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A Drink Called Paradise: Nuclear Legacy in the South Pacific　楽園という名の飲み物——南太平洋における核の遺産

Terese Svoboda

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When I first did readings from this book years ago, I explained to audiences what I knew about the contemporary South Pacific: that nuclear fallout has produced many babies without bones or anus or eyes or left them with extremely small heads and thus the "jelly babies" I describe are real, how hundreds of Tahitians and Marshall Islanders die every year from radiation-caused cancers in hospitals in Paris and the U.S., how a boat tours the Pacific monitoring the results of the three hundred plus atomic and hydrogen bombs dropped on the humans there in tests, how the Pacific Islanders make ideal test candidates, living in the largely uninhabited "wastes" of the Pacific and having a terrific rate of reproduction because of their belief in pleasure in paradisiacal surroundings.

I used to tell my audiences all about this, as background for what is really a novel about the death of the narrator's child in the U.S., and how she comes to grips with this grief marooned on an island in the Pacific whose occupants are themselves overwhelmed with their own almost unimaginable reproductive sorrows. I used to say that I wished that the only thing that was hot in the Pacific was my book. But after a while, I noticed that audiences looked so shell-shocked and guilt-ridden after my introduction that they didn't seem to even want to hear what I was reading. So I found a sex scene in my book and read that instead and skipped the introduction entirely. Then I had two Amazon reviews that referred to the book as imaginary, as fairytale. Perhaps that is what readers hope it is, but I decided I hadn't spent six months in the Pacific—one month of it marooned—and ten years in research to read that. You will have to read the sex scene for yourself.

Pukapuka

I traveled to the Cook Islands in the early 70's when I and my generation were trying to figure out sex. What I was being paid to do was to boat to the furthest flung Polynesian island, Pukapuka, to do sound for a film shoot, but the boat never came. The government of the Cook Islands didn't want us to go but would never say no. Later I suspected they didn't want us to be there during the yearly switcheroo of all the Pukapukan women at Christmastime. Waiting, I lived on the main island for six months trying to

Pukapuka aerial view

learn about Polynesia—Pukapukans especially—and myself in this place where European men were practically dragged off the plane for sex. I'm sure it's not like that anymore—planes are much more frequent in the Cooks—but it was very curious to live in a culture that practiced what my generation preached—free love.

It was decades later that the results of the bomb tests on these islands all across the Pacific became known—and suppressed. The great love of sex of the islanders had made them the perfect subjects for both the radiation experiments and birth control testing for Swiss companies. Could my heroine Claire actually end up on such an island? Check out the Bikini website where American testing promises that it's safe for tourists to dive—and will soon be safe for the islanders again. The authorities said the same thing in the sixties and moved everyone back again, exposing them at a convenient interval, and then saying Sorry, it's not true, the place is still hot, and how about a few more tests?

U.S. test at Bikini, Marshall Islands, July 1, 1946.

Excerpt from *A Drink Called Paradise*

Stars in absolute excess, I gulp stars in my breathlessness, swinging through the last door off the stairs that finally lead up and out, and she is sitting on the cold metal deck, her legs drawn up, her eyes on the smoke that curls but does not drift into the stillness of the star-packed air. She is civilian now, or at least the lab coat's gone, her clipboard's stowed--nothing she holds protects her. She jerks her cup back toward her toes, away from me.

Not that I threaten her, not that I come toe to toe. I am bathing in stars. We sit in absolute dark here, an aurora borealis in reverse, black paint sucking the stars closer than even the stars on the island, which will surely someday set fire to the tops of the palms, fronds waving once too often against their white light.

Tis the season. She offers me a shot, which I take. And I take a second one, and one more before she says it's not her bottle.

As many islands as there are stars, I say, toasting her. You like working for this corporation?

She levers herself up from the deck, weaving a little, smoothing her way forward with her feet. They give you a house at the facility, it's okay, she says. It's a very modern place.

It must be hard. I stand too.

A lot of medicine is hard. I try not to think about it.

I'm good at that.

We talk, and the dark starts to spin with words, which I try to hold onto. I ask, Are you the one in charge?

No.

Okay. So who is in charge?

She leans on the railing, leans like this is why they're installed, not to keep people in but to let them lean. Below, she signals with a hand off that railing. He hardly ever comes up, not even at night. He could be in Bellevue instead on the ocean, he could be in Persia, he's a thousand-and-one-nights kind of guy. He's the one.

She's maybe more drunk than I am.

It was an accident, you know, she says.

I know what an accident is, I say.

The captain will like my story about the island, I say. In my story, children hide under it like it is just a spoon to be overturned. But instead of being served up in a mouthful, they come up through the sand as jelly.

I stop, I go on. The important part of the story is why they are hiding.

They should hide, she says at last.

Because it's radioactive.

No--not children, they shouldn/t. What have they done?

Her smoke triples in the wait.

It's nice you don't lock us up, I say.

She dumps ash onto the deck. You're guests, you're volunteers.

Can I change my mind?

She stubs out her smoke. I say before she can--because Yes or No isn't relevant, because it isn't my mind I want to change--See which way the palms grow on that island? Have you ever actually looked at this island?

She glances over. The island's backlit by stars. Left, she says, they grow left.

Trade winds, I say. They never blow any other way. Now if it were all an accident, this Bravo thing, which is what the husband of the woman you have here who is screaming so much calls what happened, if it were all a big accident, if it were just a big mistake that they made, letting the cloud spew itself up, up, up and being borne by the wind, wouldn't you have to know which way it would go? Wouldn't you have looked at the palms at least? See that speck a hundred miles away, you said, that's nothing, there's just people in the way. Or maybe, Let the wind blow a little that way and then we can see what's what with a few people. Even the gravestones blew that way.

Okay, okay, she says. I didn't do it.

Did I? I ask. Before she can suck in another star off the deck or drink from her cup again, I try another voice: "Studies show that in paradise, sex is paramount, that the natives reproduce like rats"--do you hear a voice like that rising in wonder, envy, lust, do you hear it tinged with the amoral curiosity of science, some boy-scientist speaking who tears the wings off six generations of flies to see if it affects their reproductive abilities, their, you know, sex?

Our parents elected those people, I say, and we keep them in place.

She has already walked away.

The stars are still there. Hot little islands.

I stroll past a card game. The little girl from the island squats beside it. I sit down and take her on my lap, though she resists, she squirms away from me in fear because I have never held her or any of them, never comforted their boo-boos or said sorry. At least she knows who I am, I am not the drinking woman. But of course I have no band-aid for her, no band-aid with some animal on it that children like printed on the side that's not sticky, I don't even have words she'd like to hear: *home or get well*, so there we struggle.

I let her go. I leave the stars for the stairs, to the very bottom of the stairs, where the doors are hot with engines behind them. Some are open so I don't have to knock, I don't have to call out over the machines, O Captain! My Captain!

Of course, he could be sleeping. It is night, and on a boat any time is all the time, they have watches and they take turns and surely even captains sleep.

Nothing promises anything inside room after room: the machines and their couplings fill them almost to the ceiling the way plants do, a thick blooming, but one room does divide and through that burrowing division must lie its reason.

He smokes and wears a tiny hat. It's the kind you wear for building expressways or putting I-beams into buildings but it's the wrong size, the size real estate salesmen wear when they're saying it's in move-in condition, the one that sits on the head and teeters. Despite the hat, he's in charge, he's no missionary-in-a-helmet. I can tell when he doesn't look up when I enter his high tensor lamp light, not even when I cast a shadow in his smoke.

He could be blind.

He is not blind enough to wear the glasses they wear because he turns to me when I say, Captain, and he blinks pale eyes, I see them see me.

Doctor, he says.

Excuse me, doctor, I say. Of course he's a doctor. That makes me fear him more but I cast off that fear for later, when I have more time, when I don't have someone looking at me or three shots of liquor inside. I want to go back, I say.

He spreads a chart over his knees, and it caves in the middle where the blue is, where it's lined with circles inside circles inside circles. He stares at the map--to sort out the creases from the bullseye?

You're sicker than you think you are. But don't worry, honey, he says without looking at me. Haven't lost a patient yet, he says. He snaps the chart taut and picks up another.

None of them? I ask.

You can think what you want, honey. He smiles at me, a dazzling smile, one with teeth, then he opens a new map, snaps that map shut. We have all the data.

He folds the map small.

One more thing, I say. Can I bum a few cigarettes from you?

He chuckles with an addict's pity and hands over what's left of his pack.

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Terese Svoboda is the author of ten books of prose and poetry, most recently the memoir Black Glasses Like Clark Kent: A GIs Secret from Postwar Japan*, winner of the 2007 Graywolf Nonfiction Prize. Its website can be found here. A Drink Called Paradise was her second novel. The novel* Pirate Talk or Mermalade *will be published in September. Her home page is here.*

See also her Race and American Military Justice: Rape, Murder, and Execution in Occupied Japan.

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