

## DAVID LIGARE

*Night Diver*, 2019  
Oil on canvas, 60 x 90 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## THOMAS FARBER

### Moloka'i

#### Reflections On How Far To Go

**H**onolulu. Break of day. Again on this small beach. Ghost crabs, low tide, nearly spent waves. Ocean: living and breathing membrane stretching shore to horizon. My church, I call it. And I call it my office: writer, alchemizing water and light into words.

So many years here. Time keeps passing. More heart trouble. My surf buddy, a doctor, asks, "Do you want to live until you're eighty-five?" Arguing, "If you don't get a second opinion you might die anytime." But to live another decade? If things get worse? *When* things get worse?

More than thirty years ago, morning twilight at my church and office, I'd nod hello to a woman. She was "getting on in years" and "showing her age," as people put it in my Boston childhood. Or, they'd say, "She lived to a ripe old age." Ripe, but as with fruit, suggesting a trend toward overripe. Or someone "dropped dead." Had a heart attack: "keeled over." *Keeled!* I was in my late twenties on an oceangoing sailing vessel before I finally saw the noun inside the verb. Could picture the hull of a capsized ship.

But about that frail elder before sunrise, "wrinkled as sea-sand and old as the sea," as poet Edith Sitwell wrote. Very short; stooped; recently widowed. Given her struggles with the slippery stairs, down from the seawall and then back up after each brief swim, her several daily visits to this small beach seemed strongly motivated. Admirable; compulsive. As, two times a day/day after day/nearly every single day, I'd—admirably; compulsively?—head out to surf, I wondered how often this woman had to enter the ocean.

How often? Just often enough to stay afloat, I concluded.

Afloat. Now, more than thirty years later, for me today it's not riding waves. Knees aching, no popping up off the board as I take the drop. Instead, a very slow swim out the channel to the reefs. Then into open ocean, past surfers lifting and falling during the lulls, carving waves when the next set arrives.

First swim of the day, a second one with the goatfish at sunset. Black bathing suit. Black neoprene cap for shaved head, black two-millimeter long-sleeve wetsuit jacket: windchill, blood gettin' thinner. Goggles. No fins. No "Australian crawl," as we called it on frigid New England lakes when I was a skinny, shivering, blue-lipped child. No crawl, just a calm and steady breaststroke. Pull, glide, kick; breath in, breath out. Breath autopilot set to, setting itself to, On . . .

Might this be what some positive spirits term “aquatic mindfulness meditation”? Concentration/serenity/BLISS?

Nope. No dry-land therapies, please. No counting of breaths, no training of the mind. In the ocean, one mostly gives in—consents to surrender. Is the deep blue not indifferent, unsentimental, without memory?

On land, one mostly moves on the horizontal. On this mirrored surface, however, it’s inescapable that there’s much going on below—right below. So much unseen. Water can also break up anything structured, anything not in the moment. Regressing you back to what Mircea Eliade called “the undifferentiated mode of pre-existence.”

Sometimes, when I’ve returned to shore, shedding cap and goggles in the shallows, wetsuit jacket intimating commitment to strenuous immersion, someone asks how far I went. I could say, guesstimating, “A half hour or so outbound,” though I’ve never timed it. Wearing a watch in the water? No. Machine time v dream time. It’s not that time doesn’t pass either way, but humans have lived most of the species’ existence without timepieces. Without time measured in pieces.

Nonetheless, it’s out toward the seam of sea and sky far enough to, but only so far as to—reflexively/inadvertently/prudently—remember (?) to turn around. Though who’s doing the remembering, or, what part of who, is unclear.

At last, approaching the beach, taking a rest. On my back. Afloat. Looking up: moon, frigate bird, two fairy terns. Occasional rainbow sign. Double rainbow. “Between the earth and sky, thought I heard my savior cry,” goes the spiritual.

But how or why convey any of this to someone who asked only, “How far did you go?” As novelist Bernard Malamud responded to an interviewer’s interrogative, “What is the question asking?”

“How far did you go?”

I’m tempted to reply, sometimes do reply, “Moloka’i.”

This archipelago—eight islands, atolls, islets, sea-mounts—1,500 miles southeast to northwest across the Tropic of Cancer, from N 18°54’ to N 28°15’ and W 154°40’ to W 178°25’.

If the askers don’t much know much about where they are, they soberly nod assent, like mariners receiving their bearings. But if a fisherman, surfer, sailor, or waterman does the asking and I say Moloka’i? We laugh. From this

coast to the island of Moloka’i is more than thirty miles. “Going to Moloka’i was tough,” I like to add, “but coming back was a nightmare.”

Channels: Growing up, I imbibed something about bounded bodies of water. Nantucket Sound, and, “over there,” the English Channel, Strait of Gibraltar. But not, back then, the Moloka’i Channel. Or, its Hawai’ian name, the Kaiwi Channel.

A brutal swim, Moloka’i to O’ahu, though not impossible. For great water athletes with escort vessels carrying food, lubricants, and safety gear, it’s twelve, fifteen, or seventeen hours at the shortest crossing’s twenty-six miles. With predictably ferocious winds and currents, high surf, stinging jellyfish, tiger sharks, and, as sweetener, volcanic ash—vog—to impair breathing.

As for swimming from O’ahu to Moloka’i? Seems no one’s ever carried it off. Not even yours truly. Just a running joke. Like telling basketball-junkie friends who know better that, regrettably, I can no longer dunk. As if I ever could.

Thus my own private Moloka’i until not long ago, after open-heart surgery at age seventy. Seven zero! I pause to acknowledge my surprise at yet again writing this number. Seventy. Seventy. But I survived the miraculous operation, heart-lung bypass machine allowing my heart and lungs to be still for . . . a few hours. Truly extracorporeal. Gifted surgeon professing himself not miniaturist but minimalist: small-as-possible incision in my chest, facilitating recovery.

But then, several years later, total knee replacement. Also miraculous, but rehab strenuous. Setbacks. Chronic pain, that euphemism. I was in bed, bedridden, rider of my bed. “Haggard rider,” I’d tell myself, remembering Sir Henry Rider Haggard, author of *King Solomon’s Mines*, a childhood favorite. Some play on words! I was majoring in self-pity, minoring in misery. Or vice versa.

If you live long enough, you learn there are lines you once read that stayed right with you. The first English translation of Solzhenitsyn’s *The First Circle*, set in a prison in Stalin’s gulag, was published in 1968. In the novel, mathematician Nerzhin remembers a proverb: “You don’t drown in the sea, you drown in a puddle.” Post-surgery, that was me all over. Drowning in a puddle.

Back in my forties, thinking of Queequeg’s canoe-coffin in *Moby Dick* and reading about a retired seventy-two-year-old who died surfing, I thought—from afar, so to

speak—it wouldn’t be a bad way to go. Out on the waves during a surfer’s funeral as ashes were strewn and leis placed, I could imagine being cycled and recycled in the tropics. One day to return as warm rain.

But now, bed-ridden, rider of my bed, poet Marianne Moore came to mind. “The sea is a collector,” she wrote. And, “the sea has nothing to give but a well excavated grave.”

I could also recall Ahab’s melodramatic exchange with his first mate at the finale of *Moby Dick*: “Some men die at ebb tide; some at low water; some at the full of the flood;—and I feel now like a billow that’s all one crested comb, Starbuck. I am old;—shake hands with me, man.”

Bedridden. When my good wife, checking on me, would read my grim mood, she’d inquire, “What are you grinding on?” Not that I was up for being interrogated. Too much to say, too much that couldn’t be said.

One day, however, channeling Ahab, I came up with, “I’m going out with the tide.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” my wife asked.

I took some time. “Moloka’i,” I finally said.

Though my wife has spent much of the last decade in Hawai’i with me, she’s not a water person. Her Hawai’i is not *moana*, “ocean,” but *hālau*—Tahitian-dance school—and its *kumu*, “teacher.” This dancing: on dry land but torrents! cascades! waves! of relentless drumming. Layered frenzied pitch chattering, impelling the dancers’ gyrating/shaking/rotating hips and pelvises. She’s determined to improve her *fd’arapu*, *ami*, and *ruru*. Oh, the regret of having not started as a child! My musician wife also studies the drumming, sometimes herself one of the drummers in the *hālau*.

“So what about Moloka’i?” this Tahitian-dance zealot asks her peevish husband. For her, Moloka’i is an island we’ve yet to visit.

Another long pause. Choosing my words. “I’m going to swim to Moloka’i.”

“And?” my wife said, not unreasonably hoping to move this exchange along.

Though I wasn’t myself lately—not hardly—she’s always assumed I know what I’m doing in the ocean. It’s my thing. Always has been, she gathers. Also, given how curt and ill-tempered I’d been, if I said I was going to swim to Moloka’i, then, very well, I was going to . . . swim to Moloka’i.

Think about your own marriage or mate. How much does one want to share? How much do they want you to share?

I was tired of pretending. Dead tired, as they say.

“I’m going to swim to Moloka’i,” I told my wife, “but there’s no way I’m going to make it.”

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