

WEEKEND

// BY HELEN ZHANG

THE
GLOW/i
MISTOOK
FOR
GOD

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Whether kowtowing before gilded statues, reading Louise Glück for the first time or almost falling in love, no experience has felt as holy to me as a lightshow on the Caribbean seafloor. Fifty feet below the surface, swallowed in darkness, I was convinced I glimpsed the neurons of god’s mind.

On my final scuba trip in Utila, Honduras, I dove below the waves with the setting sun.

That night, the boat and divers held the only lights polluting the sky. Flashlight in hand, fins on feet, I penguin-wobbled to the edge of the speedboat and threw myself into the whipped, meringue-textured waves. As we descended, the last of daylight’s warmth slipped off my skin like silk. Neutrally buoyant, we hovered above the reef and scanned it for nocturnal life, flashlights as bright as lightsabers. The reef was more vibrant at night than day — at such depths, red wavelengths are swallowed by the water in natural light.

Gorgonian sea fans swayed in synchrony; lobsters frantically flicked; needlefish slept in suspension, cradled by the current. I met an octopus, a juvenile jackknife, two pufferfish and a couple barracudas, forgetting the hand signals for all of them except stingray (an upside down middle finger) and whale shark (a “W” on the forehead). No matter what the Google AI overview tells you, the latter creature rarely graces Utila with its presence. Despite being painted on multi-story murals, embroidered on hats at every souvenir shop and strung as a ceramic charm on my anklet (now a tan-line tattoo), whale sharks are more myth than fish on this island. Every local has a different explanation for their absence: the invasion of raccoons, the loss of blue crabs and, most plausibly, the human race. I was still delusional enough to keep an eye out for a diurnal, hollow-mouthed, spotted giant in the periphery of my flashlight.

Near the end of the dive, we knelt on a patch of sand beside the reef and turned off our flashlights. Bioluminescent plankton sparkled from my wiggling fingertips and blooming bubble-breaths before dissolving into the darkness, brief as a blink.

All at once, living constellations of neon green bodies surrounded me, pulsing at regular intervals of space and time, falling in cascading synchrony. Kneeling on the seabed, bubble-blowing, I had never been closer to prayer.

The locals call them “string of pearls.” Found only in Caribbean waters during moonless nights, they are bioluminescent snot-trails emitted during the mating ritual of tiny male ostracods, which sounds more preposterous than magic itself. Unlike Keats’ fear that science would “unweave the rainbow,” knowing this only made the artistry of the world harder to dismiss. The divine was never otherworldly, but in the pulse of an atrium, a sea firefly, a cicada’s rib — all dancing in synchrony to a song beyond the range of human hearing.

The moment we surfaced, a yawp tore from my mouth, drawing a wobbly beam of light from my dive buddy. To this day we still don’t know what possessed my voice. I floated on my back, stargazing, certain that aliens existed both above and below me.

On the boat ride back, I asked the captain for the song he was playing to bottle up this moment (The Doors’ “Roadhouse Blues”), peeled off my second and third skin (two wet-suits) and airdried in the breeze. I ended the night sipping Leyde’s pineapple juice — a boxed drink I savored so much I had to finish half a liter of it in front of airport security — before falling asleep in my swimsuit. Perhaps if I held off on washing the salt from my hair, the memory would have marinated a little longer.

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