Once Upon an Island

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Two-and-a-half pages of foreclosures in the newspaper are why there were no vacancies around here these days, I theorized. Our new neighbors are a 30-ish Chinese couple from somewhere in south China, the husband a timid and very polite little man, and his wife a horrific shrew that I refer to variously as the “Chinese Goddess of Verbal Abuse” or “Thunder Queen” or “the Kwan-Yin of Sturm und Drang.” Her shrill Cantonese caterwauling is as sweet to the ear as dragging one’s fingernails down a chalkboard, and at times very much like a goose being at once strangled and eviscerated. I don’t know if they lost their home, but from the sound of her, it seems that her husband must have done something terribly wrong, like lose their home in a mahjong match.

Most of those who have lost their homes now rent. But my guess is that they don’t want to rent some $600 a month dump just anywhere, since that would make them feel even worse. So they compromise and move into a dump in a nice neighborhood like this, where there are places like Casa Kahala, built on an acre and a quarter of beach-front land not a quarter-mile from here, and a monument to an era of wretched excess now light-years removed from our present malaise.

The estate included several man-made waterfalls, and a koi pond that flashed gold and silver with the rarest varieties of Japanese ornamental carp. There were sunken tennis courts, and a guest cottage with servants’ quarters. Casa Kahala was decorated throughout with Italian marble, the swimming pool was lined with blue Japanese tile, and the sunken Jacuzzi was fitted with 24-karat gold fixtures. In headier times, a pair of hyacinth macaws in a multi-story wrought iron cage would have greeted visitors in the terrazzo foyer furnished with baroque Italian antiques. Fronted with a hand-crafted 18-foot high wrought iron gate and fencing, the guests would have wound their way past lighted Greco-Roman sculptures

pouting in various classical poses, and a pair of Viennese stallions triumphantly fountaining water from their mouths.

Our place isn't quite so nice. So near, yet so far. It's a nice area, but the place sucks: cheap carpeting, clapped-out fixtures, and paint slopped all over windows, baseboards, fixtures, ceiling beams, and what-not. The bathroom mirror squeaks open on its rusty hinges, and the shower stall leaks copiously onto the kitchen floor downstairs. In the bedroom, the closet door has disengaged itself from the runner, and hangs akimbo. The veneer is peeling away from the doors and the particles of particleboard have dribbled out in little piles. The attic has roaches and geckos--the two are nemeses to each other, and the only reason the roach population has been kept down this year is because we have several very large geckos that gobble them up, leaving their white-tipped droppings everywhere. I don't know which is more revolting: the roaches live, or re-cycled. We rent from an old Chinese lawyer who methodically counts the rent money while licking his tongue and thumbing the filthy bills, over and over again. If you've ever been behind in the rent with a Chinese landlord, you'll understand why they wanted to slaughter them all in the Cultural Revolution.

Still, it's home, as this part of town has been ever since I came to Hawaii thirty years ago. As one haole, the acceptance I craved never came easy. I tried talking pidgin, with skin-crawling results-- and took to wearing a shark's tooth on a chain. I fell in love with the girls hereabouts, having never beheld such beguiling innocence and allure. They were golden from the sun, with waterfalls of hair that gleamed like burnished koa and coursed along the contours of their exquisite geometry. And who could deny the Oriental eye? But my shark's tooth proved ineffectual as a talisman of love, and they would have nothing to do with me.

Closer consideration has revealed a generation gap. At the mall, I watched a group of them, so demure-looking with their innocent almond eyes. But now they seemed mean-spirited, and fiercely proud of it. They spat like cobras, marking time with the rap music, and spat out epithets that would shame a drunken sailor. Sitting there in their sea of gob, they squinted about steely-eyed as they dragged on their butts, cracked their wads of gum, and spewed out streams of smoke and invective. One of them came up to borrow a light, thanking me with a “mahalo” with the correct diacritical emphasis. Then she and her friends got up and left, laboring along on platforms and four-inch spikes that called to mind the characters in Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, determined at last to walk upright, strutting and posturing in the sort of clothing I used to see modeled in the very early hours along Kuhio Avenue. Had something changed? Or was I, as men were wont to do with women, imagining things?

Going to school, I drove a cab, night shift down in Chinatown. That was when Chinatown, too, was innocent. Hordes of sailors blew in on payday nights, chasing and being chased about by working girls of either gender. Some of the hookers were men-- tall, overgrown Franken-mahus with enormous luau feet. Some, on the other hand, were convincing studies in the acquired art of femininity, and required by law to wear buttons that read “I’m a Boy.” Throughout the night, they would hire my cab as a convenient bordello, directing me to some dark recess in the valley above Chinatown, where I would get out, have a smoke, and whistle Dixie as the meter clicked away. All good clean fun.

Chinatown then was buildings like the Kee Wong Building, vintage 1922, a decayed structure of yellow brick covered with scabrous paint and festooned with rotted iron awnings and a flourishing banyan seedling.

The walls were barren of any adornment apart from their filigree of masonry cracks, with window frames mortised shut with the dust and grime of decades. The windows were papered over with old Chinese newspapers that admitted only the aromas of leis and bagoong from the restaurant downstairs, from which people hauled out plate lunches of Filipino food. There were lots of shops selling leis of cigar flowers, pakalana, white ginger, Hilo maile, and red carnation. Long strands of pikake, tuberose, and plumeria, in red -and-cream pinwheels, yellow, and ivory, hung from the eaves and dripped droplets from their periodic misting onto a cement floor littered with bits of blossoms. Each time the refrigerator was opened, their fragrance flowed into the street, lending freshness and renewal to the rancid dregs of the night that saw sailors hanging onto street lamps, vomiting up their very souls.

I spent lots of time at the Kuhio Bar and Grill. It was a local place, different from the Korean hostess bars whose customers were importuned for shots of cola syrup, and in turn were granted companionship tendered in toasts, brief exchanges, and access to crude groping. The waitresses at Kuhio's were older Japanese women who brought platters of jumbo shrimp tempura, gratis, along with the tall bottles of Kirin. Like so much else in the local scene, this bit of business was done on the basis of trust. But over the years, the customers began to take advantage, and wouldn't tip enough to cover the cost of the food. When the house started charging for the food, it wasn't the same anymore. That, it seems, was when they lost it, and eventually they went out of business.

But Club Hibiscus was still around, another local place like Kuhio's. It was there that I met Les and his friend Kathy. She wasn't terribly pretty, mostly Japanese with some other mixed in, but she always had a warm

smile, a real sweet girl who wasn't able to make it in the hostess bars because she didn't have it in her to hustle people for drinks. She always made sure there was stuff to eat--raw crab and sashimi, boiled peanuts and musubi rice balls and kimchi, sometimes Spam or even sliced steak with a small dish of ketchup for dipping, or shoyu chicken wings, or cold sliced octopus with shoyu and hot mustard. Like the other waitresses, she paid for the food herself and hoped she made it back in tips, which she usually did, and a modest amount extra. She really seemed to enjoy just listening to people talk, and never hit you up for drink

Les grew up on the Big Island, and used to grow pakalolo there. He had a place somewhere above Hilo Bay, amongst fields of wild orchids and stands of ohia, short and stubby with black bark and pink pompom flowers. Things were good. He lived in an A-frame with a wood-shingled roof and a large lanai, where he and his friends pulled up chairs and drank beer and smoked and played slack key. He had a jeep, a pit bull named Tiger Lilly, and a patch of about thirty plants up in the forest.

It was all "braddah-braddah"-- as he put it-- no mean and stingy boss, no shitty job and insulting wages. It wasn't work-- it was a lifestyle. At "Farmers' Market" in Hilo, which was wherever he met his friends, they traded stories and growing tips, talked prices, put each other on to some samples, and had a good time. It was fun to hike upcountry and be with his plants, just righteous out there in that fantastic terrain of fern forests and steaming fumaroles. There were plenty of birds and things, and the air smelled of eucalyptus. There were pigs, too, and sometimes he shot them and took them home to smoke the meat.

Back then, nobody really believed it was a crime. It was simplicity itself. Just dig a hole and put in some fertilizer, and after several months, the

plants budded. You didn't even have to water, since it rained plenty all the time. Once a month, he put some fertilizer on the plants, and maybe a handful of lime to reduce the acidity of the soil. Then when it was ready, he took the plant, dried it, culled it, and had some nice buds to sell. He did okay, made almost a thousand bucks straight off, just making the rounds with his friends and their friends.

Maybe there was just a few that weren't involved with it somehow, but just about everyone was growing it, no matter whether haoles, Japanese, Filipinos, whatever-- all just folks. There were grandmas doing it, just to make a little money, and high school girls that trimmed plants just for money for buy Christmas presents. They never smoked it-- it was just the money. Les paid his girl by the pound. He gave it to her green and it came back all cleaned up and sorted out. Sticks in one bag, shake in another, bud in another bag. She did good work, worth every penny he paid her. She could trim a pound in two days, and make a hundred bucks a day. Then he dried it in the closet, using de-humidifiers if it was raining, which it usually was.

Whoever had the most money or the most dope at harvest season got the nicest girls. They weren't for sale, really, but they were trading just the same. If you had good weed at a good price, you were always welcome everywhere, and there was always a party with girls and beer and music and stuff to eat. There was no getting up at some asshole hour to go to work, and your customers were your friends and their friends. Trust was the thing that made it work.

Looking back on it, trust in matters big and small around here seemed to take wing when the big money began to pour in. By the 80s, business was on everyone's minds, and not just the usual wheeling and dealing in real

estate. The MBA had become the Holy Grail, unlike the cushy academic sinecures that we scions of the social conscience of the 60s pined for.

I came to the realization that teaching, however cozy, was an invitation to starve, and hired on as a peddler of municipal bonds, and worked my way up through one of the big name investment houses. Despite its Wall Street cachet, it turned out to be little more than a gaming parlor and rest home for old drunks, and disillusioned, I went to work for a financial planning firm owned by a chap from New Zealand. But I myself seldom had two nickels to rub together, much less plan for, and my undoing came with the Great Crash of 1988 that put my accounts so far underwater that they would never again see the light of day. Clearly, my destiny did not lay in advising others how to make money.

With no business, I couldn't pay for the home we had built, situated against a background of towering cliffs, spidery waterfalls, and a riot of birdsong. I was heart-broken, but at least I was able to sell it before they sold it for me, and we sold into a rising market, for what we thought was an unimaginable and wildly speculative sum. Of course, it later went to twice that.

I embarked upon a new career in real estate, banging on doors and getting chased by dogs as I made the rounds in depressing bedroom communities, where nobody was home except bored housewives sitting around smoking cigarettes and watching soaps. I had become part of Hawaii's great growth industry, yet another agent in league with swarms of blow-dried flakes and glamour queens with blood red-lacquered claws.

They had sharpened those claws for the Japanese, and all the money they were throwing at real estate. Waikiki, in the grip of condo frenzy, was

filled with Japanese. Everywhere there were signs in Japanese, ads in Japanese, and hawkers yammering at them in Japanese. All the shop signs proclaimed their welcome in Japanese, and the Korean shopkeepers, snapping gum hard enough to break their jaws in between drags on cigarettes, peered suspiciously out from behind racks of beach towels and T-shirts on the lookout for wealthy Japanese. Leering, they would lunge after the Japanese like attacking geese. Americans, though, were of little interest, being apprised for the most part as budget travelers like the huge, misshapen women from the Mid-West and their sclerotic, dilapidated men that lumbered along like dinosaurs in a paleozoic fern forest, nosing through tacky stalls that sold cheap T-shirts, costume jewelry, spools of gold chains, crystal ornaments, gaudy candles, lurid crepe leis, lacquered clocks, and prints of whale art.

The Japanese, on the other hand, practically stood in line to be admitted into the exalted premises of places like Louis Vuitton. Throngs of them, with satchels full of cheap dollars, milled about in the bronze-mirrored, white oak-woodworked, and polished brass-trimmed sanctum sanctorum. This sumptuous building of oyster shell exterior, sapphire blue tiles, baroque faux gas lamps, and trimmed in wrought iron Chinese key design railings and patinaed copper guttering evoked Paris of the 1890s. Its concierges and hostesses seemed well versed in the art of evincing polite contempt and sniffiness toward interlopers, and those admitted milled about worshipfully, musing over niches that housed a 1923 dressing case that once belonged to the pianist Paderewski, a wardrobe trunk of actor Rory Calhoun, assorted bouteilles, flacons, pharmacie, and bijoux belonging to Honolulu's Dillingham family, and all manner of merchandise whose prices were engraved on brass plates. Treasures in hand, the ladies whirled out the door, attired in expensive flowing skirts and lucite heels, Hermes scarfs, and painstakingly-applied makeup. In the

brief span of a generation, they had grown tall, elegant, and long-legged, their limbs unmaimed by vaccination scars, though their smiles still sported supernumerary fangs and teeth as deranged, in some cases, as a picket fence in the wake of a windstorm.

Everywhere in Waikiki, they reached into alligator handbags and Gucci wallets for wads of currency to snap up Le Musts de Cartier, baubles by Van Cleef and Arpels, watches by Tag Heuer and Chopard and Blancpain and Raymond Weil and Aldemars Piguet of Geneve, Callaway Big Berthas, Swiss Army sunglasses, fashions by Fendi, Nina Ricci, Philippe Charrion, Etro Milano, and Christian Dior, Dunhill lighters, Burberry coats, Coach hadbags, pumps by Bally and Bruno Magli, and luggage crafted in the United Colors of Benetton, all to take home and carry about on the dingy streets of Yokohama as emblems of their holiday in Hawaii.

Signs invited Japanese to join the glamorous American couple pictured in the ad, sipping cobalt-colored drinks and eating lobster and steak with painted-on grill marks. Dutifully, they ordered the steak and lobster and rainbow sherbet that everyone knew was a staple in Hawaii. Another ad invited Japanese to tour the island in stretch limousines with smoked glass windows, retrofitted with TV, VCR, CD player, telephone, and even karaoke, chauffeured by a man in a tux with white gloves and slicked back hair. The same limousines then delivered them to the airport, where they picked up their boxes of New York steaks and pineapples and papayas, bought duty-free Martel cognac and Johnnie Walker Black and cartons of Dunhills, and boarded their flights for Narita.

But many of them had come to stay, and bought condos, beach-front manses, even resorts and golf courses. There were lots of “consultants” who specialized in working with Japanese, like the ex-hula dancer who

expressed her belief that it was a great honor to serve Japanese clients. The consultant knew that Japanese did business on the basis of trust, that their sense of obligation was very highly developed. This type of thing was wonderful, she effused, because it showed how beautifully two cultures could work together. With a little effort and sensitivity, it was very easy to pull together, and have fun while they were doing it. She appreciated Japanese sensitivities and tastes. An ardent admirer of Japanese culture, she was able to bridge cultural gaps and help her clients navigate the unfamiliar and treacherous waters of cross-cultural transactions.

She knew which properties were right for Japanese tastes and what prices were fair. Japanese people were very welcome here in Hawaii, she assured them. They owned the best properties in the best neighborhoods, and people considered them very good neighbors. In most cases, the client would have listened politely as he drank, becoming swollen and scarlet on high-octane drinks littered with umbrellas and pineapple spears, thinking perhaps of how preposterous it was that she regarded herself as Japanese, and concealing his scorn for this woman and her lowly profession. She was a third-generation emigrant, disowned by her parent country and beneath its contempt. And it may be that he didn't give two hoots in hell for the cultural sensitivities of these islanders and their quaint traditions.

Genshiro Kawamoto, for one, might not have cared less, as he made the rounds in a white stretch limo, pointing out one house after another—none of which were for sale--that his minion dutifully took note of and tendered outlandish unsolicited offers for. Gang lords from Japan bought hotels, and Waikiki condos traded hands in an orgiastic frenzy. Someone even bought an inter-island airline for its controlling interest in a golf

course on the Big Island. An old line of Island-style restaurants was snapped up and retrofitted into someone's whacky version of "American Graffiti"—which put waitresses with 20 years of service not out of work (as would have been the greater kindness), but onto roller skates, gliding about taking orders for burgers and malts in the parking lot.

A Japanese donated $2 million to a parochial school that owned some choice conservation land, and somehow got it re-zoned for a golf course development. It was a horrible mess from the beginning. The terrain was hilly and marshy, and they had to move some 400,000 cubic yards of earth in very wet conditions. Altogether, more than 500 piles had to be driven to anchor the clubhouse in the mud. Nine concrete bridges spanned streams that ran red and disgorged vast clouds of mud and silt that suffocated the coral reef in Kailua Bay. The rains crashed down and inundated everything, and the project lay idle for weeks as a vast muddy lake formed behind a cofferdam built to contain the erosion, that finally caved in and loosed a torrent of mud upon the hapless community.

Golf courses and mega-resorts were the apples of their acquisitive eyeballs—especially trophy properties like Waikoloa, where the jets of the 60-foot fountain in the two-acre reflecting pond played to the airs of the Kamehameha Waltz. In its center was a peach marble-and-glass pavilion that housed the Royal Boathouse and Paddling Club, though there weren't any paddlers to be seen on its premises. A herd of white stone horses reared their heads from the reflecting pool, where white marble swans swam and sculpted stone fish gushed. At the opening ceremony on the hotel's croquet lawn, a large crowd of dignitaries had assembled for the opening ceremonies, and many had arrived in 19th-century carriages drawn by Clydesdales and Percherons along a five-mile pathway.

There had been lots of excitement about the resort. Rooms would go for $350 a night and up, and the pay ought to be pretty good, people thought, and tips a gold mine. But it was the same old story. The jobs paid what the market would bear, and people around here were used to bearing up under a lot. Unemployment on the Big Island was high, and a lot of people just scraped by, working part-time for the other hotels or the car rental agencies at the airport or at the Cornet Store in Hilo or growing papayas or oranges or maybe pakalolo. But they applied just the same, for jobs like housekeeping at $6.50 an hour. That kind of money wasn't even enough to pay the rent.

The 1,300 employees of the resort were drilled in extensive role-playing, and had undergone a week-long indoctrination that immersed them in etiquette and trained them to wear a smile under the most distressing circumstances. They had to cut their hair real close and cut their mustaches and they couldn't wear earrings or perfume and couldn't do a thousand things. Some of the men apprenticed under a master butler from London. Trussed up in cummerbunds, they cut peculiar figures as they uncorked wine and offered advice on vintages. There wasn't much that could be done about their pidgin, though. Doormen were trussed up in gleaming whites with scrambled eggs on their shoulder boards, bell boys in crisp khakis, parking attendants in blue shorts with British bobby bear fur hats, standing around out there in the sweltering asphalt parking lots in their dorky hats and knee socks. There were other outfits for bartenders and waiters, front office people and all the rest.

The canoela was the developer's son's invention, a hybrid of Venetian gondola and Hawaiian outrigger canoe, nimble enough for one person to paddle, while four passengers reposed on upholstered seats under a fringed canopy. The resort's fleet would need as many as 250 paddlers,

depending upon traffic. “The majority of paddlers are teenagers who belong to canoe clubs,” he explained. “It’s an alternative to working at McDonald’s and a chance to make great tips. And they’ll be encouraged to develop their own styles.” They could wear lauhala hats, strum ukuleles, and tell stories about their aunties on Ni’ihau.

The canoelas made their way around the man-made lagoon, past islets inhabited by parrots, monkeys, flamingoes, and deer. He had tried to imagine what tourists imagined Hawaii looked like. They would expect the usual standbys of volcanoes and beaches and permanent sun, then jungle, waterfalls, wicked wahines, smiling and helpful native boys who dived for coins and called out “Aloha!” and outrigger canoes, grass skirts, topless women, dolphins and sharks, all kinds of spooky and venerable legends, kahunas, coconuts, torches, lions and tigers too.

But what the hell, I was after their money, too. I had graduated to commercial real estate, and walked around town hunting my own big game with clipboard and tax maps in hand, becoming reddened by the sun and my forehead rimed with salt at the end of the day. But when I knocked on the door of a property that the tax map said was owned by a limited partnership, I knew I had hit pay dirt, since I knew from my experience in investments that limited partnerships, larded with commissions and fees and self-dealing, invariably went bad. They’d have to sell it.

I told them I had a Japanese buyer, which I didn’t. But I was confident that I would, and as it developed, I did. They wanted $21 million, so just to be safe, I brought them an offer for $22 million-- no strings attached, clean as a hound’s tooth. But then their lawyer got hold of it, and with an offer than posed as few complications as ours did, his meter would not

have reason to run as long as he might like. By the time he got through dicking it up, the deal was unrecognizable.

I didn't have any other deals that I could look to for an income, and once again I found myself driving a cab, while I waited for this one to close. Working the navy base, I ferried the navy wives back and forth from the commissary, loading and unloading bags of groceries and Twinkies and Ho-Hos, only to listen to their apologies that they didn't have so much as fifty cents for a tip. But at least I was selling rides to people who understood the time-honored American tradition of a temp job, who understood that we were a people unafraid of rolling up our sleeves to do something less than exalted if that's what it took to get by in a pinch. Many was the hushed conversation I listened in on amongst my Oriental clientele that betrayed their astonishment at what must have seemed to them some sort of historic role reversal. I was made to feel as ashamed as if I was pulling them about in a ricksha, and wished I had never spent all those years learning their languages. But at last, after eleven months of 14-hour days, as the lawyer's meter clicked on and on as he sorted out all sorts of complications that he himself had created, it closed.

When the payoff came, it gave rise to an exhilarating money high that had me rushing around in the greatest joy, discharging debts. I wrote out check to a brokerage firm for an amount that would have choked an elephant. I would invest sensibly, and be the Prudent Man that the old imperative of the investment business cautioned brokers to emulate. I may have been prudent, but I wasn't as lucky as I would have liked, and it was miserable from the first day. I either lost or made huge amounts every day. If I lost it, which was often, it was a sum I couldn't hope to make back in months of work. If I made it, which was occasionally, it was the kind of money I couldn't hope to make in months of work. So what

was the point of going back to work? I became confused, and went shopping for things I didn't need. It made me feel better.

At last I was broke again, and forced, more or less, to go to the mainland for work. Waiting outside in the pre-dawn darkness for a ride, my heart had sunk to my kneecaps, and I was too choked up to speak a single word all the way to the airport. I was to become one of the 150,000 or so that Hawaii has lost over the past ten years. In many cases the ones who remain are the ones who cannot leave, just too broke to scrape together the plane fare, or with no better idea of what to do with themselves on the mainland than if they were to move to Tibet. Some might scarcely be able to make themselves understood, or would die of culture shock, or quite simply from the food—there being little on offer, it seemed, apart from fast food and hokey, themed franchise grinds and variations on themes of bread and mashed potatoes.

Denver had grown like a tumor writ large. I beheld pervasive homogeneity, endless burbs and malls and factory outlets like walled medieval towns out in the middle of the most desolate, howling wilderness. I thought, too, that mainland people acted funny, like they were in sitcoms or commercials, and I sensed on their part a certain disconnect from common sense and reality. All of this, I began to understand, was happening in Hawaii, a place that could ill afford this sort of disconnect and its corporate megalomania. I had to get home.

I quickly returned to my old habits and haunts for beer and banter with old friends like Les and Allen. I was quite surprised when Allen invited me to his wedding, since I hadn't realized that he was romantically involved. The occasion, a "celebration of loving commitment" as it was billed, was to be held at his penthouse apartment. And it was there that I

met Uncle Herman, an old kahuna who would perform the ceremony since, as I later realized, no one else of legal capacity would. When the day came, I had arrived late, and made haste to join the others in attendance, who had assembled in a big circle. As we joined hands and prepared ourselves for the blessing, I searched for the bride, but could discern none but my friend Allen, standing there arm-in-arm with some other guy who, as it dawned on me in the fullness of time, *was* the bride.

This was the first of my many encounters with Uncle Herman. Herman offered a wealth of highly original insight on certain of the seminal events of Hawaiian and world history and their participants, events to which he himself had in some way been party. Fascinated, I became a regular visitor to his apartment in Chinatown, a place that he shared with Doctor Daniel, a surf bum who bartered his services as caregiver in return for a roof over his head. Theirs was a contentious relationship, and on more than one occasion, Herman had thrown him out, leaving his things at the door and a note on the landing. But he always took him back, since it was for Daniel to help him on down to Duke's in Waikiki, where he drank himself silly and wheeled about the dance floor, flirting and winking and doffing his Stetson to one old woman who was so enraptured by his antics that she literally shit her britches.

Herman inhabited a world that I suspected was largely of his own fabrication, and in between picking over a plate of canned salmon and poi, he let me in on its secrets. He confided that he had been a cabin attendant on the Pan Am China Clipper. On one of its passages from New York to Canton, he had made the acquaintance of Senator John F. Kennedy. After they disembarked in Honolulu, he had escorted him to a Kahala pig farm, where JFK had cavorted with the girls in the family furo.

Kennedy relished the experience so, and was so taken with his Japanese hosts, that he urged statehood for Hawaii at once.

I learned the truth behind a significant watershed in Soviet-American relations. Herman had once met Mrs. Nikita Khruschev, who had accompanied the Soviet premier on a visit to New York and the United Nations, in the elevator at the Waldorf Astoria. She had winked at him, and late that night, there was a knock on his door. There she was, in her nightie. He let her in, and asked her what this was all about. She and the premier were not getting along these days, she explained, and in fact they had not had relations in years. Which was why the premier had become ornery and cross, and done things like take off his shoe and bang it on the podium at the U.N., and engage in the sort of provocative behavior that had brought on the Cuban Missile Crisis.

I was made privy to the *real* reason for the attack on Pearl Harbor, being that King Kalakaua had gone to Japan, where it was agreed that His Majesty would engage the hand of an Imperial princess in marriage, in exchange for delivering up the island of Maui to the Japanese-- Herman claimed to have a copy of the treaty in his safe deposit box. But when we failed to deliver up the island after all those years, the Japanese had exacted terrible vengeance. And at last, I was given to know of his secret audiences with Ronald Reagan, who had been slipping into town on the sly, so that Herman might employ his stores of sacred Hawaiian minerals to treat the president's worsening affliction with "Old Timer's Disease."

There has long been an element of tragic comedy in the affairs of state of the Hawaiian nation—to the extent that, and on the occasion when, there was one. Nowadays, the Sovereign Nation of Hawaii had reconstituted itself around the leadership of one Bumpy Kanahele, who had spent his

last hundred dollars on fishing line, some water buckets, a charcoal grill, some groceries and shoyu and rice, gone to the garden shop and bought sweet potato and taro seedlings, assorted seeds, and a few tools, and loaded everything along with his friends into an ancient station wagon and betaken themselves to a complex of derelict houses at Makapuu. The Coast Guard had abandoned them in 1974 when an automated lighthouse was built to replace the old one, and round-the-clock operators were no longer needed. The structures were badly damaged, with holes in the walls, wires dangling from the roofs, and walls covered with graffiti. The toilets and sinks had been uprooted from the bathrooms, and the windows had no screens to keep out the flies. During their first night there, everyone slept under the stars.

There was so much injury and alienation and ill will to heal. But all their troubles were going to vanish in a heartbeat, without having to worry about paying the damn rent to some piggy-ass landlord. All sickness would disappear when you ate good Hawaiian food, lots and lots of poi with good Hawaiian salt, sweet potato, crunchy red limu and ahi and those ono freshwater shrimps, and lots of good savory pork fresh from the imu-- no more junk food that rotted your teeth and made you sick and rotted your soul too.

Word got around that a new nation had been established at Makapuu. Their numbers grew from several to a dozen, and there were women and children. They set to work fixing up the old cottages, and brought in their old furniture and coolers filled with ice and beer and bags of groceries. Their junky old cars sat around like an encircling wagon train, and throughout the colony, the Hawaii state flag and a replica of a flag once used by King Kalakaua were draped upside-down, in a symbol of distress, over the settlement's entrance. Below the flags, a large banner as blue as

the ocean read “Nation State of Hawai’i, Independent and Sovereign.” The compound bustled with activity as carpenters sawed planks for benches from lumber donated by supporters. Across from them, workers prepared meals, and beneath blue plastic tarps were centers for public information, cooking, resting, sleeping, storage, recreation and meetings.

Their claim to the land stemmed from Bumpy’s tenuous and convoluted ties to a High Chief and original owner of the land, by way of a grant from King Kamehameha II. Applause and cheers rang out from those who had gathered round to listen to Bumpy, as he revealed his vision of the day when his people could return to land that had been stolen from them. They would reclaim the beaches and let Hawaiians fish and make salt and grow what they wanted on their own land, grow taro and re-stock the old fishponds. They would revive the Hawaiian language, make all the kids study it, revive the old traditions of dance and the telling of legends and let the kupuna elders rule the community. They would live a life that would serve as an example for the rest of the world, and show people that being greedy and raping the land was not necessary for happiness, that prosperity and growth came from within. They would show the world the true meaning of aloha, that it wasn’t the bullshit aloha of the hospitality Industry. They would show the world that what God had given man-- the sea and the land and the sky and the sun-- nobody could own. It was there for all to share, and not to exclude others from.

Things went well so long as the water at the nearby beach park flowed. They brought the water in with buckets and plastic shoyu containers, basins and inflatable plastic pools, and their taro and potatoes thrived. What a joy it was to live without laws or ordinances, without bills or rent to pay! It was all so madcap, and nobody paid attention so long as the clear cool water gushed steadily and the taro flourished and they reveled

in the beach showers and the toilets flushed merrily away in the bathrooms at the beach park.

Something primal stirred in their breasts as they mucked about in the taro, its great heart-shaped leaves nodding affectionately to its long-lost keepers. The people recognized it as a long-lost friend. They lumped together the dusty hummocks of sweet potatoes and held the runner vines in their fingers and beheld the nodding taro leaves with a sense of wonder as the surf murmured and the heady saltwater breeze coursed freely throughout their rude shelters and their hearts.

It must have been a mistake. The bill showed that water usage had gone from 4,200 gallons a month to more than 773,000. The City & County called the Board of Water Supply, and asked them to check to see if there was some mistake. But no, there wasn't any mistake. So they asked them to send someone to check the site. Must be a broken main, something wrong with the plumbing. Several days later, the Board of Water Supply called the City & County with its findings. They had sent an inspector out, and he had reported that a small tent city had gone up out there. People were using the toilets round the clock, and they were taking showers at the beach park. But most of all, people were carrying water away in buckets and inflatable swimming pools and containers of all kinds, and taking it to where they had their tents, and using it to cook and to irrigate a taro patch and some sweet potatoes they were growing.

Miffed at the misappropriation of its water, the City & County threatened to cut it off, and suddenly, the movement was thrown into crisis. The mayor indeed had the water turned off, the water lines plugged, the meters removed from the parks, and the toilets boarded up. It was hard to grow taro in lo'i that had dried up and baked and cracked under the

relentless sun and heat. Now that the City & County had cut off the water supply, people had to drive miles up to the next beach park with buckets and trash containers lined with plastic bags to bring water for drinking, cooking, and cleaning. But it wasn't nearly enough for the taro and the sweet potatoes.

The taro grew yellow and droopy. No matter how much water they brought in, in gasoline cans, biscuit tins, pots and pans, it was not enough to keep it alive. The parched lo'i instantly swallowed up the water and begged for more, and steadily the taro wilted. The brassy sun beat down on the sprawl of tents and plywood that had sprung up around the houses that were to have been the Healing Center, and the glare lay thickly on the beach.

The state threatened eviction. They needed to attract attention and more people, and Bumpy proposed that they distribute flyers to passing motorists. It got hot out on the highway, and the agitators grew thirsty and worn down from the sun. Someone brought beer in a cooler, a fair amount of it was drunk, and some grew rowdy and shouted at passing tourists with what sounded more like drunken invective than political harangue. It was a losing battle. The skies brought no rain. It was all parched and sun-baked lava flats around here, and every day, week after week, the sun broiled in a clear blue sky. Hardly a cloud crossed the sun to provide even a moment's shade.

When the City & County cut off the water, it was just a matter of time. Without water, nothing would last for long. Day after day went by with no rain. The heat and the glare parched the land, and the taro and the sweet potatoes yellowed and wilted. A few continued their valiant efforts to truck in water from far away, but it was a losing battle. The community

could not sustain itself without water, and in time, only a diehard handful remained, surviving mostly on bottled water, soda, and beer. They bathed in the ocean, and relieved themselves on the beach. Some people stepped in shit that had been only lightly covered with sand. There was no water for cooking, and they ate out of cans, or brought in plate lunches from Waimanalo. They were determined to tough it out, and resolved to stay here forever like this, if need be.

But then the task force moved in, with bulldozers, Dobermans, and several jeep-loads of beefcakes packing pistols and radios. They cordoned off the area, hung “Restricted Area” signs on the trees, and sealed off all access to the beach. On the sand were a few piles of battered particleboard furniture, its veneer peeling, garbage bags full of unwashed clothing and flea-infested bedding, buckets of fish hooks, lures and weights, folds of nylon net, a guitar. The bulldozer smashed into the shacks, plowing plywood, a car seat, a table, and a cheap oil of a pastoral scene somewhere in the Canadian Rockies into the keawe brush. Then it turned on a panel truck that had served as bedroom, with three eviction notices glued to its windshield, turning it over and over until its windshield shattered and its rusted roof buckled.

The last of the settlers to leave Makapuu were arrested at dawn, as soon as they finished the awa ceremony. Wearing red kihei, they stood next to an altar at the beach, while the rest moved off to a crude heiau that had been built by the Nation the weekend before, where they had conducted traditional cleansing and healing ceremonies. The police waited with bowed heads. Then they gave themselves up peacefully. A crowd of onlookers applauded, blew conch shells, and wept.

I myself felt as luckless as the Hawaiians, and I believed that it was all because of the robe. The garment in question was an artifact from 16th century China that Allen had acquired at auction. For centuries, it had been donned by the emperor for certain crop fertility rites, then had been stolen by the Japanese during their occupation of China in the 1930s. Recently, it had been auctioned off as part of the bankruptcy of the previous owner. For the robe was thought to be cursed: calamity would descend upon any who usurped the robe, as it had with each of its previous owners, ever since it had been stolen from the monks in China. In each case the outcome had been the same: financial ruin, destitution, despair, and complete derangement of the usurper's affairs.

Oddly, all of this information on the robe's pedigree was available to those who were prepared to bid for its ownership. But Allen, the very picture of probity—however illusory— saw himself as a solid citizen who, having made his own fortune the old-fashioned way and acquired a penthouse apartment by dutifully attending to all of his P's and Q's, was not the sort to be taken in by superstitious folderol. As a fancier of antique Orientalia, he was instantly captivated by the robe, and without so much as a second thought laid out a very considerable sum for it, confident that he could quickly unload it on some Hong Kong tycoon for many times what he had paid.

But the curse laid its iron grip upon him before he had half a chance to do any such thing. Having recently sold his penthouse, he had traded up to a beach-front bungalow that he intended to not just live in, but move his business into. No sooner did he take up residence, then he was given to understand that the circuits were completely inadequate to the demands of his equipment. And the house, airy and open to the sea breezes and the laid-back lifestyle of Kailua, proved irresistible to

intruders, and the place was burgled not once but several times in short order. Then business took it on the chin. At last, unable to meet the crushing expense the mortgage, Allen opted to get out of Dodge. And foolishly, I bought his business.

I should never have laid a finger on either the robe or the business. After a year of struggling with it, and unable to meet the terms of its purchase, I was ready to give it up. I got into some horrific and highly public pissing contests with Allen, himself on one end of the connection in Atlanta, and myself on a cell phone in the courtyard downstairs. When he returned from Atlanta to answer for a lawsuit that he had entered against the auction house, I saw for myself the toll that the past year of privation had taken. Under treatment for clinical depression, Allen was snowed under on lithium and left generally out to lunch. Speaking of which, he had brought a chicken salad sandwich that day from the deli downstairs, and as he sat across from my desk, he lost his grip on the sandwich and it fell, mayonnaise side down, onto the carpet that may not have been cleaned since Methuselah was a babe. But without a moment's hesitation, he reached down and picked it up, re-assembled it, boogers and dirt and hair and all, and calmly resumed his eating of it.

I abandoned the business and took up as an editor with a fellow I called the Chaos Monster, so-named after his deranged rat's nest of an office, just upstairs from a greasy spoon that was in fact crawling with fat, sleek rats. Our brief association provided a short but steep learning curve in the business of publishing on a shoestring: hornswoggling vendors into extending credit, stiffing them and engaging nasty lawyers to keep them at bay, and sucking up to advertisers.

I left him after six months or so, believing that I had learned enough about publishing—apart from all the dirty tricks of the trade—to publish my own penny dreadful. With no cash, no credit, no contacts, no credibility, I managed to sell advertising in a magazine that was nothing more than a concept to some number of businesses around town. But the unrelieved, constant rejection from huffy marketing directors and snotty advertising agents drained me. As an unpublished magazine, I stood little chance of gaining an audience with big accounts. So I took my case to the small businesses that produced all the local-style stuff—guava chutneys, Big Island coffees, noni juice nostrums, squid lures, hula gourds, koa boxes, ukuleles, plate lunch parlors, and the like. They loved the fit that a local-style magazine like mine offered businesses like theirs, but like small businesses throughout Hawaii these days, they had no money.

In between the big box and the mom n' pop, there wasn't much that remained to the old way of doing business here. In Pearl City there is a certain property that developers would call a "spite strip"—a property that the owner wouldn't sell at any price, that a developer would just have to build around. And so it remained in this case, five acres of spite and watercress in the heart of the new Pearlridge Mall. Its languid ambiance mocked this behemoth of big name retailers, glass-enclosed elevators, neon tube lighting, bridges, balconies, vaulted skylights, and hordes of people circumambulating in their mindless promenade. Millions of pounds of cold air were pumped through the mall to insulate shoppers from the soaking tropical heat, as stores that smelled of varnished oak flooring and gabardine wool carpets proclaimed "The Best of Fall Fashions" and "Jump Into Fall" in a place where no such season existed.

Beyond the mall was a vast parking lot, jammed full of glare and cars and waves of heat weltering off the asphalt. Obese women dragged their squalling infants along, ambling like game on a broiling African veldt, surrounded by a forest of signs for Home World, Territorial Savings, KFC, 7-11, Bank of America, Bank of Honolulu, Volvo Used Cars, Budget Furniture, Chevron, Shell, Anna Miller's, The Pump. The sidewalks in front of the mall were plastered with black smears of gum, molten and bubbly like the asphalt. Above the sidewalks was a cat's claw of phone and power lines, in the middle of which rose a single palm, its smoke-begrimed fronds visible through the tangle of overhead lines. The lone palm belonged to the Sumida Watercress Farm.

Sumida's was an oasis from the rush of traffic and the whooping and bleeping of car alarms and the wail of police and ambulance sirens. Its clear, cold water circulated in troughs through acres and acres of dark green watercress. In the back of the farm, against the mall's monorail that snaked along its transom, was a dense grove of towering banana trees, coconut palms, bamboo, monkeypod, pandanus, and willows. Snowy egrets flapped their wings in the watercress, and a cool breeze flowed off the farm, rustling the red plumerias and bougainvillea that lined the drainage canal.

In front was an open-air cement slab festooned with nets and glass floats, and on the wall were nailed the tails of the dozen or so marlin that had come in at better than 600 pounds. Sumida's daughter and her friends stood round the carcass of a big marlin, cutting away thick steaks. They whacked and hacked at the spine of the fish, filling up big plastic buckets with filets packed with rock salt to marinate overnight in the big refrigerated room before they were smoked the next day in the brick smoker out back by the rows of corn and chilies. The smoker handled up

to three hundred pounds of whatever was brought in---marlin, ahi, spearfish, ono, mahi, aku, kawakawa, onaga, opakapaka, uku, sailfish, and ulua. The reefer room was chilled by a vacuum cooler that had cost Sumida-san a quarter-million even back in the 60s, and now it was filled with the buckets of fish on a rack that also held bottles of shoyu, tomatoes, and big bags of salt. A well-fed cat leaned up against the metal door of the walk-in refrigerator and licked its hindquarters. The sign out back that said “No Fish Guts---Will Clog the Intakes” was unnecessary. The cat saw to that.

All kinds of people had badgered old Sumida-san to sell the property. Day in, day out came the phone calls and entreaties. Agents dropped in uninvited, as the women cut fish on the cement slab. They looked a bit foolish, climbing out of their Benzes in coat and tie and expensive Italian loafers, the women in designer fashions and Chanel heels, picking their way through the blood and marlin guts and fishy smell. They had a fabulous offer to convey. But then again, everyone did, and not even the slumlords of Chinatown could hold out against the kind of money that was on offer.

I used to see Chinatown as a garden that had long thrived on the compost of its own decay. But now, in being pruned and swept clean of litter and debris and tidied up, it had become a very different garden, one that increasingly required the fertilizer of money and the pesticide of regulation to bloom.

The old Chinatown had lost its spirit of craziness and become dispirited. The women still leered, their heads bobbing and nodding as they drooled and muttered and laughed softly to themselves. Like magpies on a telephone wire, a row of old codgers squatted on the sidewalk in front of

a bakery that sold neon-colored confections grown stale from sitting in their dusty glass case. A man drew on his cigarette, then hoicked out a stream of spittle and smoke in the manner of a komodo dragon hissing its warning at the approach of an interloper. Another hobbled along the sidewalk, barefoot and filthy, on a horribly twisted clubfoot, past an old crone sitting on the sidewalk in a bikini, weaving baskets. Harridans and harlequins argued with imagined, unseen antagonists, and visited their opprobrium upon passers-by that strayed past the high water mark of the tide of gentrification that was steadily overtaking Chinatown.

In some cases, the transformation of Chinatown had preserved that splendid spirit of chaos, albeit absent its filth and grit. Maunakea Marketplace, re-developed from a block of decayed godowns, still played host to the same throng of onlookers—wiry men with sleeveless undershirts visible beneath transparent rayon shirts in dull patterns, or with lurid polyester aloha shirts, scuffed patent leather needle shoes and muddled nylon socks, and thickly oiled hair. The courtyard was packed, everyone yammering like a tree-ful of mynahs. They sat beneath umbrellas and watched others watch them, scowling from beneath baseball caps and trading desultory remarks over endless cups of red tea and filter-less cigarettes smoked down to the bitter last shreds of tobacco. An old fellow hawked and gobbed into an official Maunakea Marketplace garbage can-- not onto the street, as in olden times, but into the official rubbish bin. A young bard with shoulder-length hair erupted in a raucous rendition of a Cantonese pop song, but no one batted an eyelash. The spectator seats for the human comedy were free, the melon seeds, red tea, and cigarettes very nearly so.

The Modhouse Cart had been here in the courtyard for a long, long time, its inventory little changed as the months go by. Its centerpiece was a

tapestry of a duo of outlaw bikers riding Harley hogs beneath a baleful moon, an enormous Confederate flag waving defiantly from the bike's stern. There were butane lighters, three for a dollar, packs of playing cards, a set of extruded iridescent ceramic busts of the Virgin Mary and of a war-like eagle's head. There was a stack of kung fu videos, football and baseball and basketball cards of sports heroes since out of favor, and a calendar now dated. Their price tags were scrawled in that peculiar Oriental style of writing numbers that resembled the calligraphy of their written characters. There were a few stuffed toys and a board of Aloha Paradise key chains, each with a photo of a blow-dried hunk that seemed to be covering himself with his body board, as if he suddenly realized how absurd he looked in his string bikini. There was a framed and glassed-in tray of coins and a dollar bill. Beneath the wares table there was a sign that said "Playboy Magazine Sold Here," a pair of old 33 LPs tacked up on the board, an ad for GPC cigarettes on a hand-lettered sign, and two packs of Polaroid 800 film. Cassettes of Vietnamese pop music for a couple bucks were stacked alongside boxes of lychee, mangoes, and coconuts. There were frilly lace fans that wouldn't stand up to their own breeze. It all looked like a hawker's stall in the hinterland of China.

On the floor of the courtyard was an array of Jack-in-the-Box commemorative tiles, one for each of their restaurants—an ironic icon of corporate food in a marketplace chock-a-block with the likes of Melewe Thai/Vietnamese Cuisine, Two Sisters Filipino Fast Food, Korean Kitchen, Chinese Mini-Kitchen, Sawadee Thai Cuisine, Naty's Filipino Foods, and Vientiene Fast Food. Today's special at the Vientiene, a mixed plate of beef larb, ong choy squid and papaya salad, was presented side-by-side with "International Fortune Telling: Card-Reading, Astrology, Palm Reading" and a tray of hot dogs wrapped in nori, chicken wings sweltering beneath a 150-watt lamp, and fried grease balls. The BM Meat

Market and its eerie cachet of necrosis-- cold white piles of chicken feet and pork claws and tripe-- introduced the indoor market, packed with trays of parrot fish with spear wounds in their sides and viscera hanging out, and buckets of tiny red goatfish, pig intestines, and crabs battling against probing tongs. Live at $4.50, dead at $3, the crabs grabbed hold of anything in a tug-of-war with the tongs and hung on grimly. They scurried to bury themselves under the others, which resulted in a continuous churning up of the most cowardly from the bottom of the pile, in a desperate pyramid scheme. A tray of catfish lay perfectly still until someone went fishing, then it erupted. A butcher hacked chicken carcasses with the loud whack of a cleaver. Glassine envelopes of chilies brought to mind nickel bags of crack, and I noted a sign that, in a uniquely Chinatown twist on Western convenience culture, read “Pre-squeezed tomatoes---no need to squeeze! We've done it all for you.”

On the newly-moneyed side of Maunakea Street, most of the buildings had a new coat of paint and neat signs hanging on chains beneath new awnings. The chaos had been sorted out and sanitized. Nobody hung out on the block anchored by the police station, situated next to two enormous black marble Chinese lions that guarded the front line of re-development at this self-styled “Gateway to Chinatown.” Beyond the sentries was Chinatown Gateway Park, offering civilized repose beneath its pumped water sculpture and elephant ears that climbed the trunk of an overarching monkeypod. A sudden flurry of pigeons took wing and wheeled past the Indigo Restaurant’s open-air lanai.

Indigo had re-created the era of tropical colonial gentility once epitomized by the Raffles in Singapore. Lacquered rattan chairs stood on polished hardwood floors, astride tables set with glazed blue ceramic trays, inlaid ebony-wood cutlery, and linen tablecloths. The menu posted

outside promised lobster potstickers with chili soy sauce, merguez lamb siu mai laced with garlic and cumin, scallop soba with tangerine sauce, and Sumatran coffee bread pudding-- dainties for the after-theater crowd emerging from the Hawaii Theater Centre. The Miss Nubian Hawaii Pageant was playing (in keeping with his year's themed tribute to African-Russians), and next week the Centre would premiere a choreographed festival of vintage Hawaiian steel guitar music, to the accompaniment of the Fa'afetai Le Alofa Samoan choir. At Habana Cabana next door, the languid swirl of ceiling fans was reflected on floors that seem lacquered. Patrons clustered around a brass-railed bar, where a vested barkeep poured single malts with strangled Scottish genealogies, and where oyster shooters and broiled mussels accompanied pinot noir, pints of Bass, and genteel repartee. Others languished in overstuffed top grain armchairs over Partagas and Cohiba cigars, their reveries drawing inspiration from the framed bistro prints of opium smokers and absinthe drinkers.

Down the street, reveries of a more brutish, beer-fueled sort were enacted over the tattered baize of pool tables in bars that await the wrecker's ball. When that happened, the old boys would remove their malodorous stogies, phlegm-draped spittoons, and themselves to the next block, and then to the next. At some point, though, Chinatown will have run out of space to re-invent itself.

Before the developers, the prime agent for reinventing the landscape was the volcano. The island of Hawai'i was being constantly reinvented, its long slopes buried and reburied under the flows of a'a from Mauna Loa. The flows snaked down the flanks of the great mountain, kicking up enormous clouds of steam as they poured into the sea, then condensed and rained down on the lush farmland. The lava soon sprouted grasses,

then grew shrubs and scrubby trees, and was re-forested almost before one's eyes.

Les offered to bring me along on his next visit home. In Hilo, we rented a Jeep from Nishimoto's service station. Since we would be on close terms with this vehicle for the next few days, I named it-- the Antichrist. It was a 1941 Chevrolet Apache with 79,000 miles on an odometer-- nearly unreadable beneath the cracked glass-- that could only register five digits. Inside it was all cracked vinyl with the sponge rubber stuffing crumbling out. The truck's coating of flat orange primer paint had receded to expose patches of flat black, its heavily-dented sides were slashed with rust, and its broad enamel white grill scowled from beneath hooded cowling headlights bracketed by dents.

Its bed of rotted pineboard planks and rusted-out running boards were wired onto the cab, and I fastened the rusted chain that held the rear gate shut, started up the truck, and floored the accelerator pedal now worn smooth.

We began groaning up the road to Papaikou, and bumped along the sandy road, squinting as we emerged from shadow into the sunlight that flooded the beach end of the broad valley. Guava branches lashed the sides of the jeep, their freight of ripe fruit spattering into the dust that swirled up and hung in a tawny haze in the wake of our passage. The heat rose with the sun, and I mopped the grime and sweat from my forehead and peered out past the keawe scrub that gave way to brakes of cane rustling listlessly in the sun. A while later, we pulled into the cluster of tiny homes and sheds and stores that was home to the Ka'u Plantation community.

It was sweltering, brutal work, hacking down shrubs and setting fire to stretches of dry pili grass that cast up great clouds of sooty smoke that blocked out the sun and choked the men. They cut cane by day, and burned the rubbish in cane fires that crackled and glowed in the sooty night. In the morning, they came in and picked up the unburned trash and loaded it onto carts, picking over the fields to make sure that every piece of cane was picked up and sent to the mill. Amidst a backdrop of emerald cane fields, brown and black lava patches, snowcapped mountain fastnesses, and the robin's egg blue of sea and sky, the laborers still thought their surroundings dreary. They slapped at mosquitoes and yellowjackets, sweated under the boiling sun, choked on clouds of cane smoke and fly ash, and flailed away at the cane.

The air in the camp was sultry and thick, brimming with sun and humming with dragonflies, whose blue pencil bodies hovered on wings of black lace. They darted and danced among unruly growths of ixora and ilima, tendrils of white hibiscus, and clumps of lemon yellow crotons. Plumeria sighed its fragrance, and the mango tree dripped piney sap that in the cloying humidity drew hordes of fruit flies to the smashed fruit lying about its trunk.

The tiny pineboard houses were identical, except for their paint. Some were painted forest green and others simply whitewashed. All had roofs that had rusted red. Their gardens were thick and tangled with bushes of tiny red chilis and vines of sweet potatoes---the small purple-flesh Okinawa kind that did well in wet places. All around were colonies of ti, stands of golden bamboo, and towering plantains that yielded enormous cooking bananas for roasting in hot ashes.

A mosquito-infested sump where taro grew smelled like pig droppings and bubbled with marsh gas, and a heavily pregnant apple banana tree stood supported by a big stick jammed up against its trunk. The tree was short and squat, its leaves shabby and wind-tattered, in contradistinction to its lush production of fruit. Vines crept up its trunk, and a withered blossom dangled at the end at the end of its bunch of fruit, with altogether more than a hundred or more of the stubby thumb-sized bananas. It had given all its energy to its fruit, and now the plant was exhausted, and its trunk would soon be added to the pile of banana logs nearby, looking like reed mats rolled up thick and tight and lopped into sections. Small suckers now clustered around the trunk of the old banana tree, poking their heads up through the earth, and some had begun to unfurl. Stands of rosemary and creosote-scented rue drowsed in the heat.

It was Sunday, and it was apparent that all the hard work under the hot sun would have its compensations. Nobody ever starved here. When the people put on a real spread, there was just no end to it. Everyone--Koreans, Japanese, Filipinos, Chinese and so on--brought something that was special for them. It was all laid out under the beach grape trees next to the ball field. The imu and the big kettledrum filled with charcoal were both going, and kids turned the chicken with tongs on the kettledrum. The smoke drifted through the needles of the ironwood trees at the edge of the ball field, where families sat around on beach mats under canvas tarps on poles anchored by guy wires, and old Japanese obaa-san milled around in the shade of a nearby trees, with their great-grandchildren strapped to their backs.

The imu, piled high with keawe charcoal and beach boulders, put out clouds of heat shimmer and steam from the banana leaves that lined the pit. That morning, we watched as they led the hog out to the lava flats by

the sea. There they cut its vein, and the animal staggered and careened pitifully among the ropes of pahoehoe. It collapsed, and its lifeblood drained out and was in time washed away by the sea spray. The men hoisted it onto the plank, gutted it, and packed its viscera into a plastic bucket to use later for sausage casing.

They stuffed the hog with white-hot boulders. The animal yawned improbably over the boulder in its maws, and other rocks were jimmied into cavities between its shoulders and neck. They had tied up its trotters and brought it, suspended from a bamboo pole, to the imu, and lowered it into the pit onto an underlying net of chicken wire. Chicken wire meat was the best, the kind that stuck to the wire mat after it was unrolled from the cooked hog. And the hog cooked all morning and part of the afternoon, as the men gently raked the ash of the keawe wood and turned the imu stones with long tongs and a spade. For that one day, it was great, sitting under the trees, eating pig and drinking sodas, talking story, dozing, playing ball.

The next morning, Les and I walked along the old worn-out dusty red road through fields of lush cane that went by the plantation cemetery. A warm rain drifted down in veils from high up on the volcano, and when you looked up past the mill and the smokestack at the hills of cane, there was a rainbow. We weren't so far away we couldn't hear the gentle hum of the machinery---the presses, the rollers, the drums---that up close was so deafening. We walked along the dirt road, its mid-section choked with grass, that led alongside broad expanses of tall wetlands grass and stands of wild papaya trees heavy with fruit. Round the bend, coming into town, used to be Chang's Barber Shop, now closed, with its three rococo-looking wrought iron chairs made, as their footrests proclaimed, in St. Louis. The shop had smelled of Osage Rub, Packer's Tar Soap, and

Faberge Talcum Aphrodisiac. It had been like a morgue in there usually, Les remarked. But instead of one corpse stretched out on a marble slab, there would be Chang, stretched out on a table reading a magazine, his shirt hung up on a coat hanger beside a big round mirror by a set of mule deer antlers mounted on the wall.

We walked past the jetty, past a clapboard shack with a rusted tin roof. A short, squat Samoan palm stood in the sandy yard with a wooden ladder leaning up against it. Some of its great wide fronds lay limply against the trunk, and the nuts were big and round and green and full of sweet water. There was a clothesline supported by a piece of driftwood, where an undershirt and an octopus were pinned up on the line, its legs done up like a ballet dancer, and its streamers, some desiccated and some still pink and fleshy, trailed in the sea breeze.

They got a lot of rain here, and lots of mosquitoes, especially out back by the river. One house, with its tin roof that collected the rain and dumped it in a torrent into the river, looked like it would collapse into it. The river, absolutely still, reflected the images of date palms towering above a perilous little pier, twisted like a rope bridge in a windstorm. Kids fished from the pier sometimes, especially back when they were so little that all they could wield was a flyweight bamboo rod. But they caught a lot of tilapia with that rod, though they always threw them back because the tilapia didn't smell so good, like silt. They tied up the skiff alongside the pier, and tarped it over against the rain. Nets, which had been strung up to dry, were now dripping wet.

We came to the old store that had been his boyhood home. I met his dad Pablo, who had built this store nearly 50 years ago. Not much about the store would have changed since it first opened, I imagined. There were

hands of apple bananas, with lots of blemishes, strung up on wire above the chipped enamel scale on the front counter. There were jars of red and pink anthuriums, and little cutaway milk cartons of dendrobium orchids. Papayas were laid out like eggs in a carton. A dusty glass cabinet held coconut pies and plastic-wrapped paper plates piled with Chinese roast pork. There was a rack full of packs of Kools and Camels, and jars of wrapped li hing mui and bags of Yick Lung crack seed. A wire cage held pints of liquor and a bottle of Lancer's white wine. A glass cabinet was filled with packs of Bicycle playing cards, chewing gum, sweets, cans of abalone and tins of bay shrimp and crab and Coleman's Mustard powder, bags of arare, boxes of baking soda, and boxes of Pixy Sticks. Up on top of the back counter was an assortment of dusty Oriental vases and small lacquer tables. On the floor were stacked cases of Primo Beer.

Gaggles of young girls still came in after school was out and dickered with Pablo over the price of sweets, and he always came out the worse for the negotiations. Still, he enjoyed making them bargain hard for it. Not that the store was ever much to behold in its younger days. But nearly 50 years had gone by, and the red-painted weatherboard had faded, and the beams and the planks of the shack had bleached and become white. It had the feel of home, like an old slipper.

Used to be, there was maybe twenty pairs of rubber slippers out there, each pair different, some blue, some white, some black, some with a strap broken, some kamaboko-style like Japanese fishcake, some geta-style with tatami soles, and some curled up like charred paper. The kids took off their slippers when they came inside the store, since there was so much sand being track around all the time. When things were slow, which they usually were, Pablo would sit out back in an old aluminum chair with the kids who came to the store after school. He sat in the crushed

coral yard amongst the lava rocks, out there by the haole koa scrub and the cluster of papaya trees that had taken root from seed from smashed fruit. He got to tell 'em Christmas stories even in September. That was his reward for accepting the short end of the stick every time they got to bargaining over the candy counter.

Many lazy days had been spent on the verandah listening to the rain hammer down on the corrugated tin roof, talking story. The front of the verandah was overgrown with distended yellow hibiscus shrubs amongst spider lily plants, and a brace of coconut palms grew at angles to each other. There were two simple wooden benches and an old barber's chair that sat on the verandah. The town's last and only barber Chang had given that chair to Pablo when he retired. Now if you wanted your hair cut you had to go up out of the valley and down the road. Humbug already. Most folks cut 'em themselves.

A few retired plantation workers still came by during the day. They were always sitting or standing around in their porkpies or old frayed Panama hats. Everyone had a hat, and everyone wore cheap, ill-fitting clothes or a not too clean T-shirt with a breast pocket that usually held a pack of Kools. One old guy always wore an old suit vest with satin backing and waist pockets with tortoiseshell buttons. That was the extent of dressing up around here.

It wasn't like old times, the way everyone came together at the yard Saturday nights, brought beer and poki, then come over for eat udon and coconut pie. They still came to talk story and drink coffee and eat udon and coconut pie, but you could see their thoughts were distant. They were thinking about all those years cutting cane or clearing the fields with fires in the night.

A warped and faded Drink Hilo Soda sign swung in the breeze. It never did attract much business for Hilo Soda, Pablo thought. Most of his customers just came to drink coffee not soda. Plus, it was hard to make out the word "Drink." Maybe that was why. The only other sign was out back by the loading dock to the shed: a pockmarked tin sign that said "Hilo Strained Poi Sold Here." Out back was where Les used to manhandle those big burlap sacks of taro corms the Chinese farmers brought in. He had to wash the muddy corms, scrub them down real good with a wire brush, and boil them up in big basins. Then the hard work started. He had to take that big wooden paddle and mash them up and knead the stuff over and over again with the metal hook until it was nice and smooth. Wasn't no Hilo Strained kine. Was Les' kine, 'til he said to hell with that and found other things to do.

It used to be just guys like Les— people from around here-- growing it. Then haoles moved in---hippies, or maybe they was hippies at first, then later on was something else altogether. They were so full of shit, those people, all talk about love and getting mellow and up the establishment and coming back to Mother Earth and live off the land. They meditated on the beach and sat under a tree with one hand on each knee, going oooooohhhhhhmmmmmmmm. They ate funny foods with alfalfa sprouts and wore cheap and baggy cotton stuffs made in Bangla Desh or someplace like that. A lot of them were dirty and never cut their hair and they walked around barefoot, and the women thought they were local girls, with their sarongs and flowers behind the ear. Worse, some of the *guys* wore flowers behind the ear. They acted funny and talked spacey and had so much love and aloha to give. But these same people who talked about mellow out and live and let live, they ripped each other off all the time, pulling up each other's plants, selling people bad acid and

bad drugs, and they got drunk and got noisy and they had no respect for other people's peace and quiet.

They went from free spirits to something ugly. They started to love what they said they despised: money. Their women suddenly weren't so hip and cool anymore; they wanted to live in a nice place and drive a nice car. Maybe these weren't the same people, but maybe they were.

Some growers drove BMWs, paid for. They had a house, paid for. Some made maybe two hundred grand a year. They bought fancy watches, wore diamond rings, and their houses had koa furniture, works of art, great stereos. They ate steak and eggs for breakfast, salmon and bagels for lunch. They ate faggy little cookies and expensive Maui potato chips that tourists bought. One guy was even rumored to have thrown money into the volcano, saying "I don't need it anymore. I'm rich!" It was fact that a lot of guys went to Honolulu, got some girls, and had all the coke they could handle. But those people wouldn't walk a hundred yards to tend their plants, and they didn't know what it was like to sit around and listen to slack key and drink beer and talk story with your friends. They'd rather be at a country club playing tennis.

Les would take his dog Tiger Lilly and a shotgun, like he was hunting pig, and sometimes he got pig, but mostly it was because you couldn't tell what kind jokers you were going to run into up there. Plus, he was growing his plants up in the National Park. The Park said they don't want it in there, and if they caught you they going to nail you to the wall.

Everyone got scared. Everyone was getting ripped off. Nobody trusted anybody anymore.

He had thought seriously about all that he stood to lose if he got into trouble. The ones that got caught were getting some pretty stiff sentences, like twenty years even, and he thought to himself he could never stand even one day behind bars. Life was too good for that kind of thing.

He pulled up his plants one more time and then went to look for someplace else. It was getting crowded, though, and people were getting paranoid about hiding their stuff from other people who just went hunting for it like Easter eggs and ripped you off. So many people were growing it everywhere, even way out in the middle of nowhere, and the people who wanted to rip it off were climbing all over the countryside to find it. You couldn't even grow it out in the sugar cane anymore, since the cane workers would steal you blind. And those little planes that flew ten miles an hour dusting the crops, they sprayed the plants with herbicide. If it didn't kill the plant, the stuff damn near killed you.

Then it got ugly. One of his friends was waylaid and had his plants ripped up in front of him by some tough guys he never saw around before. There were rumors: hikers just disappeared-- there were booby traps of sharp bamboo punji stakes up there. Sometimes you heard guns going off, up in the forest. There were pig hunters up there, but you always thought the worst. And now some syndicate guys from Honolulu came in and put in some fields that never got ripped off. One grower got muscled by those guys. They paid a fair price and they took it all, but the guy moved away after that. So then the police got mad, and fought back. It went on for three weeks, and they took no prisoners: 406,000 plants destroyed, 38 people arrested, 15 weapons seized.

The commander of Operation Sweep wanted to eliminate big-time growing completely and swore they would do whatever it took, for as long as it took. The cops went in with machetes and search warrants. When they found the plants, they went at it with machetes, cutting them so there was maybe only an inch of stalk above the ground. With the bigger plants, they took a rope and dragged them out of the ground, like a tug-of-war. They worked quick, since the helicopter was buzzing around overhead all the while. They huffed and sweated and panted as they piled up the plants in one big pile. Then they loaded the stuff onto trucks and hauled them off to the landfill.

Several months after I got back with Les from the Big Island, his friend Kathy was in the news. Early one morning, police had found her body in the bushes out by Hawaii Kai. She had been stabbed dozens of times by some creep she was doing chemicals with.

A new Ice Age had arrived, and chilled the spirit of the community with its harrowing tales of women and children brutalized and families sundered. A way of life was being uprooted with the cane, and in its place flourished ugliness. Flush with the pathologies of greed and despair, the bubble grew distended, until at last it burst. With the collapse of the Japanese speculative mania, the boil was lanced. But along with the abscess, there drained away the livelihoods of those whose lives had been lived on the cusp of the bubble.

Our first neighbors, Jeff, operated a charter fishing boat. His wife was Japanese, and her relatives from Japan had visited once, arriving absurdly in the old style, like samurai lords in a white stretch limo. My wife always knew how Jeff's business was doing from the number of bento he ordered from her restaurant for his Japanese customers. When she first

started working there three years ago, he was usually good for twenty or so on a given day, and then it dwindled to ten, and then to just two or three. It got so he owed her restaurant more than $2,000. Nowadays his bento count was usually none, occasionally two or three.

I imagine that Jeff is bankrupt—one of many thousands over the past few years. Now it's foreclosures--a hundred or more such announcements filling 2 ½ pages of the Sunday newspaper (where usually only several were to be found just ten years ago). Next I suppose it will be the turn of the divorce lawyers to clean up. That seems to be the sequence: personal bankruptcy, foreclosure, then divorce. Those who still had decent jobs kept their heads down and hung on for dear life. Because if they lost it, they'd find there were hundreds of people lined up for even the shittiest jobs-- like the 2,200 or so standing in line at the new Hawaiian Waters Adventure Park, for jobs that paid the $5.50 minimum. It would all be just like your mother-in-law kept telling you: You're inadequate as a provider. You weren't good enough to be kept on—after all, why would any employer ever let go of someone who pulled his own weight? Such people paid for themselves, and then some. So if you weren't making money for the company, you were making a loss. Which means you're a loser. And when you lose your job, it's only a matter of time before you lose your home. Then you'll have to move in with your in-laws, and your marriage will suffer such intolerable strain that you'll lose your wife and your kids, and go live with the rest of the bums at Aala Park.

These days, there were no more madding crowds of Japanese. Those that wandered about Waikiki seemed dispirited and marginalized. They just didn't have it anymore-- though I'm unsure as to what they might have had in the first place. But they had led, and we had followed. Now that the Japanese had left, there was an unshakable end of an era feeling to

the place. Those that remained included a woman I know, the daughter of the head of a once-mighty construction company in Osaka, now kept like a bird in the gilded cage of a luxury condo. She had become a pathetic, middle-aged gin-soak, with no fewer than two dozen pairs of Chanel slippers strewn about the foyer, with nothing to do, and all day to do it in.

To a certain extent, the Japanese had been replaced by wealthy Chinese who moved into gated communities like Hawaii Loa. Some had named themselves Worldster Wu, or Woodrow Chow, or Kingsley Tin, perhaps in an attempt to be seen as chummy types that you'd like to meet at a potluck. But having ensconced themselves behind high security gates with intercoms and expensive walls made from rare blue lava rock, they seemed as imperious as mandarins. The walls were everywhere, with elaborately wrought copper gates emblazoned with mantra-like Chinese characters and phoenixes riding gales of wind. Grand entryways belied the fact that you were not welcome here. Some were of etched glass, others of massive slabs of burnished koa, another an immense hammered brass door that gave way to a gilded hallway with porticoes and pillars in gilded brass and copper montage. Next to each entryway was an alarm company billboard: Sentinel Alarm, Honeywell Security, Alert Alarm, Security One, Central Security Systems. Parisian gas lamps and security lights overlooking artiste-designed driveways bathed the scene in its own peculiar, paranoid ambiance.

The basketball court at the rec center didn't seem to occupy the kids much. The net looked white and new and never touched. The tennis courts were empty. On the sign-up board, there were eleven one-hour slots for Monday-Sunday. One single, a "P. Yip", had signed up. Apart from that, there was no one. The swing set made of stressed beams of

lumber was stylish, as was the tire---a new Pirelli---hanging on a chain from a tree, but the cement picnic tables were empty. New residents might come here once or twice to try it out, for the sake of inaugurating the lifestyle. The verandahs with their sublime views of sea and sky and mountain were, to the last, unoccupied. Nor was anyone to be seen stewing in their spas, glasses of white wine in hand. Where were they? Inside arguing, arguably.

But the Chinese were shrewd and cautious sorts, and would never get mixed up in the same madness that the Japanese did. For one thing, they didn't have that kind of money, the mind-boggling sums that were spawned by the sort of epochal economic boom that Japan recently experienced. In Japan's case, it was their first brush with obscene wealth, the sort of thing that America had experienced in the Roaring Twenties. Predictably, they were profligate, and squandered their wealth like spoiled heirs. While America is wealthy, we are experienced, and have a certain dimly remembered and instinctual understanding of the consequences of speculative excess. Mindful of the lessons of business school, the big corporations have made a sure-footed and steely-eyed calculation as to their makeover of Hawaii in the corporate mold.

A great groan and hum and clank emanated from the Hilton, as gigantic yellow cranes hoisted rusty steel girders and beams. If I were a guest, I'd kill-- I'd find more peace and quiet in mid-town Manhattan. But with more than half of Hawaii's construction workers idle these days, some would say we should be grateful. The sign at the construction fence commemorated Hilton's "Commitment to the Revitalization of Waikiki" and promised us an Interactive Cultural Center, a Health and Wellness Spa, an Executive Lounge, and more. For now there was much slamming and banging, and the Waikiki Trolley, a faux San Francisco streetcar

mounted on a bus chassis, clanged and careened by. Security and traffic control cops were everywhere, orchestrating the pick-up and drop-off of hundreds of convention-goers.

I had spent the morning in thrall to the speakers at the annual meeting of PBEC--the Pacific Basin Economic Council, listening to them hold forth on the prospects for Hawaii as a prospective hub for the burgeoning Pacific Rim economies. To a man, they were confident that the recovery from the Asian economic crisis was real, and that it was here to stay. They seemed quite good at analyzing how the crisis happened, laying out their exposition of the involved Rube Goldberg-like concatenation of events that led to the debacle in Asia. But I thought they were very good also at reaching the wrong conclusions as to what lay ahead. They seemed reluctant to say anything that might spoil the party, or put them at odds with the consensus of their colleagues. For practitioners of the dismal science, the only real safety was in numbers. You could die by eating the shattered glass of the crystal ball--unless everyone else joined in and ate their portion as well, in which case you lived to predict another day. To a man, they seemed to ignore the possibility that the business cycle (remember that?) might some day rear its ugly head once again to impede or threaten the staggering momentum of the U.S. economy, to which the resurgent Asian tigers had exported their way to recovery. If that happened, it could put Hawaii back in Housekeeping.

The PBECkers were everywhere, their shoulder bags jammed full of consumer electronics slung from Oracle-branded straps that marked them as members of the high-tech fraternity. It was lunchtime, and they were on their way to Benihana's, where I thought they might be tempted by the "Farm-Fresh Hawaiian Chicken" on the menu, which sounded like it couldn't be the same miserable birds I saw flapping on their hooks at

the Nimitz Highway slaughterhouse, being drawn on a clanking chain past lines of workers wielding knives in a cacophonous whirlwind of blood and feathers. I gathered my wits at the Tapa Bar, a dimly sunned pool-side oasis surrounded by 30 stories of cityscape. A guest was smoking a Mild 7, spewing acrid chemical fumes into the hypnotic, Muzak-ed atmosphere of jungle drums and steel guitar that overlay the bleeping and hooting of the card swipes and cash registers of Check-In. Sunbathers lay still as Gila Monsters on a rock, straps undone, heads twisted, and breathing shallowly through the vinyl slats of their chaise lounges, grimly determined to bring off this requisite moment of perfect relaxation. A woman sipped an orchid-festooned concoction, kept a woozy eye out for the children shrieking and coughing up their contribution of snot and piss and spit to the pool's chlorinated witch's brew.

Every bush and tree on premises, even bananas and coconut palms, was labeled and accompanied with an ethno-botanical write-up. Its impressive credentials notwithstanding, the taro was yellowing, its spirit withering under the insult. A colony of black-footed penguins from southern Africa was fronted by a sign, in English and Japanese, that said "Please excuse my untidy appearance, we are not sick, we are moulting our old feathers and growing new ones."-- possibly for the benefit of our Japanese guests, well known for their abhorrence of the chaotic and untidy.

At a table next to the pool sat an old Japanese dowager with a hairdo becoming the hood ornament of a dirigible. At the next table was a man draped with heavy gold chains and a wristwatch that could only have been carved from a truly massive ingot, and a grossly distended stomach that would have merited a separate introduction. A young Japanese woman minced by in fluorescent pink high stiletto heels trimmed with

frilly ruffles, and managerial types strolled by in Velcro-strapped slippers, their shirts tucked into shorts like Sears models, wearing that sappy look of blow-dried, teeth-bleached sunny optimism. The PBECkers and their wives ambled past the storefronts of world-class shopping experiences like Tiffany, Brendi, Hunting World, and Bernard Hurtig—I wanted to pronounce it "BUR-nerd," in keeping with his Continental colleagues "Gay-org," "Phil-EEP," "Ro-BAIR" and "all the name brands you know and trust," as the sign overhanging the arcade assured them. But I wasn't sure that anyone really trusted them. Creatures of branding, franchising, and corporate marketing that we are, these were brands for Japanese.

On the wall alongside the walkway leading into the lobby was the Hilton storyboard, a gallery of nostalgic photos. There was Ed Sullivan, dressed like a funeral director and draped across the hood of the Buick in front of the guttering torches of the Shell Bar, a kitschy bamboo bistro with capiz shell lamps, rattan chairs, potted palms, and bands like The Four Amigos, the Catamaran Boys, and the Kingston Trio. The Terii Rua Tahitian Dancers were accompanied by barefoot Hawaiian musicians on conga drums, accordion, guitar, and some greaser gyrating in a hula skirt. Alfred Apaka's wicked wahine, wearing an enormous hibiscus and dark red lipstick, waggled her bottom naughtily at the audience. A convivial gathering was underway in the Tiare Room with Ed Kenny and Tahitian dancer, with the men in jackets and ties, the women in cocktail dresses sipping drinks in hollowed-out pineapples, and Ed's hair liberally oiled and groomed. The balcony was strung with fishnets and shells, and the stage was draped with a curtain decorated with hideous tikis and palms and hula moon. The old photograph of the scene at Duke's Beach wanted only Frankie Avalon and Annette Funicello. Outrigger canoes were beached here and there alongside striped beach umbrellas that shaded

beach bunnies as pale as cottontails. Waikiki was innocent and silly then, the bullshit piled only five stories deep or so.

At the tail end of the storyboard was Hilton's Vision for the Future: "The Hilton Lagoon will be transformed into a network of waterways and swim-thru reefs will transform it into an unforgettable interactive underwater experience. Groups of up to 6 participants will be submerged 18" and gently guided by a self-propelled towing device called the Dolphinaire, while viewing 20,000 tropical fish in a replicated tropical coral reef environment, and gain an understanding of Hawaii's fragile marine environment. Dolphinaire will filter air to participants and allow natural breathing underwater while also relaying multi-lingual nature lectures." I doffed my hat to whatever corporate madman dreamed this one up-- it sounded like great fun and value added to the Hawaiian holiday experience. "Improved landscaping and water features including waterfalls, palms, and evening lighting will enhance the Hawaiian ambiance, with a greatly improved recreational area for visitors and residents alike." Where would we residents park, and what would it cost us? The Hilton Garage charged $3 a half-hour or fraction thereof. "Kalia Tower will offer state of the art guest rooms with on-demand video entertainment and the technology to meet the needs of travelers; a world class indoor/outdoor spa and wellness center featuring massage and therapy techniques from around the world, and an enhanced pedestrian experience depicting Hawaii's indigenous flora and fauna." Would it all be labeled? I certainly hoped so.

Here then, was the "disconnect" that had so disconcerted me on the mainland, the sort of thing that turned virtually anything of historic or lifestyle interest into a theme park or corporate cash cow of some kind. Nothing was sacred, and nothing was safe.

I couldn't decide which vision was more likely to prevail here: PBEC's or Hilton's. The latter offered a more or less sure bet for jobs and continued "prosperity;" the former was up against a deeply entrenched plantation mentality that might seriously impede our participation as a player, much less a leader, in the global economy. Some would say that people here were childlike, maddeningly manini-minded: "Yeah, but what if it doesn't work?" "Shucks, could be worse, yeah?" "The nail that sticks up gets hammered down." But then the Guv reassures us, flashing us the shaka sign in his campaign ads that said "Come home to Ben and Mazie."

The role of good governance in shaping Hawaii's future is perhaps premature, for we have only just emerged from feudalism. For a long time we labored under the oppression of our liege lord and biggest landowner, the Bishop Estate. It wasn't only that they oppressed us with their greed, squeezing property owners far and wide for big money that might have been expended for more constructive purposes. They ashamed us and demoralized us with their antics: squandering untold millions on self-dealing, and on shibai methane deals, mainland real estate grabs, art collections, fad diet counselors, and most of all, their six- and then seven-digit salaries—everything, it seemed, before the education of Hawaiian children that was mandated by the will of the estate they served. That they connived to move their shady dealings to the sanctuary of a mainland Indian reservation, to avoid the scrutiny of the Internal Revenue Service, confirmed to us that the well being of their charges here was a priority as distant as the Oregon outback. Their arrogance had become so egregious that not even the apprehension for public lewdness of one of the trustees in a hotel men's room-- and the subsequent suicide of his companion in the escapade-- surprised us

overly. Giving the bum's rush to these blallahs, and unwinding the octopus' tentacles from around our throat, is a hopeful new beginning.

But no sooner is Hawaii rid of one bogeyman than we are confronted with the next. It's been that way since Captain Cook, then the British and the French, missionaries and microbes, High Chief Keeaumoku and the sandalwood slavers, the bitter acrimony of annexation, Pearl Harbor, and the Japanese redux. I could only wonder about Hilton's Vision of the Future, with its automated, audio-animatronic lagoon, replicated reefs, labeled nature walks, and interactive cultural encounters, and hope that it was not a portent of *really* big-time booshwah for the Aloha State.

A half-hour from Waikiki, and a world away, is Waimanalo. I went to see my old friend Alani, who lived in his van and combed the beach for treasures like the barracuda jaw that he opened and shut by pushing and pulling on the proper bone. Standing around on the construction site of some millionaire's tacky beach-front manse, we ate pork chops simmered with beans and stewed tomatoes in a foil basket in a kettle drum filled with coals, grasping the meat with slit-open sourdough rolls and slices of sweet onion. We passed around a pint of cheap bourbon, its tang of sour mash blending with the salt air and scent of charcoal fires that played in sandy yards everywhere that evening in Waimanalo.

We sat on the beach and talked by the light of an old kerosene lantern, its casing battered and its glass cracked and smudged from smoke. It was simple and dependable---nothing much more than a wick, a tank to store the oil in, and a glass casing to shield the wick from the wind. It didn't give off as much light as the white gas lanterns, and cast its yellow glow on the beach, soft as moonlight. Several fishing poles were stuck in the sand, their lines fed out into the bay where orange menpachi and palani

came and went. It was that time of night when the water, normally alive with the clicking and popping of shrimps, was quiet. The soft crunching of the parrotfish as their sharp teeth gnawed crushed coral into sand had ceased, and the corals pumped themselves up and stretched out their finger-like tentacles to bag drifting clouds of plankton. The big predators---the ulua, snappers, and reef sharks---had come out on evening patrol. Ulua were cunning, thuggish fish, hovering behind the whitewater curtain of breaking surf against a twilight backdrop that made them invisible to their prey.

Hard to catch, those buggahs, but so good---broiled over charcoal, with salt and pepper, shoyu and miso, chili pepper, fresh chopped ginger, and maybe some chopped celery, tomato and onions. Way better than canned tuna at buck eighty-nine for a small can. Even potatoes at dollar thirty-nine a pound were expensive, and poi had become hard to find at any price. These days, Hawaiians seldom ate any of the foods that had sustained their race for thousands for years. Poi, if you could find it, came in little eight-ounce bags, at three bucks a bag, hardly enough for a taste, nothing like the several pounds a day people used to eat in the old days. The fish was usually canned salmon or tuna or mackerel. You could hardly catch fish any more, and it was hard work standing around forever to catch just one manini.

For the Hawaiians of Makapuu, the mills of justice ground away in agonizing slow motion. Governor John Waihee, who had been under frequent attack for betraying his promises to the Hawaiian people, had been reluctant to make an issue out of the occupation of Makapuu. He himself was Hawaiian, an attorney who had swept into office on the wings of a bogus platform trumpeting the native son who would at last turn night into day for his beleaguered race.

Bumpy's mind had swam with excitement over the prospect of building a Nation of Hawai'i from land that would be forever theirs. Someday there would be communities like it throughout the islands, refuges for a people long marginalized and despairing, cut off from the wellsprings of their own heritage, and largely without prospects for living a fulfilling life in the white man's world. The communities would thrive, people would live ohana-style and grow taro and make salt and catch fish and be healthy, their days occupied by honest labor amongst the taro, their nights filled with song. They would show the world that there was better way to live. They would love the land, take pride and satisfaction from caring for it, and let it provide for them. On behalf of the Nation of Hawai'i, Bumpy had accepted the government's offer of land.

At the settlement, a milky cloud of smoke rose from a small fire of haole koa that had been cut with chain saws. Alongside the long tent that served as a meeting hall and dining room, someone had nailed up a coop for turkey chicks. Some of the people lived in tents, others in small wooden shacks. Nearby, some men were engaged in framing wood houses with donated or salvaged lumber.

Everywhere there were plots for growing vegetables. There was a sizable and flourishing patch of dryland taro, with dozens of plants with leaves just big enough for laulau. A thin growth of fine pale green grass covered the ground in front of the kitchen, where they had seeded the area to keep dust from blowing into the food. One man arrived with a large package of pastries. Another man, back from looking for trails to pick lilikoi, offered beer from a six-pack. The central kitchen was covered by a coated canvas tarp which stretched over rows of tables, where there was a community lunch and dinner every day, using food that they grew, or

bought, or that people donated. People took turns cooking. They hooked up propane stoves and a microwave oven to cook their meals. An old TVn 0 sat in the center of the kitchen area, and several residents sat staring vacantly at a daytime talk show, while a boom box played rock music.

Sometimes everyone showed up for dinner, sometimes almost nobody came. It depended on how good the cooks were. They came when the food was good---beef stew, hamburger curry, or maybe laulau or chicken long rice, but that wasn't fair, because they didn't come when there was just wieners, that kind that was dyed red, that they boiled up in a big pot and wrapped in SuperSoft white bread, dribbling cigarette ash onto the hot dogs. Food was wasted and thrown out and people's feelings got hurt.

Nobody ate much taro, even though it was beginning to grow abundantly. They bought groceries from the store---cans of Spam and bags of rice, cases of beer and cartons of Kools, and big plastic liter bottles of Pepsi and Mountain Dew. Wrappings from Big Macs and KFC boxes, empty beer cans, and plate lunch boxes from Bud's Market were found in the brush and along the roadside. Empty bottles of cheap wine, too.

One problem was, there just wasn't any money to make it happen. Everything was all the same clapboard and plywood and blue tarp jerry-built stuff. The power came from a generator that didn't have gasoline half the time, and the rainwater that collected in plastic-lined catchments bred millions of mosquitoes. To some it was like they just never grasped that they were out here in the bushes and building a new community and a whole new way of life. They seemed to expect that life would go on just like it had anywhere else. It was depressing to think that some people had just transplanted that whole welfare way of life into the bush under

the stars and under these beautiful mountains. Like to hell with helping each other out with whatever they could do---plant taro, weed the sweet potato mounds, rebuild the old water ditches, clear out the old taro patches, cut back the brush. For some, all they thought about was no need for pay rent if come out here.

Bumpy had tried to impress his followers with the fact that everyone here was under intense scrutiny, that they had a point to prove. This was the all-important first step toward rebuilding the Nation of Hawai'i, and the eyes of the world were upon them. It was important to do the job right, to show the world how Hawaiians should live, how they once did live, and could live. He got on everyone's case, telling them that it was bad for them to eat this, to drink that or snort this, to have fun even. At first most were in agreement—sort of, but later it was a different story. There were those who worked hard to clear the old ditches and make the taro lo'i. And there were at least as many that didn't want to work, just lazy and hung over and stoned and who just wanted to sleep until they were good and ready to get up. They didn't contribute, just wanted to sponge off those who had income from jobs or welfare.

There were incidents of theft. They pilfered food, even ripping up the taro plants and taking them to sell them at the farmers' open market. It started out small, people picking mangoes and lychee off trees without asking, even though the law said you could if the fruit hung over the property line. Still, it was nice to at least ask. Then some people started to steal stuff that was lying around in people's garages in the neighborhood---tools and cases of soda or motor oil. Some of the people who lived at the Nation were homeless, people who had lost their homes because they couldn't hold down a job, maybe because they drank too much or were always hopped up on drugs. Some were a bit pupule in the

head, and they acted belligerently and picked fights and got drunk and raised a big noise when they came back in the middle of the night, racing their engines, squealing their tires, shouting and brawling. It was an awkward fit, as with any homecoming for someone who has been away for a very long time in a strange land far, far away.

My in-law Izzy comes out here on the reef at low tide, at first light. The swells move lazily up, bound up against the boulders by the shore, slop around in a soup of foam and scum that feeds the seaweed that clings to the rocks, then moves back out again to collide with incoming swells. The early morning sunlight paints the ocean in various shades of green: the mossy green of coral heads, the gold-green of sand among the boulders, the aqua green of the water. There are whitish green rocks in the sea, pink rocks, red rocks.

Izzy had the squid eye, knew how to push around the look-box along the reef looking for squid. He would walk slow, then stop, and stand still as he peered through his glass look-box. Then he moved ahead again, real slow, pushing the floating look-box along the surface in front of him.

The one with squid eye had to know the reef intimately---its holes, its colors, everything. Whenever he noticed anything out of place---a loose pile of stones, stones of a different color suddenly in the wrong place, maybe a slight discoloration in the ocean bottom, or sometimes the rocks looked like they had been scattered or overturned, their whitish color giving them away-- it was because octopus were very fussy and didn't like things being out of place. One in particular would cloud the reef with his ink while he arranged the rocks around his burrow to his satisfaction, and when the ink cleared, the rocks were back to the way he wanted them. Each to his own. Squid eye was not something that could be

explained. You couldn't show someone something that couldn't be seen. You either had the eye or you didn't, and you might never get it for that matter.

Some mornings he and his friends came for squid, some mornings they came for opelu. Izzy went out towards the big coral heads, where there was plenty opelu. He drew his knife from the sheath, and tapped out a slow, steady drum roll on the side of the boat with the butt end of his knife. He looked out over the still water, and sure enough, after a few moments there was Superstar. He knew him from the unique pattern of black stripes on his tail. He threw him some opelu. Superstar moved in, aligned himself with the prow of the canoe, and lazily swam along in front. He moved with the canoe, turning this way and that.

He looked overboard with his old glass look-box. When he saw opelu, he let some bait overboard, a mash of roast pumpkin that created an aroma that slowly drifted through the water. Opelu had a keen appetite for it, and came together quickly into a tight, swarming mass beneath the boat. It was the presence of the barracuda, too, that drew the opelu, since they knew that where there was a barracuda there were bits and pieces of fish that remained from its meals. And the opelu trusted the barracuda to leave them alone. For some reason, they were not to its taste, and the barracuda was only too happy to betray them into the hands of his friend Izzy.

As the pumpkin mash slowly drifted through the water, he let down a funnel-shaped bag, which opened up and settled down in the sea like a large floating jellyfish. The opelu swarmed through the cloud of bait, and as Superstar went this way and that, the opelu followed him across the open net, and as they neared the center of the net, Izzy threw down

another handful of pumpkin. When it seemed that the opelu had gathered where he wanted them, he gave the net a sharp tug upwards. Frightened, the opelu dived downwards toward the bottom of the net. He threw a slice of opelu off to one side, and Superstar went for it. When the barracuda was out of harm's way, he drew up the net, bringing in it sometimes hundreds of fish. He and that fish went from one school to the next, all around.

That was one smart fish. But it didn't matter how smart. What did matter was respect. Hawaiians knew that. You respected the fish for its mastery of the ocean, better than anyone could ever hope to. You understood limu, since it was the best food for the fish and things, and because it made the ocean right in so many ways. You respected things because a much greater intelligence than yours saw fit to make them that way, and if want to take, you gotta give back love and respect. Then they don't mind giving to you.