THE FALLING TIDE

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1,000 Feet Above Sea Level

We laughed, stumbling as we ran
Like children up the trail littered
With knots of tangled root
And fallen leaves, our voices lost
Within the guava and eucalyptus.

When we reached the summit, breathing hard,
We let the wind press against our faces
And looked to the wooded valley below.
“What are you thinking?” she asked
Me, in that hushed, calming voice.

I thought of the wind.
The trees.
And how their blended sound
was like the ocean.

The muddied waters of Kahana Bay
in the still of a summer morning,
brushing the limu-covered rocks along
the shore, sighing in a steady rhythm.

You were there too, of course,
with your calloused hands
and knowledge of fishing knots and tides.
You sat on the same worn rock every
weekend, waiting for a fish to pass.

In the waning months you stopped fishing,
when you were too weak
to carry a tackle box or cooler,
but still you talked of returning.

I felt her staring.
What are you thinking.

“Nothing” I told her, smiling hard.
Water.
Then, laughing, I grabbed her hand,
Calluses.
Pulling her with me down the opposite trail,
Waning.
Though neither of us knew the way.
Sheet Lightning, Pauoa

Deep valley lightning scatters
the night, but her slow breathing
fills the room. I sit alone in the waiting
silence, a tissue balled in my fist. Below
the bed lie the spent clothes of our
lovemaking, like bodies curled to preserve
the heat. When will the dogs wake
and howl at the flashing sky, the invisible
moon smothered by green, swollen clouds?
When will the dead rise and walk the hungry
earth, their footsteps heralding the sad
choir of rain?
The Smell of Rain

Mornings like this I feel there’s nothing left to share. Last night’s broken words were like a sudden winter downpour the ground has refused to absorb, and yet you’re lying here asleep, as if nothing’s happened outside the ordinary spin of our lives.

Your hair’s spilled madly halfway onto the pillow, but I can tell from your easy breath that for once you’re not dreaming of sinking boats, shattered glass, or dogs that chase you blindly into the streets.

I realize I’d give anything now to hold your open hands and tell you, yes, everything will work out and that, no, there’s absolutely nothing we need to fear.

An early wind leans into the curtains. And though I’m still waiting for the sun to break the bay’s edge, I can already see clouds gathering above the mountains like ships returning to their slow harbors, the smell of coming rain almost unbearable.
The day Alan Mau fell into the ocean, he had awakened at 5:00 a.m., brushed his teeth, and strapped a large fishing pole and a smaller one to the bed of his pickup. He packed two reels, a pair of tabis, hooks, lures, line, lead, and stuffed them into a large, aluminum-framed backpack. Then he’d made himself a fried egg sandwich with lots of mayo.

The name of Alan’s fishing spot was “Podogee’s.” Of course, he’d fished all the Hanauma Bay spots before: Suicide Point, Ratchet Sounds, Futaguchi’s, and Low Point. But he loved Podogee’s most of all. It was uncrowded, remote, a little dangerous. An old man he once met at Low Point told him that Podogee’s got its name because of the steep hiking trail snaking down the side of a cliff and the hazardous fishing conditions once you got to the bottom. *I tell you, boy,* the old man had intoned, demonstratively waving a gnarled, salt-worn finger for emphasis, *anyone who dumb enough fo’ fish ovah dea haff to be paht Podogee. Trust me, I know.* Alan had nodded solemnly but had already silently made plans to check out the place. And he’d fished those living, volatile waters ever since—the old man’s warning be damned.

Located on the west side of the cliffs hedging Hanauma Bay, Podogee’s fronted waters more purple than blue—well over a hundred feet deep—and home to a variety of prized fish: nabeta, weke ‘ula, uku, and white ulua. The off-roading trails leading to the fishing spots were restricted, accessible only to those who had a key for the iron cattle gate at the base of Hanauma Bay. Normally, only privileged State researchers had such a key, but Alan knew someone with access and had pleaded with the man until he’d made a duplicate key.
When Alan fell into the ocean, his first thought was how warm the water felt. It was an ugly, overcast day, the rain coming and going in sudden bursts. He’d thought the water would be shockingly cold but it wasn’t. Warmer than the outside air, it had almost felt comforting.

So, really, there was nothing to worry about, Alan figured, except that for the moment he was in the water instead of on land, where he should have been. There were witnesses on shore—his friends—and they were all experienced fishermen, capable, quick-thinking. They would help him get back onto the rocky coastline. And Alan was a good swimmer—the fastest on his high school swim team when he’d graduated less than four years ago.

Treading water not more than twenty yards from shore, Alan’s sun-browned arms and legs moved synchronously, the muscles dully remembering functions he had once trained them for. Alan looked to shore, to the spot where he’d stood before he’d been swept in by a freak wave. Groundswells, his friend Matt DeMello called them. Waves coming straight in from the ocean with no shallow barrier reefs to slow them. “So dey jack up and pound da shoah wit’out wahnning,” Matt had said, slapping his hands together. “Poom! Pilau stuff.”

Alan had always considered Matt the most reliable thinker of his friends, an A-student in high school who had chosen to work for his father’s moving company rather than go to college. Matt had a quick mind, made sound decisions, and was a notorious practical joker. It was somewhat of a surprise then, when Alan saw Matt staring at him from the rocks, motionless, eyes large and white, mouth a round dark hole.
“Chrow me a rope! Someting!” Alan yelled into the wind, surprised by the alarm in his voice. Panicking burns energy, he chided himself; panicking kills. He knew to calm himself, to tread water and wait for help rather than swim against the wave currents swirling near the jagged rocks.

Knocked over by a wave. It was hard to believe. These kinds of things never happened to him. They happened to children, to smiling, slack-jawed tourists edging too close to the water hoping to glimpse a turtle or dolphin or half-naked native girl. It was almost funny, he thought, considering how careful he’d always been while fishing. The groundswell had approached in secrecy, the calm sea rising slowly in the distance—rising as it got closer and closer, until it reared and heaved a six-foot wall of foam onto the narrow ledge where Alan had stood. He did not have time to escape the impact. He remembered the rumble of surf, then a deep boom like thunder just before the wave slammed into the cliff. He remembered the shock of being slammed in his chest, and the unreality of it all, because these things never happened to him. When the wave rebounded from hitting the cliff, it had gathered momentum, and exploded over him a second time as he flailed powerlessly, his tabis scratching and sliding against the ground, trying to find purchase. In the half-seconds just before his eyes closed as he hit the water, he saw his beloved whipping pole spinning brightly above him, catching the sun and glittering like a marching baton on its way down into the sea.

Alan knew it was important to stay as close to the cliff as he could without being hurtled against the rocks, knocked unconscious, and slipping lifeless down to the black depths.
Facing the cliff, he heard the surf hissing behind him, felt his body rising and being pushed toward the waiting rocks. He forced himself to dive under the wave just as it passed over him. When he surfaced, he coughed up seawater and watched the rolling swell slam into Podogee’s with a heavy boom. His friends disappeared behind a curtain of spray.

He would not get back on his own, he realized.

Through his blurred vision, he saw someone on the cliff handling a length of bright yellow rope. Dark thin arms, a dark thin body—Kawika. Kawika’s hands worked furiously at the rope trying, apparently, to untangle it.

"Jus ehrow um!" Alan yelled. "Ovah here!"

Kawika stopped, gathered the rope into his hands and flung it over the side of the cliff. The thick rope nest flew out in Alan’s direction, uncoiling itself in the air with a sudden, inexplicable grace. Alan thought it was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen.

"T’ank you, God," he whispered, his arms and legs working harder now, strangely unaffected by the fatigue that should be overtaking his body. He knew he would not miss the life-saving cord—could not miss it. Otherwise he’d be in for a long swim.

When the bundled rope stopped uncoiling and jerked to a halt in mid-flight, Alan felt a lump rise in his throat. He watched the rope mass snap away from him, the tangles and knots clenching like yellow, muscled fingers. All that rope, all that graceful momentum plummeted like dead weight. Alan’s muscles flared with a renewed sense of fatigue.

The rope had fallen short of him by twenty or more yards. He swam toward the end of the rope, but stopped as a wave lifted him toward the cliff face. The wave carried
the floating coils and pitched them onto the rocks. Polypropylene rope, Alan knew, wrapped in and around the jagged teeth of the shoreline, would never be freed. He knew this because he had bought the rope himself for its strength and grip. When he saw Kawika and Harry yanking the line from above and heard them shouting and swearing, a thought he did not want to have arose in him.

"Chrow me one float, you guys!"

Alan's arms and legs were throbbing now. Soon his muscles would be taxed beyond their limits, lactic acid would flood his tissues, and the cramping would begin. He tried floating on his back to conserve energy. When he spread his arms out to his sides and let his legs rise to the water's surface, he saw the thin shapes of birds glide overhead just as a swell washed over his body and the ocean flooded his mouth. He sputtered once, and tried to relax again, let his body's natural buoyancy keep him afloat. Another wave passed and he swallowed more seawater. He thought perhaps there was no use in trying to float.

"Eh, try swim to us, Alan!" It was Harry's voice—useful for telling jokes but not for giving advice.

"No can—too rough!" Alan called, and fought down the peculiar urge to laugh. When there was no response, he tried again: "Chrow me one float!"

He felt a wave approach from behind, pulling him backwards, the awful pulling before it crashed over him. He looked behind and saw a groundswell—a large one—raising the dark water. He dove deep down, away from the impact, and felt a tabi sucked from his left foot as the wave passed above. Underwater, he could hear the explosion of the surf as if the coastline itself shook and the water vibrated in deferent response.
Alan knew he needed to get away from the waves and the rocks or he’d be ground into palu—food for the swarming nemues and hages that nipped hungrily at any slow-moving creature beneath the sea. He backpedaled with the wave’s backwash until he saw he was more than fifty yards away from shore, his friends’ silhouettes dimming despite the overhead sun. His churning legs generated a slow heat that spread to his arms, shoulders, and chest. He tore off the velcro bindings of his remaining tabi and kicked it from his foot. Fifty dollars claimed by the sea. Three hundred for the rod and reel he last saw spinning in the blue air. Something inside of Alan’s broken, tired heart wept.

 Briefly, he wondered why he was here at all, why he didn’t have better things to do today—why he should have had better things to do. His anger flared: Gina, his girlfriend, the night before, her voice caressing him over the phone, “Let’s do something tomorrow. A picnic, maybe, or a drive to the North Shore.” But no. That night he was irritated with her—irritated with her neediness, her lack of independence. From day one she had always wanted to be near him, to spend time with him, and she wished aloud he would somehow feel the same. In their moments together she could not keep her hands from him, as if she required constant physical contact.

 She could be so selfish, the way she wanted all of his time. And he told her what he thought of it. The silence on the other end the of the phone line was broken by her quiet sniffing. His reaction was an odd mixture of puzzlement, irritation, and guilt. He tried to apologize. It wasn’t, he told her, as if they wouldn’t ever spend time together—just not on Saturday, was all. Sunday, he reasoned, was a day more suited for relaxing, anyway. She had been so easily comforted by his cooing promises that a wave of guilt
washed through his chest because he knew that, if the fishing was good, he certainly did not intend to give up another day.

These memories fled his mind when the first cramp hit. There was no pain at first, more a kind of confusion when his left leg refused to straighten. Then the pain struck him, and he shot his arms out to his sides and waved them like a cartoon bird brought down by gunfire. His one good leg continued to kick awkwardly, and his head began to sink beneath the water’s surface. He saw the outline of the jagged coast biting into the sky before the world blurred.

When Alan first fell in, he remembered the warmth of the water. Now, it was cold and dark, and it pressed in all around him. Ahead of him, the sea was a gray-green murk held up by a bottomless blue void. It was impossible to locate exactly where one color ended and another began.

As a child, Alan had been afraid of deep water. He’d refused to step foot on his grandfather’s small flat-bottom because it seemed like the ocean could, at any moment, wash into the tiny boat and pull them both down. But that was years ago, and since then, Alan had come to love deep water because it held the biggest fish. Deep water covered the deepest secrets—mysteries that both frightened and thrilled him. And besides, fishing from shore, solid rock pressing into the soles of his feet, offered little danger.

Solid rock. Land. Alan shuddered and flapped powerfully with his arms. He saw a white storm of bubbles and the piercing glow he knew to be the surface, and as he broke through it, he sucked in a huge gulp of air. Stiff winds whipped the water around him and stung his eyes.
He found he could again straighten his leg and kick with it, though his hamstring throbbed with the memory of pain, so he kicked smoothly, gently, to avoid more cramping. He considered swimming back to shore, but knew that he’d never make it; he could barely keep himself afloat.

He thought that to conserve energy, he would rid himself of his large, baggy shirt that opened up in the water like a parachute. He could feel the shirt’s fabric, fattened with water, grip his skin and force his arms to work harder. His elbows caught in the sleeves, and the shirt pulled at his neck, wrapped itself around odd places on his body, stole small but precious amounts of air from his lungs.

Alan grabbed the bottom of his shirt and pulled it hard over his head. It clung to his neck stubbornly, like a child refusing to let go of a parent’s hand. He wrestled with it, pulled at it, and realized he was running out of air though it had not occurred to him until now that he was underwater. He lunged for the surface but could not tell which way was up. He thrashed with the shirt again, tugging wildly, hearing bubbles snap in his ears, but could not find a grip.

He sensed panic rising and calmed himself, bunched some shirt in his hands and pulled swiftly. The shirt slipped from his head, and he stroked for the light. When he broke the surface, he blew hot air from his lungs and inhaled deeply. Briefly, he stuck his head underwater and watched his shirt drift peacefully below him like a slow, white cloud.

He felt naked and cold now, though the dull fire in his arms and legs had not subsided. But he felt lighter, too—felt the water rush across his bare skin, and he sensed
the huge void between his body and the floor of the ocean as he floated high above, as if he were flying.

He saw something glint from shore, but could not see what it was because he was blinded by the sun’s reflection off the water. Until now, he had not even realized the sun was out and blazing overhead. More flashes—and not the sun’s rays—came from the coastline where he guessed his friends to be. He watched as Matt’s lumbering form appeared to crouch on the rocks, two other forms huddling around him. Kawika’s silhouette gestured wildly, while the shorter one of Harry stood to the side. Alan was hopeful.

He was even more hopeful when Matt hurled an object in his direction. Spinning end over end, it smacked the water audibly, and Alan knew that it was a surfboard. The surfboard that had been strapped for years to the top of Matt’s rust-eaten Bronco.

Alan and his friends often made fun of the battered, discolored roof ornament. “Ho, Matt,” Harry had laughed, amusing himself tremendously, “you no shame surf dat sorry ting?” But Matt had never taken offense to the teasing, “I pau surf um. I going save um fo’ my kids—show dem how fo’ surf.” He smiled then, and said, “Das my kids’ Podogee heirloom.”

And now, despite the teasing, the laughter, Alan started to swim for the aged board that bounced and bucked in the whitewash near Hanauma’s cliffs.

He was keenly aware of his body, his tired arms and legs, and knew it could not be far to the board: less than a hundred yards. Not very far. He would swim to it, and if, by some horrible miscalculation, he could not find it, he would swim the rest of the way to shore and take his chances with the waves and rocks.
Reach out with your arms. Pull your body forward. Turn into the stroke. Breathe. Repeat. It was not difficult.

Alan’s body burned with the effort, but he knew he could not stop. He looked up, peered into the distance for the white shape that would be bobbing and dancing atop the water. He saw it and adjusted his course a little to the right. It was not so far away.

Four years ago, he’d gotten a swimming scholarship to a small college in northern California but hadn’t taken it—too far from home, his friends, and his family. He remembered his parents’ disappointment, the way his mother’s eyes widened and her smile tightened, his father’s sobered face and glazed eyes. Their boy—their only child—had gotten a free ride to school but never accepted it.

Alan had not wanted to swim then. He had not wanted to go to a school three thousand miles from home, had not known what he wanted. Now, he lived at home, community college dropped long ago and replaced with a part-time job stocking liquor in a grocery store. There was so much time for him to do whatever he wanted, and yet here he was, swimming again.

He wanted to laugh at his current situation mid-stroke, but he knew the impulse was madness. He’d have lots of time later for laughing. He looked up. Maybe fifty yards away, maybe thirty—it was difficult to tell. In his swim meets, distance had been measured in perfectly aligned lanes. He’d chosen poolside objects and made it his goal to reach: a line along the wall of the pool, a particular section of the bleachers, a person wearing a brightly colored shirt. It was different now, swimming in the ocean—where distance has no meaning, and there is no way to measure anything.

There was only the board, which he must reach. He looked up: it was clearly visible in the surf. He knew he would reach it. He knew he would climb atop its solid, buoyant surface, knew he would rest his tired arms and legs.

*Reach. Pull.*

When his hand slapped something hard, he knew he had reached it. He shot up from the water and clutched the board with both hands like it was a trophy-sized fish he’d fought and now could not believe he’d landed it. He flipped the board over and laid his arms across the deck, letting his body hang from the side. When he tried to pull himself onto the board, every muscle fiber in his body burned with the effort and sent pain signals shooting to his skull. He managed to slide awkwardly onto the board, but was only dimly aware of the sun-cracked deck and the chipped resin that curled like sharp fish scales digging into his chest and belly, carving thin red lines into his skin. But he was on the board, and it was all that mattered, he thought, even as a wave of nausea washed through him, and he vomited and tasted the acid burn at the back of his throat. He wanted to laugh or cry but did not have the strength for either, and so he closed his eyes and let darkness take him.

He awoke, sputtering and coughing seawater from his lungs. He didn’t know how long he’d been out, but it couldn’t have been for very long. Bile surged in his throat, but he held it in check, refusing to vomit again. A thick strand of saliva swung from his lips but he did not wipe it away.

Alan looked to shore. Podogee’s was gone—no, it was down the coast behind him, maybe three hundred yards or so, and there was no sign of his friends. No one
followed him from shore. He hugged the surfboard beneath him and felt the chipped deck scrape his cheek, and was suddenly aware of the cuts throbbing on his chest, belly, and arms.

A swell rolled past him, rocking the board as he fought to keep his balance. He watched the wave strike the coastline and bloom into a white flower. Its rumble should have been louder. He figured the tide must have shifted and pulled him out to deeper water. He’d heard stories of the tide-current that rushed alongside the Hanauma Bay cliffs. Fishermen called it the “Moloka‘i Express”: a strong current that spilled into the larger Ka‘iwi Channel, like an onramp to a super freeway. The channel was rough and ill tempered, and was frequented by tiger sharks and other nasty animals.

Alan watched the moving coastline. The current seemed to be picking up speed, carrying him past other Hanauma Bay fishing spots. Podogee’s was out of sight now, as was Low Point and Ratchet Sounds. He looked ahead and saw Futaguchi’s approaching quickly. He knew he would pass that spot in a couple of minutes, and then he would reach the end of the rocky coastline—a spot called Suicide Point.

His mind was fully awake now as he recalled what the point looked like: how high it rose above the water’s rough edge, a stone knife thrust into the sea. Alan and his friends had caught a few ulua there in the days before they’d claimed Podogee’s as their own. When they had brought up huge fish that were floating on their sides from exhaustion, they waited for a wave so the fish could rise with the ocean. A well-placed pole gaff and a quick jerk secured the fish, and they easily hoisted it up, a shining, silver-fleshed trophy.
He thought it just might be possible to swim to the point, ride a swell like a hooked fish, and let the wave lift him onto the rocks. He would climb up and never let go. He could picture it: his hands and feet pushing and pulling in unison.

Up ahead, Suicide Point materialized from the haze of salt spray in the air, a dark beacon as ancient and solid and real as anything on dry land. It would not be so difficult. He gauged his distance to the point: less than a hundred yards and closing. He pushed his body to the center of the board, tested his balance, and started to paddle.

A sharp pain shot through his arms and shoulders but he did not stop. He made a straight line for the cliffs in front of him, hoping the current would sweep him closer to the point. Once near, he would ditch the board and swim hard for the rocks.

The pain in his muscles was unbearable, but he knew to block it out, let his mind wander. He never felt so alone. Why hadn’t he gone to school on the mainland? Why didn’t he treat Gina better? He vowed to make changes. He would change for his family, for Gina, for himself. He would better his life—he would still have time. The point loomed ahead. It was less than fifty yards away. As he paddled, he was surprised to hear his breath rasping with each stroke.

At less than twenty yards away, his paddling was more splashing, more noise, than actual progress. He knew it was time to ditch the board and ride a swell onto the rocks. If he timed it right, he wouldn’t need to swim much, just let his body float. He looked back and saw the ocean rise. A big swell. It was important to time it perfectly.

Seabirds whined overhead as the swell rolled toward him. It was important to remain calm. He saw sunlight glint off the face of the coming wave. He couldn’t believe its colors, like a blue jewel flecked with gold and silver. Then the swell was upon him,
and he slid off the board, wincing as the cuts on his belly and chest reopened. He felt the swell’s pull and swam for the rocks, knowing the wave would build and flare behind him.

*Reach-pull-turn-breathe.*

He could not go back for the board now. He had only enough energy to swim to shore; he wasn’t even sure if he’d be able to climb the rocks.

*Reach-pull-turn.*

Alan felt his body rise with the wave, felt his spirits lift with it. He was close enough to shore, that he could see details on the rocks. Black, spiderlike a’ama crabs—frightened by Alan’s sudden appearance—fled in a unified scuttling mass across the dark face of the cliffs. Jagged craters filled its sides. Water dripped from the crags like rain, while the ocean hissed and climbed the rocks.

*Reach. Pull.*

And all at once Alan realized he hurtled forward too quickly, too forcefully, but could do nothing now and so he slammed into the rocks and scrambled blindly up the side of the cliff, his eyes blurring with seawater and tears. He felt the hot pulse of blood spill from cuts on his head. He remembered hearing the knock of bone as he collided with the rocks—the same rocks he’d fished on for so many years, the rocks he’d walked upon so confidently before, so unafraid.

*Reach.*

The ocean stopped rising around Alan and then fell away, leaving him clinging to the cliff. He saw his arms shake with the effort of holding on, but he could not feel them. He saw blood and seawater merge and slick down his arms. He reached above, wedged
his fingers into a crevice, and pulled his body up, crying out in pain. He felt like laughing but did not know why. He reached up again and felt for another crack or handhold.

Then he heard the rumble of surf, just before another wave slammed him into the cliff. His arms and legs went slack, and he fell.

When Alan fell into the water for the second time, he did not notice how warm it was. He did not feel the smack as he hit the water. He did not hear the splash. It was like the dreams he’d had, of falling down to the earth and watching the ground rush up to meet him. Except this time, unlike his dreams, he did not wake before he hit.

He kicked for the surface, stretching up to the light because he knew he needed to climb ashore as quickly as possible. When he broke the skin of the water, he took in air, and nearly choked when he saw the point receding from him. He was being pulled by an undertow, and was more than twenty yards from shore and being carried farther away. He tried to swim but quickly realized it was no use. Frantically, he looked for the surfboard, turning in every direction, but he could not find it, as he knew, somehow, he would not.

Alan calmed himself. He watched the point move away almost serenely. He felt the warm burn in his muscles, and slowed his treading to a smoother pace. He looked up and saw the sun shining splendidly in the now-cloudless sky. Birds floated overhead, short silhouette dashes against the pale blue background.

The pain in his arms and legs didn’t seem so bad now. It wasn’t so bad as long as he didn’t fight the current. He would let himself float. He wondered if his friends had called for help by now. He wondered where they were. He would tread water until help
arrived: surely, he would be rescued. His parents would not lose their only child. Gina would not lose him. He would hold on for them.

As the current swept him out to sea, he could see the inner rim of Hanauma Bay. He saw the winding crease of the highway and the parking lot and the multicolored dots which must be cars. He would hold on until help arrived. A gray seabird squawked above, startling him. It hovered and watched him without flapping its sharp wings. Alan locked eyes with it. Black eyes. He laughed at the bird, the breath leaving his lungs like coughing. Yes, he thought. He would hold on until help arrived. He would never die.
Late March.
The fishing bells are silent.
Waiting for high tide, we watch
the sun sink behind the black mountains.
In the cold morning rain
a child holds her mother's hand
and opens her mouth to the sky.
When at first you talked of the ranch overlooking Pearl City, I'd pictured something out of a TV western, except cooler and greener: paniolas lazing around a boot-scuffed porch, sending songs into the bright afternoon sky. I hadn’t expected instead, the pitiful bleating of goats and the smell of old horses clinging to the corral’s withered wooden walls.

It was, by the way, the sun’s heat and those incessant billygoat wails that drove us to the mountains after lunch. We followed the weeds to the top of the ridge and sat under the stretching branches of a pōhā tree while she told me how, once, she’d picked up one of the soft fruits and rolled it down a trail until the trees ate it up.

You left us alone together for the first time. Me, the one intimidated by this four-year-old’s presence, her ignorance of things in this world that shatter trust and tear people, in time, from one another; she, with her small hands that moved needfully across blades of buffalo grass and guava tree trunks.

I stumbled back to the picnic while she perched calmly on my shoulders, riding out the bumps from loose rocks and gullies and missed footings. I remember the way your eyes questioned us—me—as you took her from my aching, stooped body, the way you burned to ask us “Where,” but said nothing, trusting instead the nature of the man you hardly knew.

No, she and I hadn’t been out back feeding bloody steak to the chained-up dogs or watching horses swat flies with their matted tails. We were up on the mountain, both of us, looking down on the world, talking about the sudden shapes of clouds and why pigs dig holes in the earth; but wondering, all the while, if the two of us, together, could ever make you happy.
High Tide at Yokohama Bay

The sun is a fish’s eye
melting into the horizon, swollen red

with mist and wash. Three hours ago we’d raced the waves
of high tide, beached our kayaks on the white sand, and gazed

at our stringers of fish. But now I am the key lost on the reef
two miles from shore. And as the shadows fade into night, I

think of home and the loves I want to hold on to because they
are so far away. Salt winds cut through me. I’m suddenly

intent on the sun’s broken circle, the drumming of swells,
foam climbing the slant of sand beneath the truck.

I know, when the sun falls below the edge of the earth
and the sea has extinguished the clouds’ fire, I’ll

clutch myself in the whispering dark
and pray for the light of the moon.
Even now, as Georgie-Boy Kawelo sat on the bus stop’s concrete bench, waiting for the number 55 “Circle Island,” he stroked the worn leather case that held his beloved ‘ukulele. It was as if the instrument begged him to touch it, lovingly, like a pet that needed scratching.

He took it with him everywhere: to the supermarket, to his one class at Windward CC, to the dentist’s office, or wherever else he felt like going on the occasional days off from his grandparents’ plant nursery, where he lived and worked. He played the ‘ukulele as much as he could (sitting, standing, or walking—it didn’t matter), not necessarily strumming madly to a song or chorus he’d memorized, just plucking a soft melody he made up on the spot, or sometimes just sliding his fingers up and down the strings on the fret board until dark creases formed on his fingertips.

He wondered if it might be a while before the bus arrived, and though he’d wanted to give his fingers a rest (he’d strolled through the Windward Mall, playing all morning), he decided now was as good a time to play as any other. He flipped open the brass locks on the case, lifted the cover, and smiled, as he always did, at the sight of his ‘ukulele. He wished sometimes he could be like the uke, nestled warm and safe in the gold lining of its case.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a small girl approaching the bus stop, a pink backpack bouncing dutifully behind her. She slowed as she came near, and regarded him with some interest—especially his hands, which were rubbing the soft lining on the cover of the ‘ukulele case. The girl stopped at the bus stop sign and stood there, too shy, it
seemed, to sit on the bench next to him, though he thought there was plenty of room. As she turned to the road, only the blank, cartoon face of Hello Kitty stared back at him from her backpack.

Georgie-Boy felt a little ashamed that the girl did not sit by him. He thought playing his ‘ukulele might bring her around; playing often seemed to attract the attention of people around him, and sometimes even invite conversation, although Georgie-Boy was usually too uncomfortable in public to say much, or even look up at people. But this girl looked so young and harmless. How old could she be? Nine? Ten?

He lifted the instrument from its case, and thrummed his fingers down the strings. He thought he saw the girl’s ears perk up, but she did not turn around. Hello Kitty still stared. No matter, Georgie-Boy thought, a little disappointed. What could a nine-year-old know about anything, much less appreciate the subtle beauty of the ‘ukulele? He wished he could show people the artistry that went into curving the thin koa wood, the gentle shaping of the fingerboard, the sound hole, the delicate bridge. He wished there was an easy way to make people understand. Through understanding comes appreciation, he thought. There was no other way.

He held the ‘ukulele face-up. The sun gleamed off the smooth finish of the wood, the curls of koa undulated and dancing as he tilted the instrument side to side. He remembered, as a child, watching his father play this same ‘ukulele. Saturday nights, Georgie-Boy’s father and his friends used to drink beer in the backyard and kanikapila till dawn. Georgie-Boy had been their fetcher, the number one go-getter. *Eh, Georgie-Boy—can get me one beer? Georgie-Boy, where dat ono beef jerky went, ah? Can get me some?* He had performed this tasks happily, tirelessly. *Atta boy, Georgie!* It had given
him a free pass to spend time with these beery-breathed men, whose voices and music soared into the quiet Ka‘a‘awa night.

But he had never learned music from these men; they acted as if they had no time for it, shooing him away, good naturedly, like he was a smelly but otherwise harmless dog. Or they’d promise him, sure, sure, they’d teach him later—next time. But they never came with their lessons, these smiling, laughing, singing men. Or it was possible, Georgie-Boy had thought, that they never remembered their promises. Most of them had awoken Sunday mornings in a slow, drunken fog, not knowing where they had parked their cars, where they had slept, whose yard they had crawled into, or how in the world they had ever made it home.

Georgie-Boy’s father was also strange. Some days, he’d show Georgie-Boy the ‘ukulele, and brag about its creation. “Yeah, da guy I went build cabinets for in Kaka’ako—he went make um for me. But da ting is, he blind! Or deaf. One of da two. Can believe dat?” Georgie-Boy would nod vigorously, fueled by the vision of a man wearing dark glasses, whittling away at a chunk of wood.

“But, eh! No touch um, you hear?” The room would suddenly go dark and cold. “Da buggah is too valuable—you might break um. You gottu learn how fo’ play um before you can touch um.” His father would quickly return the instrument to its case, as if the very thought of another person’s rough hand was alarming. And his father, like the smiling music-men, never had the time to teach him.

Years later, when Georgie-Boy had not yet begun high school, his father disappeared somewhere off the Wai‘anae coast. He had gone to pick opihi at some secret location—so secret, he didn’t dare tell Georgie-Boy, or anyone else for that matter—and
never returned. The next day, though the fire department searched miles of coastline (where were they to begin?), Georgie-Boy’s grandparents had picked him up and taken him to their home in ‘Olomana where he’d been living ever since. The only heirloom he had was the ‘ukulele, which his grandfather had casually handed over to him like an old rag. “Hea. You take dis, but no fuss with um when your grandmaddah and me sleeping.”

Georgie-Boy had played the ‘ukulele ever since.

A hand on his arm startled him and almost—almost—made drop his beloved instrument. His heart thumped loudly in his chest. He looked down to see the small girl. Her eyes stared intensely at him. “What, Mistah?” she asked in her child’s voice. “You can play Surf?”

Georgie-Boy blinked, regained his composure, and felt a smile work its way onto his lips. Surf. Of course he could play it.

He pulled his thumb down the strings, again listening for the tuning he knew so well. The uke was faintly off-tune, probably from playing all morning at the mall. He turned a peg slightly at the head of the instrument, strummed, turned a different peg, and strummed again. The ‘ukulele sang to him, warm and loud and perfect. He looked for the girl and found her sitting beside him. The shadow of his body slightly darkened her face.

He ran quickly through the four chords of the song: C, A-minor, F, and the last one which was something like G, except backwards. He hadn’t ever learned the last chord’s name, but at least he knew it by heart. It was all that mattered. Then he played.

His left hand’s fingers moved quickly along the fret board, pressing the strings confidently and without effort, while his right hand strummed. He played slowly at first,
then increased his tempo, adding his own flourishes to the song—an extra strum thrown in here and there, or repeating the chorus a second time.

He could not tell what the little girl thought, but he hoped she shared his own building excitement. He remembered once watching Peter Moon play at a festival in Kapi‘olani Park. How the crowd had gone silent as the man sat on a simple wooden stool, and picked and strummed his ‘ukulele with a ferocious energy. He remembered thinking how it sounded like ten men playing, and how connected the man was with his music.

Georgie-Boy wanted that feeling, wanted to feel that connection with his own music, and so he spent the better part of his free time playing and improvising and creating. He hadn’t ever needed lessons: he couldn’t figure how this stuff could be taught anyway. And he didn’t need to be in a band or a group. He didn’t need to be a part of anything. The great ones—the truly great ones, like Peter Moon, or Ohta-san, Moe Keale, Bruddah Iz, Jake Shimabukuro—didn’t need anything but their ‘ukuleles, their fingers, and their souls.

And now, Georgie-Boy felt himself going into his music. He was only vaguely aware of his body, what his fingers were doing, how they moved. There was only his music, taking form, becoming tangible and thick and heavy, like air condensing into water, like water turning into ice. He let his mind swim in his music. He felt it filling his fingertips and leaking onto the strings of his ‘ukulele. He saw himself on the green lawn of a park, sitting on his own stool, playing to a quiet, adoring crowd.

*Mistah.*

A small hand squeezed his knee. Georgie-Boy shuddered and stopped and opened his eyes which had been closed without his knowing.
“Mistah, you coming or what?”

A bus was before him, its doors opened, the aloha-shirted driver glaring suspiciously. “Yeah, Mistah. You coming?” The bus growled and spewed black fumes into the air.

Georgie-Boy sat numbly for a moment, blinking away the harsh sunlight, then placed the ‘ukulele into its case and scrambled for the bus. The little girl took the first bench seat at the front of the bus and dropped her Hello Kitty backpack beside her. She reached to pat the next seat over, motioning for Georgie-Boy to sit.

He plopped down just as the bus crept forward, and smiled nervously at the girl. He hoped he’d played enough to impress her. His fingers drummed the hard-leather uke case. He could feel the eyes of Hello Kitty staring up at him from the seat between them.

“What oddah kine songs you know?” the girl asked.

He did not know how to respond. He tilted his head and continued to smile at her.

“Songs,” the girl repeated. “What else kine songs you play?”

Georgie-Boy’s smile felt heavy. He didn’t know any other songs. The music he played on his ‘ukulele was his own unique creation. It was only by chance that he’d learned the chords to Surf, when one day he’d strolled through the mall and listened to an old man giving lessons to a group of kids. How could he explain to this little girl that he didn’t know any other “songs?” That he’d never needed any other songs?

“Can try?” She pointed to the case beneath his large hands. He hesitated for a second, but then pushed open the lid and held the ‘ukulele out with both hands.
The girl took it quickly, but gently enough, he supposed. She turned the instrument over and ran her fingers over the sparkling, finished wood. She nodded, “Nice, da koa.”

Georgie-Boy’s eyebrow went up.

“Curly.” She strummed the ‘ukulele once, let the notes hang in the air, then made a face like she’d bitten into a rotting mountain apple. She picked at the strings as she slowly tuned some pegs at the top of the ‘ukulele. And then she played.

She started slowly, plucking at basic chords as if, Georgie-Boy thought, reciting the alphabet before speaking. But then the girl began strumming a few songs he’d recognized from the radio. The notes coming from his ‘ukulele were warm and clear, but different somehow. He’d never before heard the chords she played. The girl’s playing gradually sped up as she bridged one song into another, then another. It looked so easy for her, the way she merged different songs into a long medley, made them fit together seamlessly like pieces in a delicate puzzle. She transitioned from strumming to picking then back to strumming. It was hard to tell where one song ended and a new one began.

The murmur of the few passengers on the bus dimmed. No one talked while the girl played at the front. No one laughed or coughed. And Georgie-Boy sat next to the girl, his body slumped in the seat as he watched her fingers flit across the strings, her every movement precise, every chord ringing true.

Then all at once, she stopped and handed the ‘ukulele back to him. “Dis where I get off.”

Georgie-Boy nodded and took the uke. Someone clapped softly from the back of the bus.
"Tanks for letting me try da uke, Mistah," the girl said. She got up, slipped on her backpack, and hopped down the bus's steps. Georgie-Boy watched her leave, staring at Hello Kitty until the doors closed.

The bus roared and started up the highway.

Georgie-Boy clutched the warm 'ukulele in his lap and looked out the window. They were near the old sugar mill in Ka'a'awa, already miles past his grandparents' home in 'Olomana. He didn't know how they'd come this far so quickly. He didn't remember passing the house or seeing any of the early landmarks that had become familiar to him over the years: He'eia Ke'a Pier, the Hygenic Store in Kahalu'u, the fruit stands in Waikane. To go home now, he'd have to get off and catch the bus going in the opposite direction.

The bus driver thumped his hands against the steering wheel and began whistling an unrecognizable tune.

Georgie-Boy stared down into his lap. He cradled the 'ukulele with hands that looked too large to squeeze the narrow neck of the instrument, with fingers too fat to pluck the delicate strings. He flipped the instrument over, and ran his palms over the back. The grain of the koa wood seemed to shudder at his touch, the gold curls expanding like stains. He closed his eyes.

"Da little girl was real good, ah?" Georgie-Boy looked to the front of the bus and saw the driver watching him in the rearview mirror.

"One natural, if I evah heard one," the man said.
A natural. Georgie-Boy held the ‘ukulele in the playing position, the fingers of his left hand sliding up and down the strings on the fret board, his right hand resting over the sound hole. He could not play, though, and he laid the instrument flat across his lap.

The bus came to a stop next to a beach park in Ka‘a‘awa, not far from where his father’s house used to be. The driver opened the doors, got up from his seat, and held out his arms, stretching. He looked to Georgie-Boy and nodded. “Eh, no worry about it,” he said. “Ev’rybody got fo’ staht off somewhere, right?”

Georgie-Boy smiled back at the man and looked out the window. Multicolored tents rippled along the park’s sea wall. Stripes of whitewash outlined the far reef. Yes, he thought. He didn’t feel like getting off the bus yet. He could ride the Circle Island to the end; it would bring him back home eventually. And besides, the day was still young yet. He had plenty of time.

The bus driver clapped Georgie-Boy on the back, suddenly appearing on the seat next to him. “Yeah, one day you going be able for play like da girl.” The driver scratched his head. “Maybe you jus need one teachah or something.”

Georgie-Boy sighed, and thanked the man and moved to put his ‘ukulele away.

“Eh, try wait,” the bus driver said.

Georgie-Boy froze, praying the man wasn’t going to ask him to play some more. He couldn’t imagine what he’d play. He just wanted to sit and ride the bus to the end. Hadn’t he been embarrassed enough?

“I can see da uke fas kine?” Georgie-Boy considered politely saying no, but it was difficult to deny the man’s good nature.
As Georgie-Boy handed over the ‘ukulele, he heard a whistle escape the bus driver’s lips. “Now dis is one beautiful uke,” the man said. And just as it seemed he was about to return the ‘ukulele, the bus driver sat back and blazed nonchalantly through a series of difficult chords. The man smiled at Georgie-Boy and said, “I like play one song fo’ you...”
Sightseeing

We went on a Sunday, like you and I used to.

Past Chinaman's Hat, the first opening between the row of houses
where the old sugar mill crumbles into the wind.

Kualoa Point—the place you called Gunmount for
the concrete bunker graying on the mountainside.

Even across from Ka'awa Elementary, where the sand curves
around 'opelu and halalū schooling in green summer waters.

I showed her the gravelled stretch of beach past Swanzy’s, told her about
the time we hooked nibbling 'oama and cast them in lazy arcs into the channel.

But Kahana, I never took her to see, I don’t know why.
The finger of limu-covered reef reaching into the bay’s clouded
waters, beneath the shade trees where only you and I sat every weekend.

Waiting for the fishing bell’s silvery ring, the song of the reel ratchet.
Your laughing promise of a fish still fresh in my ears.
After hard winter rain,
the night sounds of wet leaves
dripping and a cricket’s
chirping. My lover's breath slows;
again I am all alone.
Laughing at the old man’s drunkenness, we are shamed by his daughter’s tears.
Saturday night, Westside Kauai, the stars blinking over the sugar mill camp. Horn kala smoking on the half-barrel hibachi—homemade, you know—cut the wood himself too. Neighbor across the street never bothered to chop down the kiawe going wild in his front yard. Sonovabitch had some thorns.

*Like one beer?*
About the pig. Yeah that one, trophy size, so big the tusks started to curl around. .30-.30 took him from the top of a ridge, fucker dropped without flinching. Mean, the way his front leg had the jitters, freaked the dogs out. Mean, the way the ticks left his cold body all one time like dripping rain.

*Beer, boy?*
Never go Ahukini yet but heard awe‘owe‘o running there again. Water’s green until your hooks come up and everything flashes red and silver; bite doesn’t even slow in the day. Last time that happened hurricane hit. Iniki. ‘Iwa too. Get ready cause the big one’s coming. Everybody says so, including him. Serious.

*Shua you no like one beer?*
Wasn’t so bad in the beginning, Iniki. Shed fell apart; dog came in from the kennel; cat hid somewhere under the house; chickens blew away and never came back. Wasn’t too bad until everything went quiet and still, like was four in the morning except no roosters crowing and no night in the skies.

*Try get me one beer.*
Then the roof made a sound like music: slow vibrating, groaning, then more fast, banging slapping scraping screeching. Never heard metal sound like that—wood too. Roof peeled right off with a popping like a kid’s toy gun. Ever heard what a house sounds like when it bends, and the wife and kids and wind are screaming in your ear? Trust him, he pokes a finger to his shining forehead. *You cannot imagine.*
Ghost Fishing

I’ve heard the stories. My father told them to me, my friends told them to me—stories about how, on Lanai, you can see huge, docile fish swimming at the bottom of the ocean, cruising in and out of coral ledges, hardly disturbing the surface of crystalline waters. All kinds of game fish abound, all immediately catchable from shore, easily within a hook’s toss. And anyone can catch fish on Lanai. Anyone. This last point was stressed as if it were simply fact.

So it was that I found myself accepting an offer from my friend Shaun to go fishing on Lanai, along with his father, Sid, and a handful of Sid’s friends, most of whom worked with him at a local auto-body shop. We left Honolulu International Airport on a dry Friday morning in the middle of August, planning to meet more of Sid’s friends, who lived on Lanai, at Lanai Airport. If all went according to plan, we would be fishing for trophy ulua on an island that, as a majority of the fishing community assured us, is home to some of the best shorecasting grounds in Hawai‘i.

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Guy Akahoshi met at us at a shaded curb outside of Lanai Airport’s single terminal. He waved to us while leaning against the side of a weathered pickup truck. “So what? You guys ready fo’ catch some fish?”

We smiled, shook hands, and answered in the affirmative.

“Good, cause my faddah stay waiting fo’ us at da house.” He smiled, a flash of gleaming white teeth, “He a’ready get his bags packed.”
We loaded our poles, bags, and coolers into the bed of the truck and promptly sped off to Lanai City, where Guy's father, who was simply known as “Gi,” awaited us.

*****

I first started fishing with my father when I was about five. My mother remembers most of the details: my father’s military impatience with the rest of the family—my mother, my older brother, and me; my brother’s gloomy acceptance of the news of going fishing; the excitement in my child’s voice, asking if we were going to “the sand place or the rock place” and if we’d be able to swim there or not.

Some of the earliest memories of my childhood are connected to fishing. To be sure, things are foggy now, and the names of all the places my family and I went to have long been forgotten, but I distinctly recall one spot: the salt fumes of the surf, the rotting seaweed, the burnt strip of coastline behind the Kahuku golf course. I remember standing over sun-warmed tidepools with my red-lacquer bamboo pole and catching wriggling mamo and hinalea. I remember dropping the fish into a rusted coffee can, and watching them swim in small circles for hours.

These are probably the fondest of memories that survive from my childhood spent fishing with my father on the weekends.

It never got better than that time at Kahuku.

*****

Gi wasn’t the sort of person I’d imagined.

On the way to his house, Guy told us that his father, Gi, fished every day of the week, every week of the month, every month of the year. If he had something important to do on a particular day, say a funeral, he would fish either very early in the morning,
before the funeral, abandoning the fish only when there was the absolute urgency to
shower, dress, and possibly shave, or he would fish after the funeral, sometimes still in
his “best” aloha shirt.

And Gi didn’t just fish at spots off the side of the main highway. He fished at
remote spots—spots that required nearly an hour of committed off-roading and some
additional hiking.

Despite Guy’s age—I guessed him to be in the mid-thirties to early forties—I
expected a somewhat youthful-looking Gi, a stout man who’d triumphed over the effects
of aging through a disciplined regimen of walking, fishing, and living off the land.

Instead, Gi looked to be about ninety: an old ninety, which he wasn’t. He was
only in his sixties.

We met him in his dusty garage at the outskirts of Lanai City. As he lifted himself
from the dirt-stained bucket he was using as a stool, his bones—I will swear to this day—
creaked audibly. When he held out his hand, I was afraid to grasp it, afraid that I would
snap something vital in it and end his fishing career, but I shook it anyway, and stared
into his wizened face, “Howzit, Gi. Heard a lot about you.”

He smiled, displaying a set of tobacco-stained teeth that peeked out from his gray
moustache. He scratched his thin wavy hair, which, in contrast to the decidedly gray of
his moustache, was stark white. The dark skin on his face and arms hung loose and
leathery, giving him the look of someone tired and weary of life.

“Nice to meetchu,” he said, looking up sheepishly.
I watched as Shaun and Sid, in turn, shook the old man’s hand. They looked comfortable with the gesture, but, as I reasoned, they had been here before and had already met Gi.

After the initial shock of meeting Gi, who, in the short time I’d listened to Guy’s stories, I had come to regard as somewhat of a fishing legend on Lanai, I began the process of unloading my equipment, and packing my fishing gear. I figured we might be hiking to some secret grounds, at least as far as Gi could take us, so I packed relatively light: a large bag of assorted hooks, pliers, and line, wire leader, wirecutters, two reels, two 13-foot poles, two rock spikes to brace the poles, two rope tie-downs to secure the poles, two stainless-steel fishing bells, and about ten pounds of lead sinkers.

*****

The night before a full day of fishing with my father was spent in constant motion. My brother and I would bustle about, getting the gear ready, and my mother would cook. Overseeing the entire process was my father. I remember him barking orders at us: Eh, you shua you went pack da reels? Bettah not fo’ get um like da last time and Bring da tackle box ovah here—now. We’d respond with a moderate amount of speed, but also with an air of resigned helplessness. Nothing escaped my father’s eyes. Eh, no give me dat sorry look. Once in a while, he’d mutter after our slumping forms, I doing dis fo’ you guys, you know.

Then daybreak arrived. A push or a nudge from my father drove my brother and I from our dreams, which had nothing to do with fishing. We’d wake to the sounds of final preparation: the banging of almost-forgotten sand spikes, the incessant squeaking of my father’s badly-worn rubber slippers, the clanking of cooking pots, the occasional tearing
of wax paper in which to wrap warm musubis. I don’t remember crying or grumbling—at least not to my father’s face—but I know that these mornings were the hardest to wake up to. I hated school with a passion back then, but even on those weekday mornings, getting to school wasn’t as much of a chore as this. It was as if my body didn’t want to respond to or acknowledge the fact that I was headed to some remote beach to wait for a passing fish, with my father there, watching us the entire time.

*****

We left Lanai City in four trucks: a big Ford, a Jeep, and a couple of ancient Toyotas. We constituted the bulk of Friday afternoon traffic in Lanai City. It was only after we started down the unpaved trails to one of Gi’s fishing spots that we had to stop occasionally to let another truck pass alongside of us. It seemed like there was more traffic off the road than there was on it.

A spot Gi called “Forty-Five-Minute Walk” waited for us somewhere on the north end of the island. “Get plenny ulua,” he told us, smiling as always, with a sad, drooped expression. I was not looking forward to fishing a spot that required a forty-five minute walk, but Gi assured me it wasn’t “really forty-five minutes.” Besides, I thought, if he could do it, I sure as hell better be able to.

The drive down was particularly harsh. On the trails there were steep inclines, dropoffs, and holes that the trucks had to negotiate over, around, and through. Littering the red-dirt path were loose rocks, the roots of kiawe trees, and half-buried boulders.

One law of off-road driving physics is this: the longer the wheelbase of a vehicle, the smoother the ride. A longer wheelbase transfers more of the dampening workload to the tires and the suspension. In a vehicle with a shorter wheelbase, the jarring shock-
energies are absorbed by the chassis, and in turn by the passengers. I rode in the Jeep—the vehicle with the shortest wheelbase by far. The hour’s ride was torture. After we rolled down the last stretch of trail and parked behind the other trucks on a flat spread of dirt, those of us in the Jeep climbed out, and rubbed our aching muscles and joints, opening and closing our jaws to feel if we’d lost any teeth.

Gi strolled up to me then. “You ready fo’ one little walk?” He had a mysterious, youthful-looking smile on his face, like he was holding in laughter. I’m not entirely sure why it scared me, but it did. His pack was already strapped to his back, his fishing boots already on his feet.

“Yeah,” I replied, trying to hide the wince in my voice.

*****

I don’t exactly remember when it was. I can’t tell you the specific day, can’t tell you the hour, but I do know that sometime after the day we fished behind the Kahuku golf course, things were never the same between me and my father. A distaste for fishing began to spread within me like a tumor. It started slowly, barely noticeable, manifested in my reluctance to wake up on chilly mornings to steadily increasing instances of forgetting equipment I was responsible for packing. The dislike grew slowly, but the important thing is that it grew and did not stop.

When I was in intermediate school, I was still forced to fish with my father. My brother was in college then, so he had the convenient excuse of needing to study. That, and he’d decided he needed a change of environment, so he dormed at the university, which was far from Kaneohe and my father.
My mother became extremely busy during this time too, caring for sick relatives or running errands in town all weekend long. She still, however, made us lunch to take to the beach, and on rare occasions she’d help us load the car and pack. For the most part, I was the only fishing partner left for my father. *Jes you and me now, boy. Jes you and me.*

Now I sometimes wonder if he was hurt that no one wanted to fish. In my young age, I’d never thought of these things, never thought how it might affect him. I don’t remember hinting to him my own distaste, but I know there was a drag in my voice—there must have been—and a reluctance, a carefully rehearsed look of resignation when it was time to go fishing.

The car ride to our spots—most of the time Kahana Bay, sometimes La‘ie or Lanikai—was silent. I was angry mostly because, at that age, I felt I had better things to do. But if my father knew of my frustrations, he ignored them. If I huffed or sighed loudly, he’d turn up the radio. There was nothing I could do to stop our steady, inexorable progress toward these fishing spots. I remember telling him one day that I didn’t want to go; flat out told him, no asking involved. He considered it for a moment, then glared at me intensely: *Get your ass in dat car.*

So I had no choice, although I suppose everyone, really, has a choice. But I was a kid, scared of consequences and action, so I kept going. Every Saturday.

The ride from our house to Kahana Bay was about thirty minutes. It’s a nice ride actually, though I’m sure I didn’t think so. We got onto Kahekili highway which was, back then, only two lanes, and from there got onto Kam Highway when we reached the outskirts of Kahalu‘u. Past Kahalu‘u was Kualoa, then Ka‘a‘awa. In Ka‘a‘awa, we drove past the elementary school, then Swanzey Beach Park, and to the bend of road just past the
Crouching Lion Inn. From there, we could see Kahana Bay in its entirety. A few rotting houses sat on the Ka'a'awa side of the bay. An old fishpond housed mullet, small kaku, and papio at the mouth of a stream flowing down from Kahana Valley.

My father's favorite spot was just a minute or two past the fishpond, on the far side of the shore. I remember watching the scenery rush by the window, listening to the hum of the car's tires rolling along the asphalt, the rattle of sand spikes, the occasional tinkling of a bell. I remember telling myself that it wouldn't be so bad, that the day would go by a lot faster than it did the weekend before. I remember praying that my father would get drunk and fall asleep. Then I could steal the car and drive home.

*****

Gi didn't drink, but his son, Guy did, and a couple of others: Daniel, a mechanic, and Jimmy, a painter. Sid, Shaun, and I didn't drink, at least not while sitting under the blazing afternoon sun, and, neither did Mike, who came with his two young sons. But beer was a necessity to three of the people there, so it needed to be packed, along with water, ice, and the day's bait supply, into a collapsible cooler-bag. Despite everyone's insistence that he not carry it, Gi swung the cooler over his shoulder and promptly set off for Forty-Five-Minute Walk.

Shaun and I walked together, bringing up the rear of the group. We could see Gi in the front, leading the others over bristling lava rocks that jutted up from the sand and red dirt of the coastline. The water was rough and choppy, and threw spray into the air and onto the rocks, making for slippery, dangerous footing. Gi seemed unaffected by the wet terrain as he continued his march along the backs of limu-coated rocks. Periodically, he'd stop and wait for the rest of us to catch up.
I was used to this sort of hiking while carrying heavy loads of equipment and supplies, so I quickly gained ground on the others, passed them by, and caught up with Gi. If he was impressed, he showed no expression, simply kept his creased face turned to the others, waiting for them to make progress. When they got close enough, he pivoted and continued walking.

I began to notice the bounce in his step at about the time I started falling behind. He walked the backs of huge boulders and sharp rocks with the practiced ease of a goat. I remember thinking to myself this wasn’t possible; there was no way a guy his age could outcarry and outwalk men in decent shape, with at least twenty years on him, and without artificial limbs or other obvious handicaps. Maybe the odd beer belly or two. But Gi shouldn’t have walked as tirelessly, as painlessly as he did that day.

He even led us through thickets of kiawe trees, perhaps to test our reserve. At least, it felt like a test. I watched with disbelief as he walked through the intertwined branches of two long-thorned trees, barely slowing. I marveled at how his loose, rubbery skin did not catch on the thorns, how he just walked through without a scratch.

The rest of us following Gi either had to find a way around the kiawe, or walk gingerly through them—as I did—pushing thorns away from soft faces and vulnerable, exposed legs. Once past the trees, we discovered Gi waiting for us on the other side, calmly watching our efforts. He never complained once about our slow pace.

When we arrived at Forty-Five-Minute Walk (Gi was right, it wasn’t forty-five minutes—it was more than an hour), we unloaded our equipment and set up camp for the day. I rigged my two fishing poles, cast the lines into the churning water, and slid bait down to the depths, hoping a hungry fish would pass.
Waiting is truly the worst part of fishing. From the moment your bait enters the water to the moment you reel up your bait, or better yet, the moment a fish strikes, you’re thinking about that fish, and usually only about the possibility of that fish. But this is if you’re seriously into the fishing, with the mindset of a pure fisherman with few distractions.

I often think about what my father and I did in those periods of waiting. We didn’t talk much. Once in a while he’d take a deep swig of his beer, clear his throat awkwardly, and ask me obligatory questions about school. How your grades? What, no more homework dis weekend? I answered woodenly, “Okay.” “Some.” To me, it seemed he asked even his questions with the hard tone of orders and insult.

When he managed to say more than one or two sentences, it was usually about the ocean and the land we fished from and lived in. He knew a lot about nature—information passed to him from his uncles, from his own father, and from his own experiences. It was only of passing interest to me then.

I never really wanted to catch fish with him. If we managed to bring something home in the cooler, it meant returning to the same spot the following weekend. To discourage this from happening, I remember skipping rocks off the water, just in front of the poles when my father wasn’t looking. When I became older and braver, I’d do it while my father was actually watching. Sometimes he yelled at me, and I’d get more than just the slap of his voice. But I think what shocked me, what startled me to silence, were those few occasions when I wasn’t punished or scolded, when he just sat there, staring.
These rare instances placed a heavy weight of guilt upon me. It was easier to be punished; it was expected. I guess I knew that something wasn’t right, that my behavior simply wasn’t—and rightly shouldn’t be—tolerated. I’m sure I sensed it, even back then.

At Forty-Five-Minute Walk, we fished until sunset, and watched as the water bounced a spectrum of colors off the rocks. The ocean began to calm just before sunset, the tide probably dropping or leveling off. Birds began to fly in from the sea to find roosting places on dry land.

Amid the peaceful scenery, a bell rang once, clear and sudden as breaking glass. We all jumped up, startled by the noise. All except Gi, who just sat there, never looking up at the pole the ringing came from, and said, “Someone’s bait gone.”

We didn’t catch anything that day at Forty-Five-Minute Walk, nor did we catch anything in the remaining three days of our trip. But that day, that spot, will forever stand out in my mind. I remember Gi appearing beside me as we gathered our equipment, and disassembled our poles and reels for the long walk back.

“Sometimes like dat, you know. Sometimes no catch fish.” He folded his arms across a sunken chest and smiled, lifting the deep wrinkles of his face. He looked toward the dimming sun, then at me or maybe some point in the ocean behind me, and said, “Dis place not da same anymoa. Tings not da same.”

He was right, of course. Things aren’t the same. Not anymore. I no longer hate fishing for what it might have represented for me as a child growing up. Fishing is now a passion of
mine and it often leads me to questions. Why did I hate fishing so much? Why did I wait so long before picking it up again? Why return at all?

I sometimes think that maybe it’s because I’ve seen the faults in my previous attitude. Maybe it’s because I’ve realized the benefits of fishing—enjoying nature, harvesting the ocean—and have grown to appreciate it. Maybe, but I don’t think that’s really it. I’m twenty-six years old now. My father died four years ago from complications of throat cancer. I’ve been asking myself questions ever since.

His wasn’t a quick death. We had time to prepare for it. But there’s still that lingering something that makes you feel like you didn’t do enough, that you could’ve done more. Spend more time, listen more, talk more, appreciate.

I took up fishing a year after he died. I’d previously quit about five or six years before. When I started up again, I remember lifting a pole from its stand, feeling its balanced weight, flexing it, wiping away the dust. The hardest part for me then was trying to pack my gear without being completely, utterly aware of the silence. No orders, no threats.

Why fishing? I look back at my return and the only answer I have is that I was doing it for myself, because I wanted to, and although I didn’t know it yet, I was doing it because of Gi and Guy. Sid and Shaun. I do it now because things aren’t the same anymore. And because of that voice in my thoughts which haunts me to this day, quiet and vulnerable: I doing dis fo’ you guys.
Old Man at Portlock

He sits calmly on the rocks,
his face at peace as you’d
imagine a Buddha, except
that he’s clothed in fishing rags,
the stink of bait about him.
Nothing he wears could have ever
been new. He looks salt-eaten,
spent as the stubbed-out
Kools pushed into the earth
at his feet. With the economy
of patience he waits,
rusted hands on his knees,
a loose smile on his face
like cracks weathered
into stone. He might be the last
of his kind, the way he stares
into the low evening sun,
his mind a calm blue shadow
waiting for winter’s light.
Black Butterflies

In her mourning, my mother whispered secrets of my father's death. *Yesterday I saw a black butterfly,* her words fluttered toward me like dry leaves to the earth, the broom in my hands whisking soot and dust into the morning air.

*

When my father died, he left us his legacy of perfect, wired plants. He left us aloha shirts and moth eggs in a closet he never opened. He left us a dog sitting patiently by his door for weeks after. He left us an old radio rust-eaten by salt winds. He left us splintered fishing poles standing in a wide white bucket. He left us forgotten tools covered in grease, doors with patched holes, the bright spills of his unfinished paintings.

*

When I was a child, my grandmother told me stories of the dead: how, in the old days, black moths would portend a relative's passing like ribbons of slow smoke before the flame; how, in the old days, black moths would appear days after a funeral, after the koden was counted, after the family was fed and sent home with plates of extra food.

*

When my father died, he left us alone in the hospital room. He left the white, flickering light above his bed. He left his gaping mouth and corded neck as thin as his arms. He left the silent unblinking monitor the nurse forgot to turn off. He left the pillowcase we scrubbed clean of his black spit. the notepad he scratched his voice onto. the cup of milk he always asked for but never drank.

*
Today a moth blew into my office, swift as a drunken rage but quiet as spilled ink. I tried to ignore it, let it flicker about the room, landing on the split side of the file cabinet, the unused monitor, the sun-washed picture window where it spread its wings in sleep. I walked to the window and gathered the moth into the cup of my hands, my fingers soft as death, and carried it to an open window to set it free.
Amid the sound of sweeping brooms, red firecrackers lie in the street like broken flowers. How I wish the rain would come and wash them all away!
So many hidden
lives upon the coral reef
exposed by the falling tide!
Beef

Small-kid time, me and my bruddah beef plenny. He six years oldah den me, but I nevah care. I nevah sked him, no matter how big he stay. Was mean scraps too, not jus da yelling or pushing kine, but da full-on chrowing, knocking tings ovah, flying across da room kine.

He bus me up good—he is my oldah bruddah aftah all, but I got my own cracks in: jus cause I small, no mean I one panty. One time he went put me in one sleepah hold, like da kine we watch on TV, but I went make-cry so he had fo’ let me go. Den I went crack um in his mout, his lips all cut up from his braces. Told Mom he had um coming.

When we beef, Mom always da first fo’ scold us. She try spank us, but nevah hurt, so sometimes she went bus out da back scratchah or worse, da big wooden spoon. You wait, you kids. You wait till your dad come home—you going get it. And she right. Was always Dad, mo’ scary. He come home from work all piss-off at his boss, tell Mom da las ting he like hear was about us fricken kids fighting again.

When he say, Das it, and go fo’ da belt, das when me and my bruddah stop fighting, hide undah da pool table. And you know da funny ting? Was jus like we friends undah there: us two, sked and sometimes crying, both peeking up at Dad’s stink eye, smelling his beer breath, knowing he all hungry fo’ give lickens. Sometimes even Mom feel sorry fo’ us, try calm Dad down, tell him us dirty kids was going get it da very next day.

And afiah me and my bruddah went beef, was weird. Was jus like we nevah know what we went beef about, like we went fo’get. But da bad feelings was still there and was da only ting we went care about, cause we nevah know that, years later, we was going talk about these tings and not laugh.
It’s past midnight. You really don’t have time for this shit. You’re in an unfamiliar neighborhood, and you’re not exactly sure how to get out, even though you’re the one who’s been driving. You think the two of you are somewhere in Kalihi, but you can’t be sure because Marcus keeps talking bubbles and nonsense, distracting you between the directions. He says to go right, then he says no, no, it was left, he’s pretty damn sure of it—oh, and did you know baseball is the most guaranteed sport to bet on? Fifty-five percent of the favored teams cover the spread, so keep betting on them and the money will eventually work itself out. It’s practically foolproof.

You make a U-turn at the top of a street you’ve never seen before. It’s dark. Where are all the fucking street lights? It’s already past midnight.

Poor Marcus. Poor, loaded Marcus, his eyes shot and heavy-lidded with alcohol when he showed up at your house a quarter to twelve. Ready to go? he asked. Go where? you asked back, the TV remote warm in your hand, the angular, botoxed face of a stripper on a late-night talk show still dancing in your mind. The way her eyebrows arched too high and thin and froze her face in a mask of disbelief.

Marcus clapped a hand on your shoulder, looked up at you, and said, There’s a game tonight—I got a call from the boys. You could see veins striping the whites of his eyes, lines so stark and bloody you could count them. One. Two. So what do you think, Marcus asked. Are you game? Three, four, five. Like streaks of red lightning, if there was such a thing.
I don’t know, you said, and you meant it. You like gambling from time to time, and you want to keep your friend company and keep him out of trouble, but it’s just so late. It’s almost twelve. You were falling asleep before he came. And you have classes tomorrow, too. Six, seven, eight. No, not like lightning. Like spiderwebs—a veil of red webbing. Nine.

Marcus looked wounded, and it hurt you, just enough, to see your best friend like this, even if he was a drunken mess. Drunk or stoned, or possibly both. Very likely both. Ten. All right, all right, you said, knowing you were never able to say no to him and that’s why Marcus is your best friend and you his, why the two of you have been friends since intermediate school. So you’ll take the bastard to his goddamned crap game, watch him lose his ass, and then bring the fucker home before he gets into trouble. Eleven. But I’m not staying long, you said. Marcus nodded enthusiastically. You felt the need to repeat what you’d just told him.

Now, in your car, Marcus appears antsy. His leg bounces up and down, his fingers drum the neck of his green beer bottle. He feels the oncoming game. He hears the dice clack against the felt-lined table, against the curved backboard, against each other in their mad tumble toward fortune or misery. This is the place, he tells you.

You slow the car and peer through the tinted glass. You sure? you ask, doubtful. The house is dark. The curtains are drawn in every window. You’ve been led on wild game chases like this before. Your friend’s track record has not exactly been reliable. You think of turning around and buying something to eat at a twenty-four-hour drive-through. You’re thinking of a mushroom burger or thick-cut fries slathered with chili and cheese.
Marcus pipes up, I think this is the place. There’s an edge to his voice. You can’t quite read it. Nervousness? Confusion? The alcohol haze finally clearing? Look at all these fucking cars, he says. I mean, this has got to be the place, right? His fingers drum the beer bottle faster. In the back of your mind, you’re worried he might spill, but that’s not important now. What’s important is getting the hell out of here. You don’t recognize any of the cars that line the quiet street, but then again, you don’t expect to. Look—there in that garage, Marcus shouts, and you look, and you see it too: a face glowing orange for a second or two, then darkness, then the angry red point of a cigarette cherry. We’ll have to park at the end of the street, Marcus says. You want to laugh and punch him in his teeth at the same time. You were so close to turning around and going home.

Yes, you tell him. We will park at the end of the street.

The street is quiet when you park the car because you can hear the echo of the car door slamming shut, because you hear the crunch of loose gravel under your feet. But you already knew this just by looking at the sleeping houses. You look back at your car, watch it shrink the further you walk away from it. You feel uneasy leaving it at the end of this dead-end road, but you’re not sure why. Maybe it’s the way the houses seem to hedge the street and swallow it up. Maybe it’s the way this neighborhood is so quiet, and yet your ears are ringing with the silence as if it’s a weight pressing against the sides of your head.

Marcus leads the way to the house as if it’s something he was born to do. Fucking hot one tonight, he says, interrupting the cadence of your footsteps. He pulls at his t-shirt, flapping air onto his body. His pits are dark with moisture, and you notice for the first time that there are streetlights illuminating the road. You probably hadn’t noticed them
before because they’re the old kind of streetlights—wooden telephone poles with their lights hanging like swollen fruit from thin curves of steel, the kind of streetlights that cast a sickly, yellow light beneath them.

Hot one tonight, Marcus repeats as if talking to himself, and then says, These fingers need to be hot tonight, and then laughs too loudly. He brings his fingertips together into the shape of a star and blows on them, shows you the instrument of his fortunes. He laughs again and slaps you on the shoulder, asks what the fuck’s the matter with you.

You don’t respond but you smile nervously and wonder how the hell he can be so loose right now, going into a strange house, knowing barely a soul. You want to be angry at him, but you can’t get your mind around the fact that you don’t want to be here, and it’s very likely that these people you’re about to meet don’t want you here, and that your friend is happily, hopelessly oblivious to this possibility.

When you get to the house, which is seven houses away from where you parked your car, you see the red eye of the cigarette, only it’s not a cigarette like you thought it was because you smell the sweet burning. A shadow holds the joint, the end glows brightly, and then it’s passed to another shadow. Four shadows total. You think briefly that you and Marcus should leave quietly, turn around and sneak back to the car, which has shrunken to the size of your thumbnail.

What’s up there fellas? Marcus announces himself. You ready yourself to grab him by the collar and pull him and run. Your legs are warm and tense, ready to dash the length of seven houses.
The shadows turn to face you, you think, because now they’re not facing each other. You’re scared, but also a little impressed that they don’t appear startled and that the one holding the joint didn’t flick it under the truck in the driveway or into the overgrown bushes bordering the house. The shadows say nothing. One of them might have nodded, but you can’t be sure.

Marcus thrusts his hands into his pockets and rattles a set of keys. Gene inside? he asks.

The shadows in the garage are not shadows anymore because your eyes have adjusted to the darkness. The guy in front is short, built like barrel but with arms and legs and a patch of chin stubble that’s trying to be a goatee. Yeah, he’s in the house, the barrel guy says.

You wonder if, being the shortest of the bunch, he has something to prove, the way he talks and puffs out his barrelish chest. You scan the others and make mental notes of their appearance. The guy next to the barrel is tall and thin. The two of them side by side remind you of a slapstick-cartoon duo you watched as a kid. The thought makes you want to laugh but you know better. The other two guys in the back lean against the wall of the house. One of them slides down into a squatting position. You think they’re rather large and imposing, except that they’re probably stoned now, and in that way harmless. You smile at them and immediately feel silly.

Marcus cuts through them and heads toward a door. Below the door there are about a dozen pairs of slippers and half as many pairs of shoes. You leave your slippers at the edge of the gathering, nearest the street. You think about telling Marcus that maybe he should do the same, but he’s already left his shoes in the center of the pile and gone
into the house. You follow him through the open door, and shut it behind you. A large, muscled man sits on a folding chair in the center of a bare, carpeted room. Marcus stands in front of him. The sitting man does not look especially pleased to see the two of you, and as you approach, he looks up, scowls, and asks you if you’re a cop.

You’re a little confused. You’re twenty and look even younger for your age. You wonder what cops might look like, and why any cop, if asked, would actually, willingly identify themselves. You smile at the man sitting on the chair, and ask, What?

The man gives you a dark look.

Marcus shuffles over and says, Dude, you gotta answer the fucking question.

You’re still confused, but you tell the man anyway that no, you’re not a cop, and he appears satisfied. He even grunts.

Marcus makes his way to the far end of the room and down a dark hallway to a closed door. Light seeps through a crack at the bottom, and you can hear voices rise and fall within. When Marcus raps loudly on the door, the noise stops. You feel your blood pushing at your forehead and neck, your chest thumping so heavily you think Marcus must hear it. You ready yourself to run again.

Light washes into the hallway as the door swings open. You rub your eyes and follow Marcus into the room. Lots of faces. None of them familiar. A large crap table dominates the room, and people—more than a dozen—stand around it in various postures. One man sits at the rear center of the table, flanked by stacks of red, white, and green chips. To his right is a guy fanny-packed and holding a long stick with a bent end. They nod toward Marcus, turn, and eye you suspiciously. You smile at them as you did to the guys smoking weed in the garage. Again you feel silly.
Who’s your friend there, Marcus? the guy sitting behind the table asks.

Him? He’s harmless—just here to keep me out of trouble. Marcus laughs and you hear it echo off the hollow-tile walls.

The stickman points his stick at you, and you notice the tattoos covering his muscular arms. He does not look friendly. You a cop, he asks, but his tone is like a statement rather than a question. The curved, flat end of the stick circles a few feet from your face, but you don’t think the stickman is trying to be amusing.

No, I’m not a cop, you answer, and wonder why, again, anyone would ask this as if you’d tell them you were one. If you were one.

Marcus looks to the man sitting behind the table, and says, Gene, man. He’s not a fricken cop.

A few awkward seconds pass as Gene, the stickman, and everyone else, checks you out. Finally Gene claps once and turns his hands palm-up to the ceiling. Gotta ask everybody, he says. You know how things work around here. Gene now looks at you. Hey man, he tells you. Nothing personal, right? He holds out his hand. You grasp it, shake it, feel the strength in it, wonder if he’s gripping your hand hard on purpose.

Marcus smiles, elbows you in the ribs, and points to the far end of the table. Over there, he says. A couple of open spots.

The two of you walk to the end, squeeze in between a couple of guys that look your age. You notice they’re decked out in expensive clothes, jewelry, and watches. Marcus holds his hand out to the guy next to him. I’m Marcus, he introduces himself. The guy shakes his hand, does not return the introduction. But Marcus is genial, unfazed, in
too much of a good mood now to let this bother him. He has the look of a giddy, scheming child that you hate to see because it so often gets him into trouble.

You lean over to him, whisper, Eh, take it easy tonight, okay? You don’t need to prove anything to these guys.

Relax, he tells you. He pulls his wallet from his back pocket, rips open the velcro, frees a couple of bills from it. Change for two hundred, he tells Gene. Marcus smiles and winks at the others around the table. You expect the worst to come from this night.

You take a couple of bills from your own wallet and drop them onto the table. Change for forty, you say. Gene counts out the chips, ten whites, six reds, slides them to you and says, Good luck. You don’t think he means it. The stickman takes the money from Gene and stuffs it into the pocket of his fanny pack. New shooters, he shouts across the table, to no one in particular. Wanna roll, boys? Now he’s talking to the both of you.

What? You skipping me? an old Hawaiian man complains at the other end of the table.

Gene shoots the guy a look, and says, You know the rules. New shooters get first roll.

Stickman scowls, says, Yeah—shaddup and wait for your goddam turn. The old man shrinks, glares at you in a way that makes your stomach sink to your feet. You don’t want to enter the game this way.

Stickman pushes a pair of dice toward you with his stick, but you shake your head. No thanks, you say. I’d rather—

—I’ll roll then, Marcus says and scoops up the dice, flashes his trademark toothy smile. You can feel the burn of the old man’s glare. You want to say something to
Marcus, maybe caution him about table etiquette, but it’s too late—he’s already placing his chips on the table. Twenty-five on the pass line, ten on the seven-eleven, he says. And his dice soar, bounce off the table’s felt surface, and clack against the backboard.

Seven up, Stickman yells. As does Marcus, who lets out a whoop, and slaps his hands together.

Gene slides him a small stack of chips, pays out the other bets, gives you a single red chip. You feel good because you so rarely win at anything. Marcus, on the other hand, is beaming. More chips appear on the pass line. You gotta believe, he tells you, then smiles and tosses his dice.

Hear the click of the dice. Watch as the dice flip and bounce and spin in slow motion: two and one. Craps! Stickman yells, pulls the chips around the table to Gene. You see them exchange confident glances.

Double up the pass, Marcus says, though you’re not sure if he’s talking to you, or if he’s talking to himself. When he tosses fifty in chips onto the table, you know he was talking more to himself, although he could’ve also been talking to you.

You press a single red chip onto the pass line, watch as Marcus throws a backhander down the table. Nine. Clay chips clatter to the table. A few bets are called out. You watch Marcus casually toss a green chip and a couple of whites into the center. Numbers across, he calls to Gene. Good luck, roller, Gene says, his face a mask of indifference.

Marcus blows on the dice, whips it to the backstop. Three, craps! Stickman shouts, slides the dice back to Marcus. Nothing happens to the bets on the table, but the other players look nervous.
You yourself have a bad feeling about this next roll, but there’s no way to take your chips from the table now. Marcus blows on the dice. You close your eyes, hear the sharp clack, and imagine the dice flipping to seven even before Stickman has a chance to yell seven out. Marcus does not say a word. He stands there like a flat tire, watches his chips pulled to Gene at the center of the table, where they’re neatly added to stacks according to color.

New roller, Stickman calls out. You see the dice in front of you, but you’re not sure what to do with them. New roller, Stickman repeats, this time looking directly at you. His tatts writhe like serpents beneath his skin.

You take up the dice. You’ve never liked rolling. You’ve never been good at it, never had the touch for it. Are you supposed to blow on them before you roll? Are you supposed to toss them high? Or low? Backhand? Or underhand, like you’re tossing a ball to someone who can’t catch? You settle for something between a toss and a roll. The dice clatter at the far end of the table. You think rolling them is supposed to be mindless, but you can’t help the thoughts that flash through your mind, one by one, like photographs in a slideshow.

Twelve! Train tracks! Stickman yells. You think it’s not necessary for him to look that happy. He hooks the few chips around the table with his stick, pulls them to Gene who gathers them and starts building new stacks.

You watch as the dice are pushed toward you, cutting a path through the grids of lines and numbers. You don’t want to roll the dice; you don’t want to touch them. You’ve already lost ten of your forty dollars, and you’re sure that you’ll lose more if you take the
dice again. A hand clasps your shoulder as chips hit the table. C’mon, man, Marcus says whisper-quiet, meant only for you. Just one more roll.

You nod, pluck the dice from the table, and rattle them in your cupped hand. You glance at a single red chip on the pass line in front of you and are not even sure how it got there. Marcus might have covered you, but it’s more likely you put it down yourself without thought. The dice dance in your moist hand. You feel the hot breath from the guy next to you. You glance down at the table. Three bets out: yours, Marcus’, and the old Hawaiian guy’s—the guy who glared at you minutes before. He’s actually still glaring at you, though you think it’s a hopeful glare, if there is such a thing. Maybe he knows something you don’t.

You throw the dice. They glide in a smooth arc, right over the far rim of the table, and land quietly on the carpeted floor. Stickman yells, No roll, no roll! Next to you, someone says, Whoa. You know it’s not flattery. The old Hawaiian guy snatches his chips from the table. You grin sheepishly, trying very hard not to look up as a new pair of dice are sticked towards you. Marcus does not watch as you let the dice fly.

This time the dice stay within the walls of the table, and roll three and two. Stickman calls out the number. Marcus throws some chips at Gene and says, Numbers, across the board. You take up the dice. You hope no one sees the sweat beading on your brow, the sweat blooming like a stain across the small of your back. The dice feel slippery as you toss them to the far end of the table.

Seven out! Stickman says, a black grin on his face.
It is late, you think. Most of the other players have already left. The stacks of chips in
front of Gene have grown and multiplied. Stickman has started building his own stacks.
The black fanny pack, you think, has also grown, paper dreams bursting from the pouch.

You have not rolled since the first time. The dice have come your way more than
once, but each time you passed on them—as you should have done from the start—and
the one good thing is that no one tried to persuade you otherwise. Marcus mumbled a
little encouragement, but his words had seemed deflated and half-hearted. And now, he
has just finished his roll, crapping out after two throws of the dice. It’s been that kind of
night, he says to no one. He sighs and pinches his last green chip.

How you feeling, my man? he asks, slapping you on the back. You would
normally see the white flash of his teeth, his shining confidence burning your eyes. But
not tonight. Tonight he looks almost serious. You’ve lost track of how much he lost, how
much everyone else lost, but you know in both cases it was a lot. You feel sorry for
Marcus, and you hate the smug looks on Gene and Stickman’s faces. You can’t wait for
this night to be over, can’t wait for Marcus to lose his last chip, and you yours, so that the
both of you can leave this house and never return. You think that perhaps Marcus might
learn a valuable lesson from this experience. You think you can help.

You place your last red chip on the pass line. I’m feeling good, you tell Marcus,
and smile your own smile. You will help him, teach him just the lesson his pathological
need for gambling requires. Marcus stares at you, gauging you, gears grinding in his
head. All right, he says. All right, more forcefully this time. Slaps his chip down on the
pass line.

Change for that? Gene asks him, genuinely amused.
Marcus grins, his eyes glazed and, you think, submissive. No, he tells Gene.

Twenty-five to pass. Gene turns to Stickman, tells him to push you the dice and get it on.

You pick up the dice, shake them, and let them fly to the end of the table.

Eleven yo, Stickman calls out. Gene nonchalantly flips a couple of chips toward you and Marcus like they’re worth the clay they’re made from. Same bet? Gene asks.

No, we’ll press the bets, you reply quickly. Marcus snaps his gaze at you, jumps when you slap him on the back and tell him that everything’s fine and why wouldn’t he want to go for it anyway? What has he got to lose?

Marcus blinks rapidly. His mouth makes weird shapes but no words come out. Finally, he nods and drops his newly-won chip onto his last one.

Gene says, All right. We got some big players in the house. And he laughs for the first time tonight, but it’s tainted with a kind of menace. Stickman chuckles too, bares his teeth like an aroused dog.

You take the dice and toss them into the air. When they land, Marcus yells, Seven up!

Stickman hooks the dice with his stick, flicks them toward you. Like the man said—seven up, he says. Good toss, Roller.

Gene splashes a few more chips in your direction, asks if you’re pressing again.

This time it’s Marcus who responds, Of course we are—right? You hear him, but it takes you a moment before you realize he’s speaking to you. Right? Marcus asks again.

Sure, sure, you tell him. It’s becoming difficult to keep your smile. This is not what you want. You want Marcus to lose his money so that maybe the fucker will learn a bit of self-restraint. You want him to lose so that he won’t call on your ass at midnight to
gamble at some strange house in some strange neighborhood with people who, you’re sure, can’t be trusted.

You shake the dice and underhand them toward the far end of the table, this time putting extra loft in your toss. And it works.

No roll, no roll! Stickman barks. Keep the fuckin’ dice on the table, Roller. Gene says nothing, but a smirk plays with his lips. Despite Stickman’s warning, you know the two of them—the House—are happy to see the dice leave the table. Crap shooters are a superstitious bunch and throwing hot dice from the table is always good for House business.

New dice for the shooter, Gene says, then looks at Stickman, who nods and fumbles with something under the table. He spills five die onto the table and sticks them to you. Normally, you are careful in picking your dice, but right now you’re not looking to win. You’re looking to end this goddamned game and take Marcus and get the hell out of here. You select two die from the table: one red and one green—another violation of the gambler’s guidebook.

Marcus taps your shoulder. Hey, man, maybe you might want to get two green ones instead, or maybe two reds. What do you think?

It’ll be fine, you tell him, your voice thick and drippy. And you throw the dice.

Nine is the number, Stickman calls out. Bets? Numbers? C’mon, we need some play, he says. No one around the table moves. The scene reminds you of a painting of a group of dogs shooting pool. Except the scene you’re in now involves a pair of dice, a somber atmosphere, and humans.
You smile as you flip the dice to the backstop. You imagine the dice adding to seven. It’s nine up. By the time Marcus shouts and claps, your smile has vanished.

It’s Stickman’s turn to stare in disbelief. Even Gene looks surprised, his brow a landscape of lines and creases. Marcus, of course, is unaware of these details. He only cares about money and how much of it he’s won. He laughs, slaps you on the back, and says, That’s two hundred—two hundred and forty for the both of us! Marcus turns his attention to Gene, tells him to keep the hundred on the pass line. Marcus rattles his new chips in a cupped hand as if he’s rolling dice, as if he’s trying to feel the same thing you feel. His raw energy fills the room. C’mon, Roller—keep it coming, he says. And he is the same Marcus all over again, the one that pulled you from the soft beginnings of sleep. You feel like a failure for having won back part of his money.

Stickman pays out the winners with the chips he began stacking in front of him. Before he’s finished, he has no more chips left; Gene pays out the remainder. Other than you and Marcus, two other guys are at the table. One is a middle-aged guy who reeks of alcohol and smoke, but is still coherent enough to take interest in the game. He’s a sizable, thick-necked, construction-type worker, or maybe a guy who drives a tow truck. The other guy leans over the table at the far end—the Hawaiian guy who was here when you entered the room, only now he’s not so glaring and unfriendly. He even nods at you, his eyes brimming with hope. More chips hit the table. There are voices all at once:

_Dealer, twenty-five on the seven-eleven. Dealer, twenty on the hard-ways, all numbers._

_Dealer, press my bet. Let’s go, Shooter._

And you roll. The dice bounce and flip and stop: three and three. Stickman grunts, says, Six, hard six. Pay the man at the end.
Dealer—bet, Marcus chimes in. He throws his chips—all of them—to Gene.

Dealer, he repeats. Numbers, all across. And Gene begins to stack the chips into their appropriate boxes.

Your desperation is building. This was never your intention. There’s a ton of money on the table—more than there’s ever been on any one roll tonight—and these people, these complete strangers, are counting on you, willing themselves into your skin so that they might have some consequence on the numbers you’re about to invoke.

Marcus watches your every move, his eyes huge and manic.

When you throw the dice, you almost expect things to move in slow motion like a scene from a movie, but they don’t. The dice hit the backstop, fall to the table, and roll to a stop at perfectly normal speed. Five is your number. More chips hit the table. Gene builds more chip stacks within the grid lines on the table, distributes some of his own chips to everyone. You wonder why he also slides you chips, but Marcus cuts into your thoughts, tells you that it’s okay ‘cause he put down some bets for you. You nod dumbly at him, like he’s speaking in a foreign language.

You roll five again: more chips. Then ten, with two fives showing—the hard-way ten. Then four. Eight. Eleven. Nine. More chips. You’ve lost track of your original point, the first number you hit when you started this roll. You would have remembered your number except that you’re suddenly, utterly uncomfortable. Your palms are slick and moist. They won’t seem to dry no matter how many times you wipe them on your pants. Your shirt sticks to you like a second skin, only tighter and hotter and lined with prickly fibers. Ten. Hard-way eight. More and more chips. You drop them in front of you into troughs that ring the table like stadium seats. You have undisciplined chip rows of red,
white, green, and black. It’s only when you roll a six and the other three players shout in unison, that you realize you’ve hit your original number.

Marcus thumps you on the back and holds up his hand as if you’re about to high-five him, but you don’t. It doesn’t matter though, because he gets high-fives from the other guys on the table. You see the gleam of smiling, exposed teeth. You hear laughter. The players’ voices swarm into a collective buzzing.

Gene pushes a stack of chips toward you but leaves it so that you have to lean way over to get it. Stickman fists the sides of the table, his tattoos writhing again like something’s moving under his skin. The House is visibly upset, and you think this cannot be good for anyone.

The guy with the thick neck suddenly announces that he’s going to cash out. He appears sober now, the smile he had just a few seconds ago disappears when he places his chips in front of Gene who does not immediately move.

You’re going to cash out? Gene asks. What? Now? He stares until the other guy looks away, down at the table, picks the felt surface with a grease-stained nail.

Yeah, Gene, the guy with the thick neck says. It’s late. I gotta work early tomorrow.

Gene continues to stare. His skin tightens around his face, thick veins rising on his neck and forehead. He looks hollow and dangerous. Finally, he turns to Stickman who grunts, unzips his fanny pack, and flips through a wad of bills. He tosses a few hundred-dollar bills in front of Gene.

You do not envy the guy with the thick neck. He looks like he wants to grab his money and run, but you know he won’t. He’ll stand there for as long as it takes, until
Gene tells him that it’s okay to take his money and leave, which is what Gene does, eventually. Get out of here, you fucking ape, Gene says. And in his every measured step toward the door, you know the man is suppressing the urge to run.

And what about you two? It’s Gene addressing you and Marcus. You two going to duck out on us like that fucker? With our money?

You don’t know how to respond, but Marcus jumps in. Nah, Gene. It’s not like that, he says. We still want game. You nod vigorously. Stickman scowls, pushes the dice toward you, and says, You haven’t crapped out yet, Roller. You’re still on.

Silence. The muffled click of dice as you shake them in your hand, the hand which shakes on its own from a flood of adrenaline—the fight-or-flight response, you think. Your hand opens, and releases the dice, which collide and clatter at the far end of the table.

Eleven yo, Stickman says with only his lips moving. Pay the man, he tells Gene.

You don’t know what to do. You should be feeling the rush of winning. Crap shooters describe this moment as a sort of unconsciousness: the dice simply reacting to fate—the universe itself—and nothing else. There is no thought involved, no secret strategy for rolling the dice, only a pure, unadulterated thrill in winning. You have never come close to winning like this before; you realize you should be enjoying it, but you’re not. Instead, you’re nauseous. Your hands won’t stop shaking. Your neck is sore and cramped, your eyes red and dry. You want to go home.

Once the chips are paid to the winners, you roll the dice again without ceremony, and watch as they flip end over end, dots blurring into white streaks. Two. Craps. You
lose a small amount of chips but you’re not out of the roll yet—not until you roll a playable number and seven out.

The old guy at the end of the table gathers up his chips, and piles them in the center of the table. I’m done for tonight, he says in a gravelly voice to Gene. Then the old man walks over to you. He grins, takes your hand, and shakes it. This is for you, Roller, he says, pressing two black chips into your palm. Been a while since I seen a roll like that.

Still gripping your hand, he bends close to you, whispers into your ear, Don’t leave without losing back some of your chips. He straightens and smiles warmly.

This old man gotta get some sleep, he says aloud, to no one, everyone. A neat stack of bills waits on the table where his chips used to be. He takes the money, taps it on the table, and folds it into his pants pocket. Good luck, boys, he says, then turns around and walks out the door.

You wipe the cool sweat from your forehead. Just the two of you now, you think. You and Marcus against the House, and the House does not look pleased. Gene hulks above his dwindling chip stacks. If they were once high-rise towers, they are now the models of suburbia: stunted and entirely unimposing. Stickman is noticeably silent, though his eyes are smoky and wild with losing. He looks not so much older than you and you wonder if this makes him potentially stupid or dangerous. What you need is a miracle. You need to pile a stack of chips on the line and lose it to the House. You need to lose enough and you need to lose very soon, before you inflict more damage to their wallets and egos.
Marcus puts a hand on your shoulder. Hey, man, is all he says to you. You can feel his hand shaking, hear the tremor in his voice. You nod, as if to tell him: it’s okay, you know, you understand.

Marcus slides a large stack of chips to the pass line. You grab a neat row of your own chips and do the same. Gene tilts his head and says, You trying to take us down, eh? His eyes are hooded, deep. Trying to break the House?

No one says anything for what seems like a long time. Behind Gene, you notice Stickman in the background fidgeting with his fanny pack, drumming his fingers on it. You think you should be very afraid now because these guys look desperate and beaten. They have nothing more to lose, and now there’s just you and Marcus in this strange house, and maybe the strong-arm watching the door outside.

But you’re not afraid, exactly. The laws of the universe are on your side. Good rolls don’t last forever. Great rolls don’t last forever. They *can’t* last forever.

Stickman whips the dice to your side of the table. Marcus flinches reflexively, as if he’d expected the dice to be fired at his head. You calmly pick them up, blow on them, will them to show a number—any number now but seven or eleven. And you toss the dice and watch them arc smoothly toward the far side of the table where they bounce and spin and stop. Eight.

Marcus breathes quickly, audibly beside to you. Stickman does not call out the number, just pulls the dice with the curved end of his stick and shoves them toward you. Gene is motionless, a huge, looming presence over his chips, over the table, the room.

You can feel Marcus watching you, waiting for your next move. You nod at him and flip a handful of chips near a large row of numbered boxes. Numbers, three units all
across, you tell Gene, who stacks them with neither enthusiasm nor reluctance. Marcus
follows your lead, croaks a similar request.

You don’t know how you’re able to lift the dice from the table or cup them in
your hand. Everything feels weighted and slow. The air is warm and wet and thick, and
when you take in a breath, you remind yourself not to choke. You wonder how your thin
arms are able to hold the dice for so long. You wonder how the dice keep from melting in
your hands like candy. When you cast the dice into the air, you imagine a child, a rock
and a quiet pool of water. So much depends on the rock, and how it breaks the smooth
liquid plane, sending out a ring of slow waves that ripple and ripple the shoreline forever.

When it’s over, you and Marcus leave the house briskly. The big guy guarding the door is
now facedown on the floor, snoring as you tiptoe past him and several empty bottles of
beer.

Outside, it’s deathly quiet. You whisper to Marcus, ask him what time it is, and he
tells you it’s almost four. The two of you start for your car that’s parked at the end of the
road. Behind you, back in the house, you think you hear glass breaking, then muffled
voices that might or might not be shouting. You don’t want to know what’s happening.
You walk faster but it doesn’t feel fast enough. The car is just a few houses ahead—the
only one parked on the street.

You feel the strain of silence, like a thin, fragile chord between you and Marcus:
one sound, one missed step and it’ll snap. You peer around nervously. The houses press
in on the narrow street, their dark windows watching. You have no friends in this
neighborhood; no one would help you if something were to happen.
As you near your car, something is clearly wrong. Marcus has noticed it too. He slows walking, whispers, Shit.

There’s a gaping hole in the center of your windshield. A fist-sized rock sits guiltily in the passenger’s seat. You and Marcus walk around the car, hear loose bits of asphalt crunching underfoot. On the back window, someone’s tagged LOSER with white spray paint.

You unlock the door, open it, and see the rock and the sparkling crumbs of glass strewn about the interior like diamonds. It’s almost pretty. You want to cry, but you know it is not about your car.

Those fuckers, you hear Marcus hiss. Those dirty mother-fuckers.

You have no idea who Marcus is talking about, or if he even knows who has done this. You don’t care. You brush glass from the seats and grab the rock that is warm to your touch.

Man, I don’t know what to say, Marcus says. He can’t help himself from talking, making sense of things.

You look at him for a second, then let out a laugh that echoes across the street. Marcus crouches instinctively, looks around for signs of danger. In the nearest house window, a light blinks on. Marcus stares at you, horrified. He doesn’t know what else to do, and so he just stares. And you laugh and toss the rock into your backseat and get into the car, knowing that Marcus will follow.
a love poem

It’s hard these days to write of newly opened blossoms, soft snowfall, or the world gone pink and creamy when our thoughts hover over a landscape choked with weeds. It’s not that the clouds have lost their twilight colors, or that jugs of turned water have soured; the coals we fanned and flamed early on still smolder beneath thin ash. But we were new then: how could we blame ourselves for those easy words, so quick to a morning’s first offering, and yet so quick to rip and tear our silk bindings? Words ruin us. How I wish instead for those heat-filled afternoons beneath the spinning blades of a ceiling fan. For the early days we spent driving through the high Colorado winds, sending songs into the steel sky. So I’ll wait for now to see where our footfalls sound next.

I’ll wait, as you wait also, for this dull ember to flame or fade, for these summer leaves to green and swell, crisp and fall.
Broken

*

He looks up into her old face, her head nodding, telling him, It's ok. He twists through the break in the fence, the boards bending, bleeding a trail of soot on his white shirt, his new shoes with the velcro straps and the pocket that hides his quarter. It's ok, she motions with her eyes, her hands, They don't need it. And so he creeps across the lawn like a cat that smells the forbidden catch, creeps until the coconuts are green and round and within his reach. Before he can stop himself, he scoops one up, cradles it the way he wants to be held by her, and runs for the fence, her open, waiting arms.

*
He does not like the shouting. He does not like the anger, the words he knows he is forbidden to repeat. His grandfather sits in a chair, watching the television, his back straight and stiff as his own walking cane. There is no alarm in his black eyes, no color to his loose skin which used to resemble the packed earth he and his work crew uncovered when they split holes in the city streets. His grandfather turns to him, slowly, with those gazing eyes like a tin soldier’s. *You watch. Jimmy going give him lickens. No tell yo maddah.* And the boy sits too, and listens to his uncles’ heavy footsteps, the words he knows he is forbidden to repeat, the dull thump of flesh striking flesh, until it all bleeds away into the soundless blur of everything else, even the television the boy and his grandfather watch: the pretty faces, the mouths that open and close but say nothing.

*
The car has just left him. Outside the house, other cars are squeezed onto the lawn, the street. His duffel bag with the sleepover clothes is tucked in the curve of his arm. He begins the climb up the stairs to the waiting arms of his mother, and on the way he is mindful of the cracked boards, the faded, curling paint, the nails that, over the years, have worked themselves free from the fast wood. And at the top he is greeted by the already-open door, the thick gathering of his aunts and uncles smiling at him through their pink, puffy faces. It is his mother who finds him, holds him tight against her rocking chest, and tells him that she is gone, gone: his grandmother is dead. At first he does not know what to do. But soon, the tears rise in his throat, stream down his face, and it is as if everything is as it should be, except that his grandmother is gone, and that, although he cannot know it yet, he will never again be as young as he was the day before.

*
It is as tender a moment as they’ve ever had, he thinks, holding still his grandfather’s head with the tips of his fingers. The hair clippers hum to life, pass over the head in a smooth arc. The boy remembers his grandfather’s instructions: *Short. Short as can go without making bolo-head.* He guides the clippers, fills their teeth with gray hair, and is amazed at the ease of cutting. He would do this forever if he could—clip and cut whatever is overgrown, fix whatever is broken. When it is finished, his grandfather’s hands rub his scalp like some marvelous new thing, nods and rubs and rubs and says it’s good, and the boy is sure he means it because his grandfather has never lied to him, has never shaded the hardest of truths. Will not lie, even later, on the drive to the hospital, when the boy asks why not have the barber cut his hair. The grandfather will tell him, with a slow wisdom he will have learned in these final weeks, that it’s because he didn’t want anyone to know. Because he didn’t want anyone to care.
But He Nevah

I saw my faddah cry one time. We was standing outside,

next to da fence da neighbahs went put up one Sunday

morning. Our dog was lying between us on da patch of mondo

grass an da ants was a’ready going fo’ his eyes.

He told me he went wait too long take da dog to da vet—shoulda

went take um lass night cause his breat’ came in slow whistles.

But he nevah.

I jus stood there, hearing his voice crack, staring up at his face but wanting

fo’ turn away when I seen his eyes staht fo’ get teary. I remembah

tinking he was going turn away—at leas’ try hide his face from me.

But he nevah.
Eating Crab

Sunday. As we push our way through the thinning trees behind the schoolyard, clouds of mosquitoes swarm to us, attracted to the heat of our bodies. I can feel them feeding on me, the tiniest pinpricks, as if the fine hairs of my arm were being tugged at, even though I’ve made sure to double-coat every inch of my exposed skin with insect repellant. I look behind me and see Jenny beating at the air in front of her face, the new, white bucket in her hand starkly out of place in this damp and muddy world. I smile and tell her the mosquitoes won’t bother us for much longer.

The path down to the water is slippery, glazed with old mud, and it’s smaller than I remember it. It feels like the hau bushes have grown inward, trying to fill in the tunnel someone a long time ago hacked through their twisting branches. When we get to the foot of the path, the vegetation opens up and we see the shallow sand flats of Kaneohe Bay exposed by the dropping tide. We’re wearing only rubber slippers, and our first steps out into the water are slowed by soft, sucking mud. A few times we have to pull our feet naked from the muck and quickly reach down to grab our slippers before the mud swallows them up. After twenty yards or so, the water rises to our shins and the ground becomes firmer, though never quite solid, like we’re walking on a huge, damp sponge.

Out on the shallow sand flats, fish flee before us: mullets, a few weke and barracuda—small ones mostly. When my father took me here as a kid, he used to tell me that old-timers used this area to fish for mullet—a difficult, frustrating activity that approaches art form rather than function—and for trapping ‘oama, juvenile weke, with chicken-wire traps during the summer months, which was and still is illegal. I doubt now
that this place holds the same numbers of fish it once did, or that anyone comes here for anything other than novel exploration. But as I take a quick survey of the area, I’m genuinely surprised at the absence of rubbish and pollution from run-off. The water is low and clear, like I remember, the sand white and smooth. On the outer edge of the flats, a lone fisherman whips his line into waist-deep water.

Jenny puts the bucket down on the nearest concrete marker. There are dozens of these markers dotting the shallows: stone slabs the size of pool tables that rise up from the water like gravestones. There doesn’t seem to be a pattern to their placement as far as I can tell. In fact, I’ve never known who built them or why or when. They might have once been moorings for small flat-bottoms; or markers to warn boaters of the flats; or the abandoned efforts of military precaution. Dried husks of oysters cover the sides of the markers, indicating the potential of high tide, which is more than a foot above the current one. I look to Jenny, tell her we have a couple of hours before the water begins to rise.

She picks up a red scoop net and asks me how to catch the crabs we’re after.

“T’ll show you,” I tell her, and walk out into the water with my own scoop net at the ready, my sloshing clumsy and loud. A few dust clouds billow up from the sandy bottom in front of me like fresh chimney smoke, but I can’t imagine the crabs who made them are much larger than a poker chip so I don’t bother with them. After a few yards of careful scrutiny, I spot a decent-sized fellow frozen in a mock-challenging stance, pinchers spread wide, body as high off the sandy bottom as its thin legs allow. I say “mock” because it’s smaller than a drink coaster and only slightly more imposing. It can’t possibly want anything to do with me.
“Got one over here,” I call to Jenny. She walks over to me cautiously, slightly untrusting, places her hand on my shoulder when she gets near. I steady my net over the crab, careful not to disturb the water. “See? You just have to be slow with them. You don’t want to frighten them.” And I scoop.

A thundercloud of sand and mud and debris erupts from the patch of sand where the crab was standing as I pull my net from the water. Jenny and I are breathless as I shake sand from the net. We both huddle over the net’s mouth and see a crab emerge from the murk, claws outstretched, angry and perfect, staring back at us from the bottom of the mesh.

“Not bad, ah?” I say this more to myself than to Jenny, who stands in the swirling water, mesmerized by my shelled captive. I flip the crab into the waiting bucket and continue my search. As I walk away, I can hear the crab skittering wildly inside the bucket.

A long time ago, my family—me, my father, my mother, and my brother—would come with the low tide to this exact place on weekend afternoons when the still, warm Konas smoothed the water’s surface into glass. As always, my father led the way, his over exuberance not spreading in us, somehow, but smothering us.

I was only a child then. I couldn’t have been more than nine years old, and it was, as I remember, mostly fun. Except for him, my father, the days we went crabbing weren’t just for fun: the possibility of bringing home crabs to eat wasn’t enough. The thrill of capture wasn’t enough. We had to produce, all of us, as a family. He was on a different sort of itinerary, as if it were an important job that needed doing, like mowing an
overgrown lawn or laying sandbags across a flooded driveway, and so he laid into the crabs with a wild-eyed ferocity.

When we got down to the water, my mother would place our cooler, with its carefully packed sodas and sandwiches, onto one of the cement markers, and then she’d put on her large hat, her clean pair of *tabis*, her long sleeve t-shirt despite the heat. My brother and I would sometimes apply sunscreen to our faces, sometimes not, and on occasion we’d take off our t-shirts and invite the sun’s sharp rays on our skin and feel like men. And then we’d be off, nets poised like cocked rifles, in the wake of my father’s quick trail.

I remember sometimes he’d take a short break from stalking the crabs in order to gauge his family’s progress. He’d watch me flail at the water—usually missing my target—and offer me pointers on technique. *No pound the water like that! How you going catch something when you scare um away first?* He’d tell me which crabs to look for, about the ones we didn’t want. *Ne’mind the Samoan crabs wit the blue claws—they pilau buggas, always looking fo’ take one big bite outta you.* About his favorites, the ones we wanted. *White crab meat da sweetest one, their miso the best.* And what to do if we found them. *You see one, you bedda not miss. You hear me? No miss, or you going circle um till you find um again.* It was more threat than instruction, more pressure than pleasure. And it usually worked.

After a couple of hours we’d usually fill our quota: a five-gallon bucket a quarter-way full of white crabs. It was a job, if not well done, at least done. And then we’d leave the water. My father never led the way up through the trees. He lingered in the shallows at the foot of the trail as if personally insulted that any remaining crabs would walk
unchallenged across his stretch of sand flat while sunlight remained. The rest of us were already in the car when he finally materialized from the trail shadows. Wordlessly, he’d hand his net to me or my brother—a few wet, wriggling crabs struggling to climb up from the bottom—and fire up the car engine, leaving the bay behind us in a purple cloud of exhaust.

Now, the crabs aren’t as big or as many as they once were. I’m only able to net a few white ones, and of these I keep none. They look small and fragile, as if cooking would dissolve them, and they’re well below the legal size. It’s the Samoan crabs that have mostly taken over the area. They flee from us at regular intervals, skittering away like roaches startled by sudden light. Samoan crabs in other parts have been known to grow up to nine inches across their shells and can reach an impressive weight of nearly five pounds. The largest ones we catch today are no more than six inches wide—outstretched claws included.

But I’m okay with it. I don’t need the crabs, and although Jenny loves them—I often look back and see her staring into the bucket, watching our captives bump and jostle like playground children—I know she’s here for the joy of something new, more than anything else. And although I tell her I’m here to escape an unusually humid winter afternoon, I can’t help but think this has all somehow been planned in my head for a while without my own clear knowing, the memories of my youth swirling and rolling like forgotten broth on a stove burner. There, by the deepest marker, is where my brother and I used to cannonball into the water, madly splashing back to the platform as if sharks were homing in on us. There, is where I parted the curtain of reeds, and discovered my first glass float, like a muddied jewel, the blue-tinged bubble half-sunken in the earth.
And there, the marker nearest the trail, is where another family called to me, and fed me potato chips and melting shave-ice cups which, afterwards, earned me dirty but worried looks from my mother.

I round a bend of hau trees that have taken root on a thin sandbar. Jenny is far behind me, tending to her crabs, but it’s better this way; I want to do some exploring by myself. On the other side of the sandbar, large two-story houses with manicured lawns line the shore. I’ve never been this far from the trail before. I look back for the white beacon of our bucket, but can barely make out the marker we left it on. All around me are the hissing, popping sounds of the exposed flats at low tide. I figure there are no crabs here. The water seems too clean, too purified. There’s not enough mud and junk and garbage in the water for the crabs to feed, so I head back to where I came from.

It’s as if the sandbar is a border for the two areas. One, white-sanded and idyllic, a haven for migrating kōlea and the reef-walking residents of upper-suburbia; the other a home for mud-loving mullet and Samoan crabs, however limited in size or number, and shadowed by thick stands of hau and swarming mosquitoes.

On my way back to the first marker, I manage to scoop a few decent-sized crabs. I drop them into the bucket and watch the circus of activity within. One large guy seems to be the bull of the bucket. He hulks over a good chunk of plastic real estate, and to perhaps emphasize his no-nonsense attitude, he grips another crab’s broken-off appendage in his pincher like a grisly prize.

Jenny walks over to me and smiles and asks if it’s the largest crab I’ve seen. I tell her yes, it’s pretty big. I know it will make her day.

“Can we eat these crabs?” she asks.
“Yeah,” I tell her. “If you want to, then sure.”

We have a total of about three dozen crabs. Of these, only a dozen or so are edible, meaning they’re large enough for us to actually handle after cooking, and if in the highly unlikely event that a game warden stops us on the way to the car, we won’t be facing a stiff and much-deserved fine. We dump the smaller crabs into a shallow depression in the mud and watch them scramble away or hunker down in the murk as if, once out of sight, they are out of danger.

Climbing up the path to the car is not as difficult as climbing down. Or maybe our bucket of crabs renews our vigor. We reach the car in no time. The mosquitoes don’t even have time to lead an attack. Jenny turns to me and asks how I’m going to cook the crabs. I tell her I’m not sure how, and that we can ask my mother when we get back to her house right up the road.

“What about cleaning them?”

“You just rinse them with water,” I tell her.

She thinks about this for a moment. “Are you sure they’re safe to eat?”

I do my best to smile for her. “Of course. They’re from Kaneohe Bay.” Until now, I never thought to wonder if the crabs were okay or not. I’ve heard of monster Samoan crabs pulled up from brown depths of the Ala Wai Canal. I’ve heard of people laying crab nets in the chemical-laden waters off Westlock and bringing them up loaded with white crabs and thin, sweet Hawaiian crabs. Fish in those places regularly wash up dead on shore by the hundreds. But still. “We’ll wash them thoroughly, okay?” It can’t hurt.

My father, too, believed in clean crabs. When he got home (a three minute drive, tops) from taking us crabbing, he went about preparing his catch for the cooking pot. The
white crabs were carefully poured into a large, metal colander, and soon our carport echoed with the clicking, scraping, fluttering symphony of their activity. Then my father gently thumbed the end of a garden hose to spray the crabs down, to wash away any stray bits of leaves and twigs or sand and mud until the crabs shone with a kind of purity that somehow indicated to him that, yes, they were clean: they were ready for cooking.

He worked on the crabs diligently, though in silence, with priestlike concentration. My brother and I enjoyed watching this process, him. But most of all, we loved watching the crabs. We knew the strongest crabs were the only ones moving by now, though they moved sluggishly, as if they knew it was the end and that any resistance was futile. The others simply hunkered down in the colander, foam bubbling from their mouths. Some crabs displayed the ravaged hallmarks of their capture: missing legs, a broken pincher, or worst of all, a cracked shell. It was always surprising to me that my father didn't make me or my brother wash down the crabs. It was as if the act were entirely his chore, his way of making amends.

Once, my brother and I grabbed the two largest white crabs of the day, held them face to face, and guided their open pinchers toward the other's unblinking eyestalks. The crabs were docile and cooperative, dreamily unaware of their own impending mutilation. It seemed funny at the time, the way children's cruel games are often fun but never fully conscious.

Eh, you fricken kids—knock it off! My father's shout so startled us that we dropped the crabs to the cement ground.
I remember a sickening crack as one crab landed top-shell first. My father ran to them, picked them up off the ground, and placed them back in the colander. No do that to the crabs—nevah again—you hear? There was almost a wounded look on his face as he glared at both of us. Then he turned on the hosepipe and gave the crabs another thorough washing.

When it was time for cooking the crabs, the smell must have driven my father crazy. That sweet, salt odor filling the kitchen and the rest of the house—the smell that burst from the open windows like a sticky, invisible fog. There was no escaping it. Even bathing in the tub at the opposite end of our house, I could smell the steaming crab. I remember my father’s quivery anticipation. He would line the dinner table with old newspaper. There were no placemats or glass dishes or forks or knives, just the newspaper, a large bowl for the crabs, and some paper plates. In the giddy silence of waiting, my father, my brother, and I stared down at the table, to the random blocks of newspaper text. We wanted to talk to each other—or at least I did, I remember, always—but at the time it was the hardest thing to do. I must have thought my father was such a weird guy. He had such weird passions, such inexplicable distastes. Talking to him was a struggle at that age, there were no right words for anything, and yet it seemed to grow more difficult as I grew up and he grew older. It was easier to wait for the crabs to cook, and to eat them together, and in that way share in something that was good and clean and pure.

I think now that my mother realized this, as did my father. And so she went with us to the beach those many years ago, despite her lack of enthusiasm for the sun and the
water and anything that wasn’t clean and devoid of germs. Now she’s too old to follow us down the path to the sea, but it seems right somehow.

When we return to the house, I carry the bucket of crabs to the coiled hosepipe on the side of the carport. My mother comes out and peers into the bucket. “Oh, Samoan crabs,” she says matter-of-factly.

I nod and tell her there were quite a few.

“They’re small,” she tells me, “but they’ll be sweet.” She stands there for a moment, as if pulling something at the tip of her memory. “No whites?” she asks. I tell her no, and she appears satisfied, shuffles back into the house. In no time at all I hear the clanking of pots and lids coming from around the kitchen.

Jenny and I hose down the nets and empty the cooler. I dump the crabs into a plastic strainer that’s actually made for drying vegetables. The crabs go wild as they clamber for position at the bottom, but as soon as I spray them down with water they become as placid as sunning turtles.

The crabs cleaned and calmed, Jenny asks what’s next.

I shrug. “Cook them, I guess.”

There’s a pot of water already steaming on the stove as I enter the kitchen. “Add a little salt, and put the crabs in right away,” my mother says, clearing the kitchen table. “It’s better if the water’s not boiling when you add the crabs—they won’t feel it as much.”

I doubt somehow that a slow cooking death is better for them, but I slide them into the pot anyway, and watch as they settle on the bottom like river rocks. Some crabs scramble for the rim of the pot as if it’s less likely they’ll feel the heat there, but most
simply stay where they fall. A few land upside down and don’t move. The bull of the bucket clears room at the center of the pot and sits and waits for the inevitable. It’s rather noble, the way he’s accepting fate: right at the center of things, no bustling about, still holding firm his trophy claw. I cover the pot just as the crabs are beginning to blush, and the first tiny bubbles rise from the steel bottom; I’ll give them at least a little dignity.

Jenny helps me line the table with newspaper. We take out paper plates and napkins, and ready a large glass bowl for serving. I can tell she’s excited about the idea of eating crabs we caught ourselves in the ocean. She asks me when the last time was that I did this. I tell her that I don’t know exactly, but that I haven’t done this since I was a kid.

My mother sits at the end of the table, reading today’s newspaper and trying not to look very interested. “It’s been a really long time. Over twenty years, probably,” she tells us. She turns a page and says without looking up, “I think the crabs are done already.”

She’s right, of course. The smell of crab drifts over the dinner table. I hurry to the pot, open the lid, and look into the swirling steam. The crabs are a bright, startling orange. The rolling water is so turbulent it begins banging the crabs against the sides of the pot. I switch the stove off and dump the water and the crabs into the strainer. Crab steam rushes up from the sink and envelopes my face with its unique stench. I slip the crabs carefully into the glass bowl and bring it to the table. Jenny asks me which ones we should eat first. I give her the largest one, the bull, and tell her to go ahead. It’s the only way that seems right.

And for the next hour we crack shells and split claws, spray crab juices onto the table, our clothes, our hair, the wonderful heat burning our fingertips, the sweet, fine
meat caught in our nails. Early on, Jenny asks me how to get into the thick shells. I
struggle with one, trying to break through the side, but it's Jenny who squeals with
discovery. She shows me how to rip open the carapace of the crab—dig into the
protruding underbelly and pull down. Then we both remove the feathery gills and sip the
pungent miso, rich with oils and undeveloped eggs. I offer a plate to my mother, but she
politely declines, tells me she can't eat shellfish.

"Ever?" I ask.

"Yeah. For the longest time, remember?"

In the deep recesses of my memory, the knowledge is indeed there, but buried
beneath so many layers of selected images and sounds and moments that I've forgotten it
until now, or chosen to. My recollected portrait of this act, so many years ago, included
her.

Jenny points to the remaining crabs with a greasy finger. "Aren't you going to eat
more? You hardly ate any." I look down to my plate and then to hers. There are a few
discarded shells and broken bits of crab, mostly claws, but it's nothing compared to her
own steep pile of carefully cleaned remains.

Just as I'm about to answer her, my mother cuts in. "He never used to eat crab,
either."

I'm genuinely surprised. "But I did," I tell her. I must have. "Me and Dad and
Greg. We used to sit here and eat crab after the beach." Though it was a long time ago, I
remember doing it.

"No, you kids never used to eat the crabs," she says. "Your father used to come
home and clean the crabs, and eat it at the table by himself." She paused, and her words
hung in the air like smoke. “Once in a great while, one of you kids might have sat here and watched him eat, but you both told him you hated eating crab.” She goes back to reading the newspaper. “And so he ate by himself.”

Jenny and I drive home through the Ko‘olau after cleaning the dishes and wiping the table with a soapy cloth. The odor of crab is still with us, though we both washed our hands with detergent and showered and changed into fresh clothes. Jenny’s tired, as I am, but she’s happy and already looking forward to the next time we eat crab.

“Weren’t they great?” she asks, smiling, her hand resting atop mine.

I nod, and continue to drive. “Rain’s coming,” I tell her, and point to the mountains looming above us like giant, green sentinels. Dark clouds descend from the tops. A light drizzle already mists the highway ahead of us.

“The crabs were so good. I mean I can’t believe you never ate them when you were a kid.” I want to tell her I can hardly believe it myself. “I think my lips are actually sore from eating so many of them,” she says. “What about you?”

I can’t answer. My lips aren’t sore from eating the crabs. In fact, I don’t know the feeling; I never have. I think about my father. Sitting there at the table, alone with his bowl of steaming crabs. Perhaps my brother and I were playing outside, or lying in the living room watching cartoons, away from his hard eyes. My mother might have been in the bathroom scrubbing the stink and mud from her hands. And perhaps my father sat there in a moment of silence before breaking the shells. Perhaps he sat there, readying his lips and taking in the smell, hoping one of us would keep him company.

“Did you even like the crabs?” Jenny asks quietly.
We round a bend and approach the open mouth of the highway tunnel. To our left, the wide curve of Kaneohe Bay is visible. “Yeah,” I tell her. “They were good.” I switch on the truck’s lights just before we enter the tunnel. “They were really good.”