic work has been done on warm and sunny days or in warm and sunny places. Think only of the achievements of Ancient Greece and Renaissance Florence. There is winter in these places, but I can't imagine everything of any consequence was done then. Have the Jews been any less creative or have their achievements in the arts and sciences been any less in Israel than they were in Eastern Europe? The evidence indicates not in the least.¹ I realize Israel is not exactly in the tropics but nevertheless, it is really warm and sunny there much of the year.

I think of Charles Darwin who made most of his great discoveries in the Galapagos, not far from the Equator. I think of Paul Gauguin painting his masterpieces in Tahiti. I note that Gabriel Garcia Marquez, a Nobel Laureate, who was born in Colombia but probably wrote most of his work in Mexico with utterly benign weather conditions. I think, then, that cold Northern climates like Moscow are surely not sufficient for creative achievement. Clearly they are not necessary either. The life that Dostoevsky led in

¹ <http://www.levitt.com/news/2005/08/04/57-contributions-israel-has-made-to-the-world>

Russia gave him a subject matter that ultimately led to his masterpieces. But they did not guarantee he would write them. I think of Lawrence stricken with tuberculosis, who spent much of his writing life moving from one warm-weather place to another—southern Italy, Ceylon, Mexico, and finally Taos. Was he any less creative in these places than he was in England? Just look at his work after he left London to decide.

The question calls for a detailed analysis of individual human achievement in all the arts and sciences and, at the same, time, knowledge of the exact location where they were made. Thomas Mann might have been born in Germany, but I suspect he wrote much of *Death in Venice* right there in his hotel on the Lido during hot and humid days on the Venetian Lagoon. In short, perhaps it doesn't matter *where* you live. What matters is what you make of where you live and the life you have led, as well as your talent in translating those experiences into some form of artistic or scientific brilliance.

Surely I am no *less* creative, wiser or productive where it is warm than I am where it is cold. In fact, I think the weather probably had no uniform effect on how thoughtful or clear-headed a person is. Maybe some work better on a sunny, warm day or think they do, while others prefer to work on dark and rainy days. At least the winter was more likely to keep you indoors, pounding away at the keyboard. Maybe that's why so many Nobel Laureates in Literature came from the freezing North. But I am surely not in their league anyway. All I know is that I feel good when it is warm, the warmer the better. Perhaps my work will be less gloomy if I am feeling so upbeat. I am fully aware of how gloomy my stuff is when I'm totally at war with the world.

One summer day before we were married I exclaimed to my future wife that I would like to buy an island to live on for a while. And so together we went to a travel agency to gather materials on islands that were for sale. I was such an escapist even then. Now, almost 50 years later, I have finally found an island where I would like to live. I didn't need to buy it. That was fortunate. I thought so much is coming full circle now as the shadow of death approaches.

Still one night I went over the Powell's, the well-known bookstore in my hometown neighborhood. It was the first time I had been there in a long while. I went upstairs to the book holding room. I had ordered a book from their warehouse the day before and here it was the very next day. It is a long walk up to the 5th floor but I didn't mind, since it took me through the philosophy section with all those treasures I wanted to read or read again. I came downstairs to the 4th floor where a reading was about to begin and stopped to scan the book the visiting author was going to discuss. It seemed interesting and I thought about staying. Afterwards, I regretted that I didn't. And then I wandered around the travel section on the third floor and eventually returned to the new book section on the 1st floor. It felt really good to be there, so close to where my home was, even though the night was cold and wet. And the next morning I thought it might be hard to live in a place where Powell's wasn't just a couple of blocks down the way. And then I wondered if a bookstore, if Powell's, could keep a person, keep me, in a town that I found so cold and oppressive most of the year.

It was the kind of feeling I experienced whenever I went to any of the places I had been going to for years—the nearby market, coffee shop, my favorite delicatessen. They had become a part of my life and I worried it would be hard to leave them for good. But I knew that was true for all changes in life. Anatole France put it well:

All changes, even the most longed for, have their melancholy; for what we leave behind us is a part of ourselves; we must die to one life before we can enter another.

The thought consoled me. I was ready to begin again, more than ready. There would be a bookstore in Honolulu. It would be different than Powell's but it would be a good one too, good in its own way. It would have what I wanted and maybe there wouldn't be so many flights of stairs.

And so I packed my books, a few photos, some files and cherished mementos and shipped them off to an island in middle of the Pacific Ocean. I didn't want to wait any

longer. I didn't want to keep discussing it or describing how much better I felt when it was warm. I had remained in the Northwest long enough, too long really.

A dream, an adolescent dream? No, I had lived in Portland most of my life. It wasn't as though I was just starting out. I had waited long enough. There was no reason to stay there anymore, except to be with her. She was wonderful, too wonderful but with all that wonderfulness, I was nevertheless routinely uncomfortable. I knew there would just as many discomforts in Paradise but at least the warm sunny days would give me one less to deal with.

Epilogue

I live in Honolulu now on the 26 floor of a condominium that looks out upon the sea. I came for the warmth, to avoid the cold and wet never ending winters in the Northwest. And I came alone. At this point, there was never any question that it would be otherwise.

At times I feel isolated, not lonely, but rather physically isolated without wheels or knowledge of the local scene. I am consoled by recalling the isolated souls who have lived alone in remote parts of the world—the medieval monks in their cells high in the hill towns of Tuscany, the Swedish film director on a remote island off the coast of Sweden, the prolific writer hidden away in his Connecticut home, not unlike his fictional alter ego. Oh, that I had their talent.

I need to make a few friends. Where might they be and how to make contact with them? Do people read in Honolulu? Where are they? Where are the writers, the talkers? Where are the Jews? I think I would wither on the bougainvillea without a few people to talk with once in a while. In the local newspaper it is reported that Hawaii ranks 48 among the 50 states in the number of international patent applications. I am not surprised by this statistic. After all, there are only so many surfboard designs you can patent.

Outside of a few art centers the community seems rather culturally barren. Rarely does an author get this far on a book tour. I wonder if it really matters that the cultural

community, as least the kind that I prefer, seems so limited in Paradise. In a recent *Paris Review* interview Alice Munro was asked about the kind of literary community available in the immediate area of her home in a relatively remote rural town, Goderich, in Ontario Canada. She said that there isn't a library in Goderich and the nearest good bookstore was in Stratford, some thirty miles away. I think that if Alice Munro can write as well as she does in such a place, surely I can get by in Honolulu where at least there are a few bookstores, an academy of arts and very excellent libraries. Come to think of it, there surely wasn't a bookstore close by Yasnaya Poliana.

The warmth astonishes me. Day after day, never much of a change, other than a few clouds, showers, and refreshing trade winds. I will have to begin learning something about this microclimate, the ways of the oceans and the mountains off in the distance. I also wonder if there is a neighborhood here, a neighborhood like those I know in Europe or those in the town I have left for that matter. Ever since arriving, I have been searching for one. I'm not sure there is anything that comes close. It is drive here, drive there, drive everywhere.

Yes, there are malls, in fact a huge one right across the street. It has everything in the world and then some. It is also surrounded by an immense parking lot. I wander through the mall, from one end to the other, each day. But it is not a neighborhood; it lacks intimacy. I will never come to know any of the shopkeepers, nor will they ever come to recognize me.

So eventually I begin to question the importance of all these warm sunny days. Are they necessary? Are they sufficient? I am rather intrigued by the questions. Should the weather play such a central role in one's life, in my life, in my life now?

Yes, I long to be where it is warm. I am miserable if I'm not. But I may be equally miserable on those warm sunny days if I always feel so isolated. Then I long for something altogether different. I conclude I am damned if I do and damned if I don't. It is one of my common maladies.

And so while I am utterly content in my body, or to be more exact my hands, I realize there may be little else for me in Honolulu. Can it be created? I haven't really tried and now I'm not sure if I even want to.

Can a person at the age of 70 put down new roots? I suppose it is possible, but I am not sure if want to do it alone, at least, not when it isn't necessary. My roots are deep now within a wet and soggy ground. There's nothing I can do about that anymore. All this is clear after being in Paradise a little over a month. Yes, the Internet has changed everything and brought the rest of the world right before my very eyes. But it can't bring everything and the everythings that it can't bring are surely the most important.

Still I worry that I will forget what the days are like in Portland, forget how dreary and damp, how cold and windy it can be and is for so much of the year. I must not forget that. It is entire too easy to do when you are far away in a world of tropical sunshine and gentle breezes.

On a Sunny Day in May

Do not forget the winter

The cold and chill that engulfs me

The dark and numb hands

Do not forget the bitter wind

The grey and dark sky

The endless days of rain

Do not forget the difficulty of heading out

The plays, lectures, and films missed

Do not forget the winter

