

Apocalypse then and now

by Gerard Sarnat

WHY WE LIKE IT: *We were almost hyperventilating when we finished reading this opulent, hybrid take on gonzo journalism where memories, impressions, and emotions boil to the surface with startling hallucinogenic realism. The apocalyptic trajectories, then (Conrad), now (Coppola) detonate a frenzied narrative tension where chromatic images (past and present) collide like particles in the literary equivalent of freeze-frame stop-action photography. The author's impressionistic technique—one favoured by Conrad—to make your see, hear, feel) brings the world—conscious and subconscious—into hyperbolic clarity and it's all played out against the gaudy tropical dark hearted surrealscape of Fiji. Quote: 'Buddhist bardo-brained black happiness painful passageway cauliflower abbatoir wet dreams ankle deep ash-filled strange gravely sandstorm sounds narrow train track freeways travel through the mind.' And 'When electric generators black out (frequently), the phone and computer inside what was an air-conditioned room melt into sweetmeat treats for ravenous red fire ants.*

The Horror” -- from Conrad's book *Heart of Darkness*, adopted into Coppola's movie *Apocalypse Now*.

i. Admirer Approaches 40th Anniversary of *Apocalypse Now*

Lifted straight from pages of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Herzog's *Aguirre, the Wrath of God*

cinematography, dropped right out of Coppola's insane Colonel Kurtz/ odd Brando lips...my own bad trip, how

to get distance or some rest there on bare cot under mosquito netting -- **this** grown boychick squints

toward bloody sky at one maybe more Apache 'copters' whirring blades to avoid being scalped perhaps sliced

into unSolomonic hellish halves by that goddamn overhead fan...



ii. Kadavu Sabbath

... Stale chicken soup, wintry morning taste, Sunday dry mouth hangover forty bowls into impossibly hepatic communal wood basin, all night *kava* root circle clap-clap ceremony; post grog, groggy on three case stubby beer washdown, I try to keep up with the big boys getting down on Cliff and Marley.

Does the gentle terrain explain why this laid-back tropical turquoise paradise's gentle folk evoke Jamaica -- minus the stoned green glazed *ganja* gleams?

Buddhist bardo-brained black happiness painful passageway cauliflower *abattoir* wet dreams, ankle-deep ash-filled strange gravely sandstorm sounds narrow train track freeways travel through my mind.

Organisms rise sweaty under bug netting waking from cold noisy silence onto laughing waves...

One of three hundred magical Fijian islands, overlooking likely-named Raintree Lake, it pours and pours some more off and on day and night.

A blond lad spends mornings on the deck outside his family's *bure*. Unhurriedly, time after time, he drops in a corked breakfast-baited line. Sometimes he pulls out little wiggles which I've observed him learn how to dehook and toss back, waiting for a larger one the lodge has offered to cook. He looks like the serene child moonfishing at the beginning of *DreamWorks* movies.

In the nearby sea, while porpoise dorsal fins play with surfers while sunny sailfish peek above whitecaps. 3

Beneath the storm novice scuba divers kiss and worry that hissing raindrops are leaking oxygen lines.

Inside, does the whirring circular ceiling fan turning over hot air signal the beginning of an *Apocalypse Now/Heart of Darkness* nightmarish-insane-Morrison/Conrad *This is the End Willard-terminating-Kurtz* detritus cycle -- a horror-of-it-all upriver hallucination? (Thirty-five years ago on the ocean's other side, in Marin County where Francis lived; dear Aggie, wife to Coppola's editor-supreme Walter Murch and more importantly our midwife; cajoled, Lamazed, and natural childbirthed, then taught us to suckle our first.)

Outside our torrent-pounded thatched roof, bleached-out blond fatted Mr. Wimpy Michelin Man doughboy tourists snorkel and float in remote South Pacific lukewarm amniotic fluid.

Covered head to toe, wary Australians and Kiwis from New Zealand, where an ozone layer hole has created a melanoma epidemic, drip messy suntan and bug lotion.

It wouldn't surprise me if to local eyes, we self-proclaimed apparent masters of the universe seem lifeless avoidant droids, vamped blood-sucked servants, deluded enslaved worker ants. When electric generators black out (frequently), the phone and computer inside what was an air-conditioned room melt into sweetmeat treats for ravenous red fire ants.

... Manual typewriter nursing Chivas on ice boozy Hemingway fantasies ...

Boats of vibrant brown curved curly men wearing sperm whale teeth and sounding turtle shell trumpets, lower shark and octopus lures, bamboo crayfish and shrimp traps. Nets knitted from fruit bat bone-needles snare yellow fin tuna in mass scare lines. Razor-toothed barracuda trolls encircle confused gemfish, boxing them in with bubbles, pushing to the surface for the kill. Predatory seabirds rise and fall time after time until finally dive-bombing when the catch arrives at the top. Trawling fishermen come in behind.

Back on shore, roosters crow, palmed parrots talk, mynahs squawk from Captain Bligh's *Munity on the Bounty* 4 bread trees. Crickets chirp: I try to remember how to derive formulae to calculate the temperature from the speed of hoppers' leg-rubbing. Sunday morning bells chime method-to-their-madness rhyme, calling the natives to Methodist prayer in the nearby village of Naikorokoro.

After peppermint tea, I redon last night's traditional *sulu* skirt, scurrying behind Epi, Veranando, Samuel, Seta, my peer elder Alfredi, Thomas, Reverend Alex and the rest of the *kava* and alcohol-wasted guys. Isaac offers a shortcut in his old-time warrior double-hulled dugout outrigger. Not really old school, appearing like a sharply-dressed Eddie Murphy, he drops the religious among us past the coral reef on the village's beach, then quickly excuses himself for more pressing affairs.

Leaving the canoe, learning from recent *faux pas*, I pause to lift my long skirt. A pig with earrings, feet swollen from bites and anti-bite cream allergies, my ample ankles are my late grandma's thick tree trunks. My wife cautions me to cross my legs in church.

Missionaries eliminated slave-snatching blackbirding from this island about a hundred thirty years ago. But it is said the evangelists only rid Kadavu of cannibalism around 1964 — when the current chief was already an experienced man.

...Native Americans encircle cowboys: the shooter who kills the most Indians gets the girl -- or is it the man shooting the most girls who's rewarded with a good-looking Indian? Ladies who think nasty thoughts in their hearts of darkness start growing hair in all sorts of body parts...

In any case, no fool, I hop to the proper amenities too: why take chances they're still a few checkerboard tattooed, scarred ashen five foot-wide hairdo'ed human-flesh *scrapie*-virus infected warriors insane with Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, pickling arms and carving sailing needles from human shins, long forks from long bones? Which one might drink *kava* from my skull, make me watch others eat my body parts, climax being

forced to consume myself before thrown in an oven alive, cooked to humiliate my soul, remove my body's sacred *tabu*?

Approaching the village, my daughter removes from her shoulders what looks like a long light scarf, which she's worn like a Jewish fringed *tallis*, and now turns it into a traditional wrap-around *sulu* skirt. She also wears a Princeton head lantern that from a distance looks like Jewish *tfilin* phylacteries.

...In 1935 quite a few Polish Jews faithfully fatefully fatally felt the only ones not to be afraid of were the Germans. If only Hitler would come. At least in Germany there's law and order, everyone knows his place. It doesn't matter so much that the mob is terrified of *Der Fuhrer*. What matters is imposing order.

The nightmare scenario, of course, was that one day the priests would say Jesus' blood was flowing again because of the Yids who drink Christian children's blood. That they would start to ring those scary bells; the peasants would pick up their pitchforks. That's the way the butchering always begins.

Like when a piglet is killed, it squeals and pleads with that pink-cheeked voice of a tortured child. God sees and hears every creature's grunt, and has no pity on anarchist Antichrists.

No body imagined what was really in store. Wealth is a crime, poverty a punishment. Fear and faith are synonyms in Hebrew...

Corrugated tin roofed shacks lead to the stone church. Men dressed in black and red and blue western shirts and jackets and ties with matching traditional Fijian *sulu* skirts, greet us warmly. (I think of yesterday at the movies when Fijians howled during *The Hostage*. Something went over our heads, something about Bruce Willis being the chief of police.) The chief comes up to me as our crew's likely elder: we exchange *Bula! Bula!* greetings, bizarrely reminding me of the totally dissonant beany-wearing flag-waving Yalies' wailing their *Boola! Boola!* fight song. Women all in white and pink guide us inside to front row seats of honor.

The Fijian-speaking chieftain, leaning on silk pillows and drapes, leads the service. His presumed in-training son sits next to him: maybe still drunk; he yawns, stares out the window, eventually catches a few zzz's, a *kip*, ☞ nap. We're handed feathered bamboo fans to swat away disjointed long-bodied stinging wasps. The WASPS among us seem to know that numbers 116, 221, 174 on the wall indicate hymns: they sing along in English with the amazing chorus' four-part Fijian harmony. A trumpeting angel Gabriel hovers.

The village spokesman extends us greetings in English, preaching we're all brothers and sisters before God. Kids in the pew behind me give up their good-natured giggly pinching, get up to pass the collection plate.

... If only they knew we were Jews. The Old Testament and *Eretz Israel* are big-time around here: New Guineans asked my bearded longhaired son whether he was Taliban or descended from Abraham before honoring him...

A few *Bula Vinaka* thank yous and we're on our way down the oval mountain path, through groves of cassavas, mangos, guava, cocoanut, orange flame, killer figs, lantana, taro, bougainvillea, avocado. Low tide, we arrive at the sea's crab holes, lobster and kingfisher nests.

An underground oven cannibalizes mahogany wood to fuel a special goodbye *lovo* feast slow-cooking since dawn. Yesterday we brought produce back from the open market in a huge wheelbarrow. This morning, the kids caught fish from the boat. Isaac put down a pig. It all smells yummy. Before putting unknown meat in my tummy, I ask the old chief man-to-man to assure me that the banana-braided hairy fatty white flesh between the chicken and red snapper is just good old pure unkosher pork —not human.

iii. Upriver

Last night's festivities behind, it's last-chance-for-adventure time before we head back home.

Wolfing down blood oranges and poached eggs with the family, I head out alone east along the northern shore.

Kadavu musk-parrots shriek “KANDAVU!” -- probably the reason natives add an “n” when pronouncing the 7 island’s name. Marveling over exquisitely spiraled yellow, pink and white scallops, conches, whelks and starfish; the world is my oyster.

I follow the creek inland. About a hundred yards upstream, zany Dr. Seuss-ish skipper fish, heads up like alert water skiers, surf the surface on their flipperlike tails. Another fifty Darwinian yards inland, they’ve increased from small guppies to medium trout. An owlish turtle’s head bobs up from its shell like Captain Nemo’s periscope. *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* was one of my favorite kids’ movies. Exquisite slithery slivery fluorescent geckos and red smushy newts slide underfoot.

Sand gives way to rock as I ascend southeast. The lush green canopy shelters the cut-glass crystal-clear blue lagoon from the rain. Black and white millipedes inch along the ground. Monarchs surge overhead, reflexively triggering my humming, “Zippity do dah, Zippity eah. My oh my what a wonderful day. Plenty of sunshine heading my way. Zippity do dah, zippity eah.” I flashback to childhood Ur-memories of the amazing butterflies in the animated feature film *Uncle Remus*.

Leaving the rainforest’s cover, it’s drizzling pleasantly. Slipping on the sharp boulders, I break off a sturdy tree branch to better support cartilage-less knees. My internal soundtrack flips to Doc in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, “Hi ho, hi ho, it’s off to work we go.”

It’s a regular Disney moment out here.

Thud! My glasses and I fall. Although body parts seem no worse off than before, a palm and elbow sting and drip blood. Feeling a bit like Piggy in *Lord of the Flies*, I fumble around for my glasses. Luckily, my searching fingers find them unbroken. Reaching over, I’m startled by two bare brown feet a foot in front of me. Looking up, I gradually see raggedy filthy shorts, a broad tattooed chest, a tangle of disheveled hair on a young man with

nose bones holding a wood pitchfork with three sharp metals blades. This guy looks just like the hundred-plus year-old cannibal photos in the museum. What's going on? Who is this dude?

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Be real, Ger, no time to panic, learn from past mistakes when you've overreacted. Within a millisecond, my spinning mind retreats into a flood of loony-in-retrospect family jokes I'm the butt of, stories I'm constantly kidded about.

On safari in Kenya, a horde of tall thin red-robed spear-bearing blue-black Masai tribesmen wade across a river toward us: I yell for my wife and two small kids to get behind me, I'll protect you; the warriors cross over... smiling, sheepishly offering to sell trinkets, trade a spear for Eli's camera.

Stripping to undies, jumping into the Pacific to rescue a capsized middle-aged lady...who turned out to be a most ungrateful master kayaker.

In Belize, the brute jumping out from nowhere toward my younger daughter, three hours into what felt like a forced-march through torrential mud looking for Indian ruins...to give her an umbrella.

Alone with my older daughter deep in northwest Thailand's rice paddies, hours after leaving the Lanu Red's village, a man runs at her wielding what looked like a club...a generous, if blottoed, Lanu White extending us his opium pipe, inviting us -- *Come Over to My House, Come Over to Play* -- to stare at a receptionless blank TV screen.

So, cool it, man. I gather myself, rise to stand tall (all five feet five inches of me), and summon a hearty *Bula! Bula!* Unlike every other Fijian, who's out-smiled and out-*Bula Naka'd* me back, this fellow just stares, suspicious, clearly not happy to see me, arms on spear, holding his ground, not moving on. I hold my walking stick firmly in front of me.

Although last night I'd dismissed Susan's news as so much gossip, I reconsider. The owner of the adjacent resort recently fell to his death from a cliff. He catered to the high-end \$3000 a night likes of Madonna, offering cement bunker security and isolation instead of our up-close-and-personal bourgeois experience. Rumors have it that he abused the Fijian staff, which may have had something to do with his accident.

Now I'm totally focused, no yucks or campy drama-king inner giggles about what a cool story this will make. I pause to look briefly into his ghostly eyes. Then, careful not to touch, I slowly walk around him as calmly and confidently as I can muster. Not looking back, I proceed up toward the suddenly threatening misty peaks. From nowhere, a gibberish of Wounded Knee, Slippery Rock, and Captain Ahab jangle my head. Good job, Sarnat, no point fooling around if there's any possibility he didn't understand or wouldn't be deterred by the international ramifications, the big hurt that would descend if he ate an American.

Not hearing rustling or steps behind me, the self-recriminations and second-guessing start. My god, what if you've violated his tribe's territorial boundary? You idiot, he was just as shocked as you, he's probably hightailing it back to the village where you attended church yesterday. You ridiculous wimp!

Nevertheless, relieved to be safe, my adrenalized fight-or-flight rush turns romantic, into a Wordsworthian *Intimations of Immortality* natural high. A half-eaten honeycomb and an intact tiny blue egg generate sublime epiphanies. I go forward. The ecstasy proves short-lived.

Way too full of myself, not concentrating on my next step, I collapse into a mud hole. Skittish crookedly black crabs scoot from their holes under my feet. Delusions of grandeur instantly shift back to dread. Pulling myself up, tubers become snakes entwining my ankles. Twigs become giant walking stick insects snatch at me. Low-slung gnarly black-hooped mangrove trellises, strangely rooted in the sand at both ends, come alive to entangle me in the nasties. My sweat and blood attract every kind of bug. Sheets of rain bite into my skin. I retreat under a tree -- until I see smell lightening char. The rocks are impossibly slick. The path is sometimes underwater, sometimes washed out.

With that, I'm done. No trouble convincing myself that I've got a good excuse for the family, that after two hours in the elements, they're all worrying about my whereabouts. We've got a plane to catch. Time to turn 10 around, retrace my steps down.

He's nowhere in sight as I return to the point of our brief encounter. The storm rat-a-tats the now black lagoon like a machine gun. A black and tan water snake -- the tan camouflaged by the sandy bottom making it look like a string of undulating black diamonds -- swims toward my open sandal. Making it back to the open-spaced beach, I stumble on sharp shells, cutting my big toe...

Now showered and comfy, I wonder what the hell actually happened.

I'll bet if the kids had been in my shoes, they'd have made friends and invited him back for tea right now.

Although sympathetic, my family obviously doesn't know what to make of my story. In any case, enough is enough for me at sixty. Back in time for a quick nap and snack.

Before lunch, I pull *Papagena's* Canadian manager aside. "Don, I have no idea what really occurred, but you should know about it. I'd appreciate your being discrete if you make inquiries..."

Don said he'd never heard another like this before, that all tourist-Fijian meetings have been friendly. "Every once in a while, the villagers chase off a hunter spotted poaching game on Naikorokoro land, but it's never happened on the resort side."

After lunch, Mele comes over, formally but sheepishly. "I apologize to you and your family." That was all. He left without further explanation.

Then Samson sidles over, putting his arm around me. A huge affable brown New Zealand Maori who's been the divemaster here for six years, he often serves an intermediary role between the Fijians and the Westerners. He's the only person who eats at both the staff and the guest tables. "My little white man, I heard you had a

scare today. You encountered Mele's brother. He's the village idiot, an idler, no good. Never works, a longhaired hippy. He was sneaking off to spearfish in the ocean when you came upon him. At times he gets 11 stoned into oblivion, so bad he can barely talk or walk. But you needn't worry, he's meek and mild and wouldn't hurt a fly."

With all remnants of a Kurtzian mystery dispelled, I join the family on the *Nunu Moi* to motorboat to the local airport, then puddle jump to Nadi before jetting home into our routine California lives. But before we hop on, our hosts, the sweetest people in the world, place *leis* around our necks and hold us around our waists as we sing our last four-part harmonies together. After kisses and hugs, we jump on board, wave, and toss our flowers back toward shore, leaving our hearts in Kadavu, our intention to return.

Au sa liu mada, see you later, not goodbye.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *'Apocalypse Then and Now'* was meant to be a kickass memoir from Fiji visiting my entomologist ant-man son doing field work. Stylistically, Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* and even more so Francis Ford Coppola's eponymous film suggested the feverish pitch. PS: his Fijian dog 'Cassava', had really catchy fleas!

BIO: Gerard Sarnat is a physician who's built and staffed homeless and prison clinics as well as a Stanford professor and healthcare CEO. He won the Poetry in the Arts First Place Award plus the Dorfman Prize, and been nominated for Pushcarts plus Best of the Net awards. Gerry is published in academic related journals including Stanford, Oberlin, Brown, Columbia, Virginia Commonwealth, Arkansas, Harvard, Johns Hopkins, Wesleyan, Slippery Rock, Appalachian State, Grinnell, American Jewish University and the University of Edinburgh, University of Canberra. Gerry's writing has also appeared widely including recently in US outlets such as Gargoyle, Main Street Rag, New Delta Review, MiPOesis, American Journal of Poetry, Poetry Quarterly, Poetry Circle, Clementine, New Verse News, Blue Mountain Review, Danse Macabre, Canary Echo, Fictional Southeast, Military Experience and the Arts, Poets and War, Cliterature, Qommunicate, Texas Review, Brooklyn Review, San Francisco Magazine, The Los Angeles Review and The New York Times. Pieces have also been accepted by Chinese, Bangladeshi, Hong Kongese, Singaporian, Canadian, English, Irish, Scottish, Australian, New Zealander, Australasian Writers Association, French, German, Indian, Israeli, Romanian, Swedish and Fijian among other international publications. Mount Analogue selected KADDISH FOR THE COUNTRY for pamphlet distribution nationwide on Inauguration Day 2017. 'Amber of Memory' was chosen for the 50th Harvard reunion Dylan symposium. He's also authored the collections *Homeless Chronicles* (2010), *Disputes* (2012), *17s* (2014) and *Melting the Ice King* (2016). Gerry's been married since 1969 with three kids, five grandsons and looking forward to future granddaughters. You can visit him at gerardsarnat.com

