

The Geographical Review

VOLUME 97

April 2007

NUMBER 2

THE ISLANDS

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From the mainland where the traffic is a constant surf booming on the mind's ear; where there is no silence and yet the air seems too still and the thought of possibility and enlargement seems to drown, like a mayfly in treacle, it is then that the idea of the island can start, glow, and grow in the mind like a beacon of possibility. The island looks like the place where that mixture of heaviness and insignificance might somehow evaporate, leaving life pure and rich. An island, in other words, concentrates the dreams of Arcadia with which civilization has always been haunted. It is a place defined by its otherness, thriving on nothing more than its distance and difference from the mainland to which it is opposed.

My experience of islands is that they ignore the middle ground. Everything the mainland is designed to provide is discontinued there. Comfort, contact, sociability—all of that is removed by the island. Instead, the island attends to the extremities of one's existence. Because, on an island, you are not living in the cocoon-net of civilization, perhaps because heat, water, and light are no longer on tap there, it becomes a place in which your body starts to matter. On the mainland we treat our bodies either as cars—the vehicle which our brains, our selves, use to get to and from the place of work—or as pets, to be pampered, exercised, spoiled, and fed. Our bodies, most of the time, are not us. But on an island that changes. Physical life becomes the life we have. We become engaged with the un-smoothed-out nature of the earth and the sea. We manhandle our existence in a way that the power-assisted mainland has largely forgotten. We know the sweet pleasures of physical exhaustion, not as an end in itself but as a by-product of making life livable.

Perhaps as a corollary of that, perhaps as a result of the silence that an island creates in the mind, an island also opens up one's pores to the metaphysical. Its simplicities tend to make the universe more visible there. One's nakedness on an island, the absence of stuff that tells you, at every turn, what you are, creates the conditions in which to consider eternity. Or perhaps a better way of saying that is to recognize that those are the conditions in which eternity considers you. This is the physical-metaphysical miracle of island life. On an island you become more your-

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