

## Miss Bird Catches a Wave.

Miss Bird is watching the natives again.

Watching their soft, sugar-brown bodies tumble and dart through the water.

*'They are truly amphibious,'* she writes to those who stay at home.

She doesn't speak of their nakedness, of how clear the water is; the way they swim close to the shore, where she is standing. Nothing is hidden from her.

Yesterday, she felt the tremble of a horse's flesh beneath her thighs.

*'I ride on a Mexican saddle,'* she wrote.

*'I have fashioned an outfit to suit. It is perfectly respectable. There is no need to worry about any impropriety on my account.'*

The boy had offered his mount, so she could ford the streams criss-crossing the bay. He flapped his hands between the horse and the strange white woman, who had appeared out of the forest. Then laughed and shrugged, when Miss Bird shook her head.

'Why not?' he meant, 'when there are no other 'haoles'<sup>1</sup> around.'

And so...

She will never tell how she hoisted her skirt far above her knees, or say she had taken off her stockings at the last camp and left them there.

Later, she felt the pain of it, seeing the pale, pillowed flesh scraped raw, so that today, she couldn't ride again, and walked to the beach to bathe in the salt-water. But while she rode, the clasp of another body between her knees, the pulse of another creature against her... she had never known anything like it before.

Strange, that something of the feeling remains, when all she is doing is lapping the water towards her bruised thighs, and watching the natives swim.

*'The naked form, when seen artlessly, bears no resemblance to the statues found in the galleries of Paris and Rome. There is something animal about it, yet somehow so appealing.'*

She shakes the words from her head. Of course, she will not write such things, to her sister, her friends, to anyone back home. She will not even write them in her diary.

She will not even think them again. Perhaps she didn't think them before. Perhaps they were no more than a foolish notion of some imagined other. Yes, they most certainly don't belong to her, just as the lady who rides bareback is *not* her.

But who is 'she'?

'Missbir, Missbir.'

It is the boy again. He stands in front of her, the water dripping down from his black, lustrous locks. He looks at her with eyes like forest pools, sparkling in the sunlight. How she wishes his shirt was longer, and did not rise up and cling to his salt-licked skin.

'Looka, looka!' he says, pointing to the next bay.

She turns, just in time to see a shadow crouched in the curl of a wave. The figure rises upright, stretched to the shape of a cross, as it rides the highest edge of the breaker towards the shore.

She watches, her breath stopped. He will fall, he will be lost beneath the churning white. But no, on he goes, flying.

She has seen them before, these surf-board riders, as she stood amongst a crowd of 'haoles', called to the beach for an 'exhibition'.

*'The piece of wood they stand on is made out of the erythrina, or breadfruit tree. In form, it is not unlike a coffin lid. All ages, shapes, and sizes take part – I watched as one large man with grey in his hair outdid all his younger fellows.'*

She had clapped along with all the other ladies and gentlemen, as they ohhed and ahhed at the antics.

*'First, they must travel out beyond the combers, where they wait and wait, as wave after wave pushes under them, until you wonder what they are doing. The trick seems to be to catch the perfect roller – not simply the biggest, but the cleanest. It is an interesting diversion for the natives, and can be quite exciting.'*

She looked at the other ladies near her, how their gloved fingers tapped together in applause, how the corners of their lips twitched. She swallowed her gasping breath back into her throat and clasped one hand with the other, to stop throwing them above her head. She stayed watching, when all the others had returned to the verandahs for sundowners or tea.

And now, here they are again, a half dozen of them, all expert, this time, all standing effortlessly, riding their 'Papa-he-nalu<sup>2</sup>', ruling the tallest waves.

*'It is interesting that the activity is called 'riding', as if it bears some resemblance to travelling by 'horse'. And of course, there is none.'*

Yet, when she watches them, the stirring inside her reminds her of yesterday. ‘Yes,’ she thinks, ‘Yes!’ each time they rise, and beat the crests to the shore.

YES!!!

Drip, drip, drip. She wakes to colour raining down around her. The crimson tassels of the ohias, scarlet hibiscus, the cerulean blossom of morning-glory. Golden fruit falling at her feet.

A ‘mamo’ bird flies past her, its one yellow feather a shard of captured sunlight.

Sometimes, when her eyes mist and blink at the scene, she thinks she has died in her sleep and gone to Paradise. For what else could this be?

But she remembers, then, that Heaven is quite different. She remembers her father’s words from the pulpit, the dark Lord looking down.

Besides, today is not one of those days. Today, she knows exactly where she is, that she has had a restless slumber, disturbed by the strangest of dreams. A dream in which she herself was surf-board riding.

She laughs. How foolish – a nonsense. How could *she* possibly do such a thing? A middle-aged woman, short of stature, and... dumpy. She wasn’t supposed to hear it – the word whispered behind cupped hands by the young women at the edge of the croquet-lawn. But they are right, of course. Yes, squat and solid is what she is, in spite of all her illness – somehow her appetite has never been thwarted. The fat has gathered on her stomach, her hips, her ankles... those thighs! Just like a sack of potatoes – or yams, or guavas, while she is here. No wonder the natives wanted to carry her everywhere, when she first arrived – not that they are thin, themselves. Still, it is a different kind of girth. Their fat cushions their bones, creating smooth hillocks of honey-brown flesh. Everything about them is soft, curved. In the water, they float as if buoyed up by the dimpled watermelons of their buttocks, their ripe papaya breasts. And the way their skin ripples and glistens, in the sun, in the sea. She has seen them rubbing the oil from the cocoa palm, deep...

No, no, no. She rubs her eyes clear, and shakes her head until she thinks her neck will break.

It is this place, again; this person again, who isn’t her. And the person in the dream wasn’t her, she remembers now. A thin, young girl, with hair flowing in the breeze, her mouth wide. *She* could ride a surf-board. ‘But not me, surely not me.’

Still, the week before she had climbed up Kilauea. True, as they ascended, she had stopped every few yards, certain her lungs would explode if she went any higher. ‘The view...’ she gasped, waving downwards. ‘Must...see...it...’ True, she clung to the tail of the mule in front, when the trail was the steepest, roughest. But only if no-one else could see her. And finally, there she was, at the top, and she had done this, what no other white woman had done (well, British woman, maybe). What she felt –

if she had collapsed there and then and died, it wouldn't matter. She would be happy. But she hadn't died, and it was enough.

And now she had ridden a horse bareback, whooping and hollering, while the natives shouted along with her, and it had been... fun.

Once upon a time, when she was a child, 'fun' was a tea-party, where a girl wore a handkerchief over her eyes, and tried to catch the other girls in the room. When they were older, she and Ettie had visited a church in another parish, where the congregation clapped along to the hymns. They had thought that was fun. She still thought it, until she came here.

But... a horse gallops on dry land; a path up a mountain is firm deep down, even when its surface skids away from her.

She has never been good in the water. A flap of her hands and feet is all she can manage – like a dog, not a fish.

And she is old, not as old in years as the surfer with grey in his hair, but older, far, in spirit.

And her twisted spine, her headaches, and the weight of her legs.

All foolishness, all a dream.

'Aloha, aloha!' The boy has found out her camp in the forest, and he has brought his girlfriend with him, 'Debra' her name is. They smile, with their perfect white teeth, and sign at her, wanting her to follow. Why not?

The cove is one she has never visited before, around the headland from yesterday's. The languid billows are no more than a foot high. The sea-bed is visible for miles. It is perfectly safe and there is no-one else here.

The boy brings out a board from behind the trees, and offers it to her. He had noticed her poised breath; he had heard her whispered YES.

She shakes her head, more than she has ever shaken it before.

But the boy takes one hand, the girl the other, and pull her towards the water.

She flounces her hands down her body, meaning 'what shall I wear?' Debra removes her cardigan and blouse and motions her to step out of her skirt and petticoat, then reaches forward to unfasten...

'No,' she shouts, 'no more!' The girl shrugs.

And on they go, into the sea, beyond the white plumes, that are, in truth, no more than frothy soapsuds. But still...

The girl places the board in the water, and motions Miss Bird to lie down. They will hold it the whole time, she says. ‘No need to be afraid, not even get wet.’

But even this lying down is hard, edging this way and that, trying to balance. And yes, she gets wet, very wet, as first a foot, then an arm, then her leg, then all of her, rolls over the board. Finally, she is on. Finally, she stretches her arms out, so that she bobs up and down, with each gentle swell. The smallest lift, a hiccup of her body, making her smile. And then, the boy and girl let go, so that, for one pause of breath, the board lifts her forward on an unfurling crest.

Somewhere inside her, twenty-one year old Issy Bird stirs. She looks up, towards the shore, the mountains beyond. Young, fearless Isabella Bird. She moves her hands onto the front of the board, as she has seen the natives do. She positions her feet, just like them, and pushes up, until she is standing tall, perfectly poised, laughing as she moves forward, catching the curl of the wave. She is floating, flying, she owns the sea. Her mouth opens in her exultation!

But she is not twenty-one, agile, brave. She is still that sack of coconuts, floundering on a piece of wood, tipping one way, then the other, until her open mouth fills with sea-water, as she tumbles off. The cry that comes from her lips is a gargled yelp. There is no danger, the water is no deeper than her body, and the boy and girl pull her up, before too much sea slops down to her lungs. They drag her to the beach, laughing as always. And Miss Bird, who wanted to cry – at her failure, her age, her shape, at her life, begins to laugh, too. The laugh of a young woman, abandoning herself to fun.

<sup>1</sup> *Haole* is a Hawaiian term for individuals who are not Native Hawaiian or Polynesian. In Hawaii, it may mean any foreigner or anything else introduced to the Hawaiian islands of foreign origin.

<sup>2</sup> *Papa-he-nalu* or *Papa he'e nalu* is a surfboard.