

## Closing Out the Visit · John Barth

GOOD VISIT, WE AGREE—fine visit, actually, weatherwise and otherwise, everything considered—but as with all visits agreeable and disagreeable its course has run. Time now to get our things together, draw down our stock of consumables, tidy up our borrowed lodgings, savor one last time the pleasures of the place, say good-bye to acquaintances we've made, and move along.

"The *light*," you want to know: "Have we ever seen such light?"

We have not, we agree—none better, anyhow, especially in these dew-bedazzled early mornings and the tawny late afternoons, when sidelit trees and beachfront virtually incandesce, and the view from our rented balcony qualifies for a travel poster. That light is a photon orgy; that light fires the prospect before us as if from inside out. Mediterranean, that light is, in its blue-white brilliance, Caribbean in its raw tenderness, yet paradoxically desert-crisp, so sharp-focusing the whole surround that we blink against our will. That light thrills—and puts us poignantly in mind of others who in time past have savored the likes of it and are no more: the late John Cheever, say, in whose stories light is almost a character, or the nineteenth-century Luminist painters, or for that matter the sun-drunk Euripides of *Alceste*: "O shining clear day, and white clouds wheeling in the clear of heaven!"

"Such light."

Major-league light. This over breakfast bagels and coffee on the balcony—the end of these Wunderbägel, freckled with sesame- and poppyseed, as good as any we've tasted anywhere, fresh-baked in the little deli that we discovered early on in the village not far inshore from "our" beach. So let's polish off this last one, to use up the last of our cream cheese and the final dablet of rough-cut marmalade lifted from the breakfast place downstairs along with just enough packets of coffee sweetener—raw brown sugar for me, low-cal substitute for you—to go with the ration of House Blend coffee that we bought from that same jim-dandy deli on Day One, when we were stocking up for our stay. Can't take 'em with us.

"Have we measured out our life in coffee spoons?"

We have, come to that, and canny guesstimators we turn out to have been. No more than a potsworth over, two at most, which we'll leave for

the cleanup crew along with any surplus rum, wine, mineral water, fruit juices, hors d'oeuvres, what have we, and I'll bet that the lot won't total a tipsworth by when we've had our last go-round at this afternoon's end, checkout time. Adiós, first-rate bagels and cream cheese and marmalade, fresh-squeezed juice and fresh-ground coffee, as we've adiósed already our fine firm king-size bed: Here's to sweet seaside sleep, with ample knee- and elbow-room for separateness sans separation! Here's to the dialogue of skin on sufficient square footage of perfect comfort so that the conversation begins and ends at our pleasure, not at some accidental bump in the night. Hasta la vista, maybe, in this instance, as it has become almost our habit here, after an afternoon's outdoorsing, to relish a roll in the air-conditioned hay between hot-tub time and happy hour.

Our last post-breakfast swim! No pool right under our balcony where we'll be this time tomorrow (no balcony, for that matter), nor world-class beach a mere pebblesthrow from that pool, nor world-girdling ocean just a wave-lap from that beach, aquarium-clear and aquarium-rich in calendar-quality marine life for our leisurely inspection and inexhaustible delight; no scuba gear needed, just a snorkel mask fog-proofed with a rub of jade- or sea-grape leaf from the handsome natural beachscape round about us.

Now, then: Our pool-laps lapped, which is to be our first next pleasure on this last A.M. of our visit (not forgetting the routine and parenthetical but no less genuine satisfactions of post-breakfast defecation in our separate bathrooms and stretching exercises on the bedroom wall-to-wall: Let's hear it for strainless Regularity and the ever-fleeting joy of able-bodiedness!)? A quick reconnaissance, perhaps, of "our" reef, while we're still wet? Bit of a beachwalk, maybe, upshore or down? Following which, since this visit has been by no means pure vacation, we'll either "beach out" for the balance of the morning with some serious reading and note-taking or else put in a session at our make-do "desks" (balcony table for you, with local whelk- and top-shells as paperweights; dinette table for me, entirely adequate for the work we brought along) before we turn to whatever next wrap-up chore or recreation—not forgetting, *en passant*, to salute the all but unspeakable good fortune of a life whose pleasures we're still energetic enough to work at and whose work, wage-earning and otherwise, happens to be among our chiefest pleasures.

Tennis, you say? Tennis it is, then, and work be damned for a change; we've earned that indulgence. You're on for a set, on those brand-new courts at our virtual doorstep, with a surface that sends our soles to heaven, pardon the pun, and so far from pooping our leg-muscles for the morning, has seemed rather to inspire them for the scenic back-country bike-ride up into the village for provisions, in the days when we were still in the provisioning mode. Extraordinary, that such tournament-quality courts appear to've gone virtually undiscovered except by us—like those many-g geared mountain bicycles free for the borrowing and for that matter the pool and spa and, we might as well say, our beach and its ocean, or ocean and its beach. Where *is* everybody? we asked ourselves early on in the visit: Does the rest of the world know something that we don't?

"Vice versa," you proposed and we jointly affirmed, and soon enough we counted it one more blessing of this many-blessinged place that our fellow visitors were so few, as who but the programmatically gregarious would not: those couples who for one cause or another require for their diversion (from each other, we can't help suspecting) a supply of new faces, life histories, audiences for their household anecdotes. Well for such that the world abounds in busy places; well for us who binge on each other's company to've found not only that company but a place as unabundant in our fellows as it is rich in amenities: just enough other visitors, and they evidently like-minded, for visual variety on the beach, for exchange of tips on snorkel-spots and eateries, for the odd set of doubles on those leg-restoring courts, and for the sense of being, after all, not alone in the restaurants and on the dance floor, at the poolside bar and out along the so-convenient reef, in this extraordinary place in general, in our world.

Auf Wiedersehen now, tennis courts! Arrivederci, bikes and bike-trails, charming little village of excellent provisions agreeably vended by clerks neither rude nor deferential, but—like the restaurant servers, reception-desk people, jitney drivers, even groundskeepers and maintenance staff of this jim-dandy place—cheerful, knowledgeable, unaffectedly "real."

Lunchtime! You incline to the annex restaurant, up on the ice-plant-planted headland overlooking "our" lagoon, a sweet climb through bougainvillea, hibiscus, and oleander to the awninged deck where frigate-birds hang in the updraft from tradewinds against the cliff and bold little bananaquits nibble sugar from diners' hands. I incline to a quicker, homelier "last lunch," so to

speaking: fresh conch ceviche, say, from our pal the beachfront vendor down by the snorkel shack (who knows precisely how much lime juice is just enough lime juice), washed down with his home-squeezed guava nectar or a pint of the really quite creditable local lager. But who can say no to the stuffed baby squid and crisp white wine up at our dear annex, with its ambiance of seabirds and fumaroles, its low-volume alternation of the sensuous local music with that of the after-all-no-less-sensuous High Baroque, and its long view through coconut palms out over the endless sea?

"Endless *ocean*," you correct me as we clink goblets of the palest, driest chablis this side of la belle France and toast with a sip, eyes level and smiling, our joint House Style, which would prohibit our saying *endless sea* even if we hadn't already said *seabirds* just a few lines earlier. *Sea* is a no-no (one of many such) in our house, except in such casual expressions as *at sea* or *on land and sea* or *moderate sea conditions*, and of course such compounds as *seaside*, *seascape*, *seaworthy*, and *seasick*, not to mention the aforementioned *seabirds*. One does not say, in our house, "What a fine view of the sea!" or "Don't you just love the smell of the sea?" or "Let's take a dip in the sea," all which strike our housely ears as affected, "literary," fraught with metaphysical pathos. Thus do longtime partners of like sensibility entertain themselves and refine their bond with endless such small concurrences and divergences of taste, or virtually endless such. But here's an end to our self-imposed ration of one wine each with lunch, especially in the tropics and only on such high occasions as this extended work/play visit; and there's an end to our unostentatious, so-delightful annex dinery, as pleasing in its fare and service as in its situation. Au revoir, admirable annex!—or adieu, as the case will doubtless prove.

Next next next? A whole afternoon, almost, before us, whether of sweet doing or of just-as-sweet doing nothing, since we have foresightedly made our departure arrangements early: scheduled the jitney, packed all packables except our last-day gear, settled our accounts and left off running up new charges, put appropriate tips in labeled envelopes for appropriate distribution, penned final hail-and-farewell cards to our far-flung loved ones, and posted on the minifridge door a checklist of last-minute Don't Forgets that less organized or more shrug-shouldered travelers might smile at, but that over a long and privileged connection has evolved to suit our way of going

and effectively to prevent, at least to minimize, appalled brow-clapping at things inadvertently left undone or behind and too late remembered.

This air—Mon dieu! Gross Gott! ¡Caramba!—such air, such air: Let's not forget not simply to breathe but to be breathed by this orchid-rich, this sun-fired, spume-fraught air! Off with our beach tops, now that we're lunched; off with our swimsuits, while we're at it, either at the shaded, next-to-vacant nudie-beach around the upshore bend—where we innocently admire lower-mileage bodies than our own (though no fitter for their age) of each's same and complementary sex; likewise each other's, trim still and pleasure-giving; likewise each's more than serviceable own, by no means untouched by time, mischance, and vigorous use, but still and all, still and all . . . —or else at our idyllic, thus far absolutely private pocket-beach in the cove two promontories farther on.

Pocket-beach it is. We lotion each other with high numbers, lingering duly at the several Lingerplatzen; we let the sweet trades heavy-breathe us and then the omnisexual ocean have at us, salt-tonguing our every orifice, crease, and cranny as we slide through it with leisurely abandon: hasteless sybarites in no greater hurry to reach "our" reef for a last long snorkel than we would and will be to reach, in time's fullness and the ad lib order of our program, our last orgasm of the visit.

Good wishes, local fishes, more various, abundant, and transfixing than the local flowers, even. Tutti saluti, dreamscape coral, almost more resplendent than these fish. Weightless as angels, we float an aimless celestial hoursworth through spectacular submarinity, not forgetting to bid particular bye-bye to the shellfish and those calcareous miracles their shells, their shells, those astonishments of form and color, first among equals in this sun-shimmerish panoply, and virtual totems in our house. Faretheewells to our fair sea shells, no more ours in the last analysis than are our bodies and our hours—borrowed all, but borrowed well, on borrowed time.

"Time," you sigh now, for the last time side-by-siding in our post-Jacuzzi, pre-Happy Hour, king-size last siesta; no air conditioning this time, but every sliding door and window wide to let the ceaseless easterlies evaporate the expected sweat of love. "Time time time."

Time *times* time, I try to console you, and myself.

"Never enough."

There's all there is. Everlasting Now, et cet.

"Neverlasting now."

Yes, well: The best-planned lays, as the poet says, gang aft a-gley.

"Not what I meant."

Appreciated. Notwithstanding which, however . . .

We beached out, see, post-snorkelly, first in the altogether of that perfect pocket-beach on our oversize triple-terry beach towels, thick as soft carpeting, fresh from the poolside dispensary of same; then on palm- and palapa-shaded lounge chairs on the beach before the pool beneath our balcony, books in hand but ourselves not quite, the pair of us too mesmerized and tempus-fugity to read. Fingers laced across the beach-bag between our paralleled chaises lounges, we mused beyond the breakers on the reef, horizonward, whither all too soon et cetera, and our joint spirits lowered after all with the glorifying late-day sun, so that when time came to say sayonara to that scape, to stroll the palm-shadowed stretch to our last hot soak and thence, pores aglow, to take the final lift to passion's king-size square, we found (we find) that we can't (*I* can't) quite rise to the occasion.

"Me neither."

We do therefore not *have sex*—that locution another house-style no-no for a yes-yes in our house—but rather make last love in love's last mode: by drifting off in each other's arms, skin to skin in the longing light, no less joyful for our being truly blue, likewise vice versa or is it conversely, the balmy air barely balming us.

I pass over what, in this drowsy pass, we dream.

Have we neglected in our close-out prep to anticipate a snooze sufficiently snoozish, though alas not postcoital, to carry us right through cocktails to miss-the-jitney time? We have not. No mañana hereabouts for thee and me: On the dot sounds our pre-set, just-in-case Snoozalarm™ (which, in our pre-set half-dreams, we have half been waiting for); half a dozen dots later comes our back-up front-desk wake-up call—Thanks anyhow, unaffectedly "real" and pretty punctual paging-person—and we've time time time for the last of the rum or le fin du vin or both, with the end of the Brie on the ultimate cracotte, while we slip into our travel togs and triple-check our passage papers, button buttons snap snaps zip zippers lock locks. One last look, I propose, but you haven't heart for it nor do I sans you, hell therefore

with it we're off to see the blizzard heck or high water. Adieu sweet place  
adieu, hell with it adieu adieu.

Time to go.