

A Sea Worry

by Maxine Hong Kingston

1 THIS SUMMER MY SON body-surfs. He says it's his "job" and rises each
2 morning at 5:30 to catch the bus to Sandy Beach. I hope that by September he
3 will have had enough of the ocean. Tall waves throw surfers against the
4 shallow bottom. Undertows have snatched them away. Sharks prowl Sandy's.
5 Joseph told me that once he got out of the water because he saw an enormous
6 shark. "Did you tell the lifeguard?" I asked. "No." "Why not?" "I didn't want
7 to spoil the surfing." The ocean pulls at the boys, who turn into surfing addicts.
8 At sunset you can see the surfers waiting for the last golden wave.
9 "Why do you go surfing so often?" I ask my students.
10 "It feels so good," they say. "Inside the tube, I can't describe it. There are no
11 words for it."

12 "You can describe it," I scold, and I am very angry. "Everything can be
13 described. Find the words for it, you lazy boy. Why don't you go home and
14 read?" I am afraid that the boys give themselves up to the ocean's
15 mindlessness.

16 When the waves are up, surfers all over Hawaii don't do their homework. They
17 cut school. They know how the surf is breaking at any moment because every
18 fifteen minutes the reports come over the radio; in fact, one of my former
19 students is the surf reporter.

20 Some boys leave for mainland colleges, and write their parents heart-rending
21 letters. They beg to come home for Thanksgiving. "If I can just touch the

22 ocean,” they write from Missouri and Kansas, “I’ll last for the rest of the
23 semester.” Some come home for Christmas and don’t go back.
24 Even when the assignment is about something else, the students write about
25 surfing. They try to describe what it is to be inside the wave as it curls over
26 them. Making a tube or “chamber” or “green room” or “pipeline” or “time
27 warp.” They write about the silence, the peace, “no hassles,” the feeling of
28 being reborn as they shoot out the end. They’ve written about the perfect wave.
29 Their writing is full of clichés. “The endless summer,” they say. “Unreal.”
30 Surfing is like a religion. Among the martyrs are George Helm, Kimo Mitchell,
31 and Eddie Aikau. Helm and Mitchell were lost at sea riding their surfboards
32 from Kaho’olawe, where they had gone to protest the Navy’s bombing of that
33 island. Eddie Aikau was a champion surfer and lifeguard. A storm had capsized
34 the *Hokule’a*, the ship that traced the route that the Polynesian ancestors sailed
35 from Tahiti, and Eddie Aikau had set out on his board to get help.

36 Since the ocean captivates our son, we decided to go with him to Sandy’s.
37 ¹⁰We got up before dawn, picked up his friend, Marty, and drove out of
38 Honolulu. Almost all the traffic was going in the opposite direction, the
39 freeway coned to make more lanes into the city. We came to a place where raw
40 mountains rose on our left and the sea fell on our right, smashing against the
41 cliffs. The strip of cliff pulverized into sand is Sandy’s. “Dangerous Current
42 Exist,” said the ungrammatical sign.

43 Earll and I sat on the shore with our blankets and thermos of coffee. Joseph and
44 Marty put on their fins and stood at the edge of the sea for a moment, touching
45 the water with their fingers and crossing their hearts before going in. There
46 were fifteen boys out there, all about the same age, fourteen to twenty, all with
47 the same kind of lean v-shaped build, most of them with black hair that made

48 their wet heads look like sea lions. It was hard to tell whether our kid was one
49 of those who popped up after a big wave. A few had surfboards, which are
50 against the rules at a body-surfing beach, but the lifeguard wasn't on duty that
51 day.

52 As they watched for the next wave the boys turned toward the ocean. They
53 gazed slightly upward; I thought of altar boys before a great god. When a good
54 wave arrived, they turned, faced shore, and came shooting in, some taking the
55 wave to the right and some to the left, their bodies fish-like, one arm out in
56 front, the hand and fingers pointed before them, like a swordfish's beak. A few
57 held credit card trays, and some slid in on trays from McDonald's.
58 "That is no country for middle-aged women," I said. We had on bathing suits
59 underneath our clothes in case we felt moved to participate. There were no
60 older men either.

61 Even from the shore, we could see inside the tubes. Sometimes, when they
62 came at an angle, we saw into them a long way. When the wave dug into the
63 sand, it formed a brown tube or a golden one. The magic ones, though, were
64 made out of just water, green and turquoise rooms, translucent walls and
65 ceiling. I saw one that was powder-blue, perfect, thin; the sun filled it with sky
66 blue and white light. The best thing, the kids say, is when you are in the middle
67 of the tube, and there is water all around you but you're dry.

68 The waves came in sets; the boys passed up the smaller ones. Inside a big one,
69 you could see their bodies hanging upright, knees bent, duckfeet fins paddling,
70 bodies dangling there in the wave.

71 Once in a while, we heard a boy yell, "Aa-who!" "Poon tah!" "Aaroo!" And
72 then we noticed how rare a human voice was here; the surfers did not talk, but
73 silently, silently rode the waves.

74 Since Joseph and Marty were considerate of us, they stopped after two hours,
75 and we took them out for breakfast. We kept asking them how it felt, so they
76 would not lose language.

77 “Like a stairwell in an apartment building,” said Joseph, which I liked
78 immensely. He hasn’t been in very many apartment buildings, so had to reach a
79 bit to get the simile. “I saw somebody I knew coming toward me in the tube,
80 and I shouted, ‘Jeff. Hey Jeff,’ and my voice echoed like a stairwell in an
81 apartment building. Jeff and I came straight at each other—mirror tube.”

82 “Are there ever girls out there?” Earll asked. “There’s a few who come out at
83 about eleven,” said Marty.

84 “How old are they?”

85 “About twenty.”

86 “Why do you cross your heart with water?”

87 “So the ocean doesn’t kill us.”

88 I describe the powder-blue tube I had seen.

89 “That part of Sandy’s is called Chambers,” they said.

90 I have gotten some surfing magazines, the ones kids steal from the
91 school library, to see if the professionals try to describe the tube.

92 Bradford Baker writes:

93 ...Round and pregnant in Emptiness

94 I slide,

95 Laughing,

96 Into the sun,

97 into the night.

98

99 Frank miller calls the surfer

100 ...mother’s fumbling

101 curly-haired

102 tubey-laired

103 son.

104 “Ooh, offshores—“ writes Reno Abbellira, “where wind and wave most
105 often form that terminal rendezvous of love –when the wave can reveal her
106 deepest longings, her crest caressed, cannily covered to form those peeling
107 concavities we know, perhaps a bit irreverently, as tubes. Here we strive to
108 spend every second—enclosed, encased, sometimes fatefully entombed, and
109 hopefully, gleefully ejected—Whoosh!”

110 “An iridescent ride through the entrails of God,” says Gary L. Crandall.
111 I am relieved that the surfers keep asking one another for descriptions. I also
112 find some comfort in the stream of commuter traffic, cars filled with men over
113 twenty, passing Sandy Beach on their way to work.