

OUT IN THE DISTANCE

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By

Brian K. Lieu

Thesis Committee:

Susan Schultz, Chairperson

Gary Pak

John Zuern

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The Introduction in Front of You

Nine days and nine nights: that's how long we were out there. We only stopped in Hainan for a few hours to get water. We were on a leaking ship circling somewhere in the South China Sea, lost with a captain who didn't know how to find Hong Kong. We didn't have much food and water, and when people threw up, worms moved around in their vomit. You know, everywhere I looked, there was nothing but water—no land. We were sardines on that boat—two-hundred people. Hawai'i law allows a maximum of six fishermen on a boat that size. We were so lucky: my cousin's boat didn't make it, but ours did. It took us nine days to get halfway to Hong Kong. When we ran out of water and were about to die, a fishing ship came and towed us to the Hong Kong harbor in less than a day. The men from our boat were breaking the walls on our boat to make it sink at the Hong Kong harbor, so there would be no way for them to refuse us.

In Hawai'i, *talking story* is a great part of the island culture, and its nucleus is voice. Hawai'i has a strong oral tradition, which is the method Kānaka Maoli use to record their genealogy and history. Orature “was a system of knowledge given mana through the lifeforce of the word. As it was given life through the leo (voice) of a chant” (Young 32), and so those who spoke and relayed mo'olelo were people with knowledge, and therefore people with strength, power, and respect. I also noticed the practice of talking story taking place on my grandmother's veranda every Sunday and was astonished with the global power and reverence that this practice carried. The interchange between my family members when we talk story cannot be replaced, and so

heteroglossia¹ is born; however, the heteroglossia of talk story is not as blatant in *Out in the Distance* as in real life on my grandma's porch, but instead subtly implied by putting my father's voice in the first-person (the storyteller) and mine as an external voice through my text (the listener). This is our voice, and this is how we exist.

The importance of voice and storytelling cannot be stressed enough; it is vital to our existence. Ngugi wa Thiong'o advances the theory of the bondsman and the writing master in *Globalectics*: "The oral, even when viewed as being (more) authentic or closer to the natural, is treated as the bondsman to the writing master. With orality taken as the source for the written, and orature as the raw material for literature..." (Thiong'o 52). The bondsman (slave) is to the oral as his master is to the written; a slave can survive without the master, but the master cannot survive without the slave. Orality was where literature began, where stories came from, and so retrieving and listening to a tale—or, in this case, my father's stories—from as close to the original source as possible is imperative to a people, as stories are what make a person exist. It was Eduardo Galeano who wrote, "[they] survived because they could talk... no one can stop the human voice... Because every single one of us has something to say to others..." (Galeano). What does a person have if without his/her voice? How does one exist past his/her time if without his/her story?

I never had a formal interview with my father; instead, the stories were free flowing and began as silence-breakers: he would be cooking pig feet stew or lamb curry, patiently inching through traffic, watching basketball, raking the yard, sitting under the dining room light. His stories spewed continuously, but they began to seem more like

¹ Heteroglossia is "another's speech in another's language... [serving] two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author... Always internally dialogized" (Bakhtin 324).

yarn as the tales continued to be told; but, after years of the same stories sounding mostly identical, it became obvious that the fables may have been factual—or mostly factual. Initially, I would vaguely pay attention to these silence-breakers—only picking up stories through my subconscious perhaps—until I had begun to find intrigue in them as I matured. From my interest came questions through which I would delve deeper into my father’s memory—what he would do every day at recess, how people fixed punctured bike tires on the curb, where to get midnight snacks. It was sometimes a difficult journey for him just to remember (or, perhaps, recreate). After listening to these stories, as well as his parents’ and siblings’ stories through him, I realized how little time I had spent with him, and I learned that he was eager to share these tales with someone. Although my father had always been ardent to archive his stories in me, I was never mature or attentive enough to receive them, and perhaps he was aware of that; maybe passing down his surname was not enough.

Every Sunday is like an open market, as my father’s family circles around my grandma’s lanai of mismatched chairs—surrounding a potluck of homemade and store-bought cuisine, varying in cultures from Vietnamese, Chinese, and whatever culture is responsible for fast food—and babble about the past and present. We sporadically feature distinguished guests—relatives from Los Angeles, elders from Vietnam, a grand aunt from down the block—who allow for a greater leap into the past than what the pool of our memories limits us to, sometimes opening new doors to stories already told dozens of times. I listen to the stories, join in on the laughter, hear the jokes but miss the punchlines (a language barrier is at fault, as I am not fluent in Vietnamese). The stories are literally all they have left of Vietnam; everything else had been forfeited. Where did we come from? Now, where did we really come from? What did we do? Why did we do that? Do

you remember that? How do you remember that? Why do you remember that? How the hell did we get to where we are now? Questions fuel the stories. Laughs and disagreements are as indisputably present as the flinging of morsels saturated in spit and plaque.

The stories told by my relatives, however, did not always match my father's, which caused me to question both my father's and the others' credibility. The struggle here is that my intention for *Out in the Distance* is for it to be a collection of nonfiction poems about my father's and his family's journey; but who is reliable, if anyone is? This sort of doubt is common with most new and aspiring nonfiction writers: Can I trust the interviewee? Is he or she credible? Taking a creative nonfiction workshop course answered this question. Trusting my father and the other storytellers is the best I can do as a nonfiction writer, because it is the best they can do to remember. Our past, as aging human beings, is only limited to what we can recollect—how we recall certain things happening or where we were when they happened. If that is how events are remembered, then it is still nonfiction.

The mind is fickle, and so is our memory. As writers, our duty is to bring the story as close to the experience as possible, fending with the subjects' variables. Carolyn Wells Kraus suggests that “reducing a person's story to words on a page robs it of complexity” (Kraus 284); however, we write what we know—in my case, what I'm told. Memory's imperfections enlighten the subject (and writer) about his identity. After realizing the magnitude of what he and his family went through, my father felt appreciative—not because of his family's success, but because they went through such struggles. The lapses and imperfections are what make this collection a book of poetic narratives and not a textbook of facts and history.

Recollection and trust are common complications with nonfiction writers during the interviewing process. Did the events in my father's stories really happen as he said they did, or was he trying to spice up his tales? Memory is fickle—a continuous feud within the individual, questioning whether a certain thing took place; even when there is indisputable proof of an event occurring, the individual may possibly be in denial of its development, or the mind may have naturally repressed the memory of the incident—sometimes as a defense mechanism. Guy Pearce, as Leonard Shelby in *Memento* (2000), said it best:

Memory's not perfect... Ask the police. Eyewitness testimony is unreliable. The cops don't catch a killer by sitting around remembering stuff. They collect facts, they make notes, and they draw conclusions. Facts, not memory. That's how you investigate... memory can change the shape of a room. It can change the color of a car, and memories can be distorted. They're just an interpretation. They're not a record. They're irrelevant if you have the facts.²

The imperfection of memories needs to be explored and exploited. What can a narrative look like when written by memory's ink? What does it look like when experiences and facts manipulate memories? In the middle of putting the collection together, I found that memories are not expendable in the presence of facts, but instead allow for a partnership. The imperfection of recollection adds an intimate feel to stringent facts—adding color to the black and white.

Some authors and poets leave gaps or fragments in their writing to represent lapses in memory, whether it is theirs or their subject's. Lyn Hejinian fragments her

² Nolan, Christopher, director. *Memento*. Newmarket Films, 2000.

sentences/narrative/spans of memory to exploit such lapses; fragmentation can make thoughts palpable, unfamiliar, and real—authentic really:

The body is a farmer. From the beginning, they had to drive the plow through stone eggs. She pretends she is making popcorn. The boats appeared to have stopped in the water, moving only as if to breathe. It seemed that they had hardly begun and they were already there. We were sticky in the back seat of the car. In the school bathroom I vomited secretly, not because I was ill but because I so longed for my mother. Now, bid chaos welcome. It requires a committee, all translators. Undone is not not done. And could it be musical if I hate it (Hejinian 15).

Hejinian jumps from scene to scene, thought to thought, emulating an organic stream of consciousness—of remembering. She writes that “a cluttered room makes for a cluttered mind... What memory is not a ‘gripping’ thought” (27). Thoughts and memories dominate the mind—cluttered and clouded with dust—only regurgitated occasionally, sometimes into new thoughts and new memories. In *My Life*, Hejinian harps on a few phrases: “a pause, a rose, something on paper,” “we who love to be astonished,” “analogy is with music”; she exploits the cluttered mess with this repetition of events (restating the same memory at various parts in the book) and recurring phrases (memories), progressing across her poetic narrative. Although reminiscing opens the past, repetition (of storytelling) and questions clear away the clouds and bring forth small minute details. Furthermore, memories are gripping; they stick in our brains and do not leave us, becoming floaters in the corners of our consciousness, waiting to be noticed again.

My father’s stories never seem to be missing information, as he insists he remembers all parts of the clutter, even when several questionable holes in his stories and

differences between his and others' have been exposed. Is he, perhaps, unintentionally dishonest? Daniel L. Schacter suggests that when an experience is not properly bound to a time and place, the development of misattribution³ and paramnesia⁴ are possible outcomes (Schacter 94). In other words, if binding various components of an experience into a unitary whole—creating a memory—fails, the lapses need to be filled with conceptualized aspects. There are stories that seem too unrealistic for me to believe, which causes me to question the reliability of my father's memory and possibility his integrity. Did he really walk on shards of glass with his bare feet on the days he went to town? Did he really continue working the day after he lost half of his finger? Did he really go to LA twice a week to buy dolphin watches and still have time to work in Waikiki and Swap Meet? Did he really eat that much cabbage? When an experience transpires, chemical changes in the brain occur at the synapses connecting neurons together, which encode memories, and time can deteriorate these connections; this method of weakening is known as transience—the “forgetting that occurs with the passage of time” (12). The passing of time creates opportunities for interference to blur or erase recollections, and so the brain attempts to fill in lapses through guesswork, and “unless strengthened by subsequent retrieval and recounting,” remembering may be impossible (33). In my collection, the lapses are replaced with what may possibly be filler memory (what my father may think is true, but may not be true) and represented by abruptly-ended sentences and fragmentation in the story—an unsteady narrative.

Disclosure and dishonesty seemed like possible issues. If permissible, what constitutes lying? Any sort of deception calls into question the credibility of a memoir,

³ The confusion between the imagination and the reality of the past.

⁴ The fabrication of false memories.

but no one can truly know another person or completely portray their reality; so even if no sort of imperfection is brought forth from the interviewing process, the complete story will never be produced. The subject has complete control of what he or she decides to divulge to represent his or her life, choosing what to announce and what to withhold, sometimes without knowing it: “egocentric biases in memory reflect the important role that ‘the self’ plays in organizing and regulating mental life” (Schacter 150), causing one to better remember the good and self-serving perspectives—surrounding the present self in a comforting glow of a false reality—and resulting in “selective recall, exaggerating past difficulties, and deprecating past selves” (153). Regardless, a story will never be a perfect substitution for experience—living the story. Freud’s theory of repression suggests that the mind has a defense mechanism that attempts to exclude emotionally threatening material from conscious awareness (84). However, Schacter suggests that because “the amygdala regulates or modulates memory storage by turning on the hormones that allow us to respond to and remember vividly—but sometimes intrusively—threatening or traumatic events” (180), also known as persistent memory, it is possible for some memories to be recalled in detail. Perhaps witnessing neighbors and store clerks being shot was traumatic enough to embed every detail of that memory into his brain; on the other hand, perhaps swaying on a rickety boat for nine days and nine nights with nothing but the ocean in all directions was taxing and traumatic enough for his brain to hide certain aspects from his memory.

First-person perspective—the use of “I”—projects my father into the story as the central character and speaks from his perspective as co-poet—his voice out of my mouth. He told it, and I wrote it. I suggest the term “co-poet” because there are two voices: the interviewer/writer and the interviewee/subject. Writing my father’s story in English with

my locutions, inspired by his tales and rhetoric, allows for both our voices to mesh in the poems—for heteroglossia to blossom—and I attempted to prioritize this internal conversation. The possible imperfections in the (willingness to remember) memory are a part of the whole package; my father is *Out in the Distance* with all its beauties and flaws. The collection was only made possible because of storytelling, because of a voice—my father’s voice—and it deserved to be highlighted, whether he spoke of clear or misremembered events. Joseph Harrington theorizes that “if poetry is an archive [of information], then so too is a poem—or any text—and the writer is a kind of archivist.” The documentary poems⁵ do act as an archive of my father’s past; however, not only am I (the writer) the archivist, so is my father (the storyteller), as we both maintain the archive of stories: what is retained and how they are archived.

Is *Out in the Distance* poetry? The rise of docupoetry in the 1930s reevoked the split between literary and nonliterary parties, between poetry and reportage (Harrington), and the assumption that docupoetry is artless. Is poetry supposed to take readers away from the real world—as an escape from reality? Because documentary poetry keeps us inside reality—the past—how can docupoetry be poetry? In an attempt to sever the boundaries of genre, Joseph Harrington offers his nongenre genre for poetry to allow for some flexibility and include documentaries: “Creative Nonpoetry.” He elaborates that creativity can be found in the genre’s capability to be either poetry or the “non,” which then decreases the distance between being criticized for writing history and writing poetry (Harrington). Therefore, the poetic narrative about my father’s past during the aftermath of the Vietnam War is docupoetry; after all, the collection was written with his

⁵ Documentary poems are poetic narratives written about either (or both) macro and/or micro historical events and are normally comprised of a montage of other sources—including photography, reportage, or any found articles of the time period.

microcosmic—in contrast to the entirety of the Vietnam War—history in mind. The collection of prose poems may not transport the readers to an idyllic state of mind, but instead documents my father’s stories—which hold his history—and informs readers about not only an individual’s experience as a child amid the Vietnam War, but the risks he took as part of a diaspora of refugees.

If the recounted stories are the “nonfiction” of *creative nonfiction*—descriptions of authentic people, events, places, and thoughts and observations—then my writing style is the “creative” part, an application of literary techniques that employs narrative tools also associated with fiction; in other words, creative nonfiction offers more than the facts and more than the experience. It gives color to the black and white that research and information sometimes entail. It allows for the author’s curiosity and passion for gaining and sharing insight to become the reader’s thirst and appetite. In both graduate and undergraduate programs, I rarely relied on my imagination to create fictitious characters, settings, and plots; I typically wrote about my uncanny life as an elementary school kid and my troubles with the law, recollecting fragments of memories through photographs and reminiscing with others to string together the narrative. Writing about myself compelled me to dive into my (figurative and literal) scars and swim to each corner for a peek; writing was a vehicle for me to travel through myself (past and present) and discover what influenced me to do the things I did that led to the mistakes I made. Ultimately, as Patricia Hampl raises, “memoir isn’t for reminiscence; it’s for exploration.” As much as the researching and translating of information into a finished narrative is a journey of discovery and intrigue for an author yearning to better understand his (or his subject’s) world, he can only hope that his destination triggers the beginning of the reader’s voyage for discovery and intrigue.

I see *Out in the Distance* as a poetic journal masked behind aspects of memoir; I term this ghost memoir.⁶ According to Moore, literary journalism is a creative nonfiction genre that focuses on “some person, event, place, or idea outside of the writer’s direct life experience” (Moore 74). Questions are a key component, as suggested by Ta-Nehisi Coates in *Between the World and Me*, in the author’s exploration (his driving force) and position as a journalist. But, what do these questions do for a collection of prose poetry? It depends on the kind of effect the author wants the audience to feel, respond to, and ponder; or maybe they are simply rhetorical questions that help to move the narrative forward. Literary journalism does not only thrive on research, but depends on it. That does not mean intimate details of the narrative should be left out, as they are painstakingly important for constructing the image of color over black and white. Additionally, Moore suggests that memoir derives its energy from an exploration of past events—a journey of discovery—rooted in memory. These traits, the archive of events in my father’s life, and this gray area of interview versus research—of memory versus truth, or emotion versus information, of retelling versus reporting—births the hybrid that is ghost memoir.

Writing prose poetry uses poetic techniques—such as repetition, rhyme, metaphors, and fragmentation. Like eating a bowl of raw rice with a glass of water, prose poems expand after they are consumed—the few words are meant to expand in the reader’s mind. In Sesshu Foster’s *City Terrace Field Manual*, the poetic narrative of each poem links to the overall narrative, capturing the essence of East Los Angeles—of the hardships. I find that there seems to be a single focus on one thing/idea, almost like an

⁶ “Ghost”, borrowed from “ghostwriter,” to denote a writer separate from the narrator; and “memoir” to denote the style of writing.

obsession, and then he dwells on that single experience or memory; for example, in his first poem “The Boy,” he focuses on the train and the narrator’s family’s descent into a new life—a new world. Although each prose poem holds its own title, they create a more powerful story when strung together. Edgar Allan Poe suggests, “What we term a long poem is, in fact, merely a succession of brief ones” (129). In this case, Foster does split up his book (one long poem linked by a theme) into a succession of brief poems.

Influenced by the way Sesshu Foster brought his sequence of poems together to highlight the setting of East Los Angeles, I attempted to do the same with the four major settings of my father’s life (Quy Nhon, Hong Kong, Hawai‘i, and Las Vegas) highlighted by a chain of poems, describing and instilling the settings with characteristics—with souls.

Gertrude Stein’s works in *Tender Buttons* opened my eyes to how I could experiment with prose poetry, particularly with pouring out beautifully worded sentences. *Tender Buttons* helped me see what I needed to do with *Out in the Distance*: just write and get everything out—find something, a noun (a star resulting in “Us Amongst the Constellations,” a rock producing “If He Did Not Shout,” paranoia generating “Questions Lingering,” a cabbage giving rise to “Ode to Cabbage,” the idea of home prompting “Farewell Home,” the sun bringing about “Heatstroke Hallucination,” and barf or hope birthing “Out in the Distance”), and just write; make the noun the star of the poem and add the descriptive language later. For example, Stein wrote a poem called “A Carafe, That is a Blind Glass”: “A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and arrangement in a system to pointing. All this a not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading” (Stein 3). Is this poem about a carafe, or something deeper? She begins with a noun and everything else ripples from it.

Ultimately, Stein's experimentations in prose poetry gave me permission to continue experimenting—first to write, then to find what works, and edit last.

Tender Buttons catapulted me to Google to discover that Gertrude Stein's writing style was influenced by Cubism—sharing many of the same traits, such as movements “in and out of recognizable representation... shatter or fragment perception and the sentence (canvas), and both render multiple perspectives” (DeKoven 81); and so, the effect that her poems have on a reader is the ability to exhibit multiple perspectives. Similarly, Eleni Sikelianos exhibits multiple perspectives in *You Animal Machine (The Golden Greek)*; she stated in an interview with the Museum of Americana⁷ that she shifts between poetic forms (making use of different ways of writing out her poems individually) to allow readers to see around corners because certain things are interpreted differently by different readers. Stein's and Sikelianos's ideas of displaying multiple perspectives are different. Stein shatters and fragments perception and sentences to achieve this effect; Sikelianos presents various forms of documentation in different poems, such as photographs, advertisements/posters, maps, handwritten letters, poems with different-sized fonts, collages of news clippings. Still, they both figuratively offer multiple perspectives with the knowledge that each reader reads poems and interprets them in their own way, and I attempted to adopt this idea by writing specific poems in distinctive styles or with shattered sentences based on the effects of my father's imperfect memory. Experimentation is vital to discovering and rediscovering an artist's style, and the same idea follows with writers. Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* has been republished, updated with ways her life has progressed since the collection's previous publication. Perhaps this

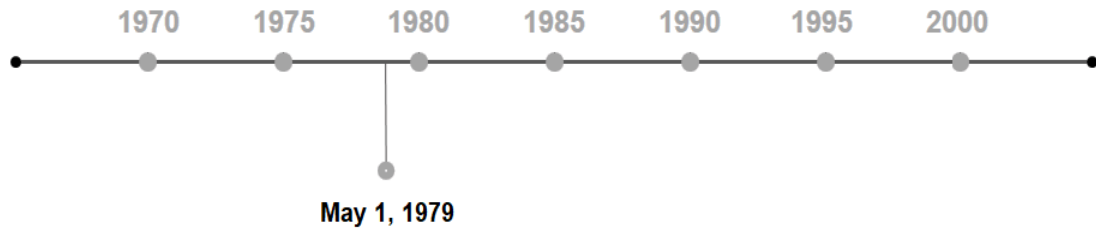
⁷ Interview by Ann Beman.

is a practice to embrace because not only does my life/father's life need to be updated, as it is ever-progressing, but my writing style needs to be updated, as it too is ever-changing; discovering one's voice does not make it perpetual.

My father's stories were already there for me; they had been told to me numerous times—an infinite well of tales. Talking to him allowed me to learn about him, not just how his life progressed from point A to point B, but how he felt about each event—through his facial expressions—as he told story after story. Along with his stories, my everyday experiences and interactions with people, entertainment, and inanimate objects helped to galvanize my poetic narratives. If there was a great scene or line on TV, I would make note of them to potentially influence a poem. In the movie *Rain Man*, there is a scene where Dustin Hoffman comes down the escalator and takes in all the lights and sounds, but it still focuses on the dealer—on gambling, on winning; do gamblers have a sickness, or are they on a mission? Perhaps this mission is their sickness. What keeps a gambler gambling? These questions, along with others, worked as gears to produce many of the Vegas poems. If there was a powerful message in Sunday's sermon, I would take bullet point notes of it. There was a story of John Harper, a man aboard the Titanic—a man of God. John Harper rescued as many people as he could, not from the icy waters, but from missing the chance to go to heaven. He ultimately drowned while preaching from the Bible in the intolerable ocean. What if I told my father's story with him as John on his own Titanic, braving the water, retelling his life as John told of Jesus's, retelling his life as the inspirational figure—the hero? And the first ten poems were born—prose poetry of my father's nine-day journey on a boat, escaping Vietnam and the aftermath of the war. These daily experiences and interactions helped me to visualize better what it meant to be in a casino, what it might have been like in the middle of the black ocean,

what it might have been like to be treated as inanimate objects. Stories told by others influenced the writing of stories told by my father.

There was a man driving a truck trying to cross the border, but a border patrol officer thought he looked shady, so he stopped him to check the trunk for any sort of smuggling, but it was empty. On the next day, the border patrol officer saw the same man at the border trying to cross through, so he pulled the truck to aside, but the trunk was empty again. This repeated for years—sometimes three times a week, sometimes once a month, sometimes five days a week. On the day before the patrol officer's retirement, he saw the shady man and went to talk to him. He told the man that he would not get into any trouble, but before retiring he wanted to know what he was smuggling. The shady man told him that he had been smuggling trucks. I have always seen my father as a hardworking businessman and a parent, and so his epics seemed uncanny to me. However, my father is a fountain—an archive—of history and stories. Like the shady man and his truck, sometimes what we are looking for is right in front of us. Stories are everywhere waiting to be written—waiting to be told.



The Departed

Ba goes on a rampage, digging ditches to fetch the "walking gold." Má helps him trench through fertile soil. They have difficulty locating their valuables, quarrel over where to stick the spade. In the morning, Ba bikes his long-lost treasures to town (a single trip). *What is going on?* The sky slowly transitions from soft blue to red, and then blinding darkness. He returns. "I went to hide the gold."

He stretches the bag open. *What is he trying to show me?* My face: blatant confusion (or is it ignorance?); blank and static. "I melted our gold into cups,

plates, knives, and bowls. Then, I coated them to look like silver." He explains that the government doesn't allow gold onto the boat.

What boat?

We leave for the docks under the sky's shadow. More of the North inching closer to Central Vietnam.

Pandemonium suffocates us as we squirm closer to the behemoth. *My two gold coins!* I pull them out of my pocket and show Ba. *What if my good fortune can't travel with me to wherever?*

Without hesitation, he covers the gold with his blistered palms and reaches for

his knife, crouched—keeping out of sight from watchful eyes. He slices into the rubber bottom of my boot and stashes, covering his crime—brazen disobedience—with needle and thread. *Clever*. I feel them beneath the sole... fortunate...

We pay a hefty price to get our family of 14 onto the vessel destined for Hong Kong. Dock men barter for more: we reluctantly comply. My foot squeaks... creaks wood planks as I embark. Pockets of space between crowds of laborers, teachers, storeowners, street

chefs are filled with screeches: incomprehensible conversations. The floor sways left to right—forward to back—bullied relentlessly by the sea. The emptiness soon fades, and we say farewell to Quy Nhon, our home.

SUNDAY JUNE 16 2013
BASKETBALL PLAYOFF FINALS GAME 5

<u>Entry #</u>		<u>Line</u>	<u>Point Total</u>	<u>Opening Odds</u>
1	Miami Heat	- 1.5	187.5	- 260
2	San Antonio Spurs	+1.5	187.5	+210

Don't Play with Butterflies

I know not to sit long (if at all) at a table with Vietnamese Others. Vietnamese, I know that we are a gambling culture, that we revel in our addiction, that adrenaline is our oxygen, that we thrive on gambler's fever. The family calls the casual Vietnamese stranger by a code name: Butterfly. Avoid the flying beasts like a kid does a spoonful of burgundy liquid. Sitting with butterflies puts us at risk of breaking our fever—it's not a sickness. They swindle us with their, "let me borrow; I'll pay you back," knowing we can't say no because we've already traded stories of old; we've become comrades on the viridian

battlefield against our adversary, the Dealer. Win or lose, that money never returns. MIA.

As a teen, Má was told not to marry a Vietnamese. They were branded by the family as notorious domestic abusers... plus the gambling thing. Chinese men were better suitors because of their business brains.

The Vietnamese community in Hawai'i coheres and knows (about) each other—about taxi drivers who stop abruptly, get into accidents, and fake injuries for insurance income; of pedestrians who walk in front of TheBus for the same purpose; of couples who don't marry so

the “single mother” can take advantage of the government welfare and live in a Kāhala home bought by her “not husband.”

In other words, it’s best not to get involved. It’s best not to play with Butterflies.

**What They Don't Tell You About
Riding a Bicycle**

...is the thrill.

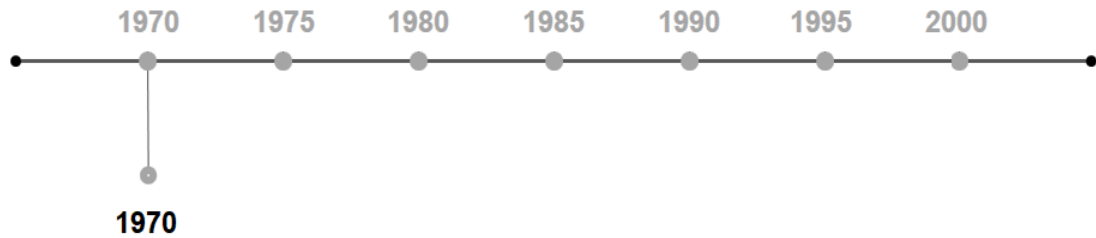
Going down the hill dries the eyes.
There's none of that pre-rollercoaster
feeling—that stomach-sinking-in-and-
burning-like-a-Sriracha-indigestion
feeling;

None. Of. That.

Whizzing wind through the spokes, cut-
up by rusted diagonal lines. Zigzag
swerves. Sharp turns. Escaping
homicidal potholes and cracks in the
bloodthirsty dirt road.

None. Of. That.

I want—to have a (great white thrash
out of the ground and set its heat-
seeking eyes onto my) throbbing throat;
to have my brakes fail when I tightly
squeeze the lever (catapulting me into a
trench of tigers); to have clouds huddle
above and pour a blinding curtain of
rain (while I am chased by
velociraptors)—to have a story to
tell. Instead, I have cold ears and fuzzy
cheeks.



Hèm 47 Ngô Thời Nhiệm

Our First Dwelling Hole

Echoing stomps. Metallic screeches. Ammonia aroma. Congregating above to tweet. Tucked between a narrow alleyway, a tin roof with thin walls squats on dirt and disdain—our aluminum nest. Má hatched six here. Half a dozen. Half a carton. Born into eternally brown toes, sullied—dusted on when sunny, slathered on after a torrential drizzle. ‘Slathered’ means the waterhole is ‘half full’—means we get to drink. The well protrudes with just enough stones to discourage stray creatures from contaminating its life-sustaining potency, rather than potentially transfiguring its dependents

into Western Zombies or rabid Savages (who migrate south for the winter). However, the stones don’t build high enough to dissuade children from possibly dropping in—plunging to a region of absence so intense that nothing can escape nonexistence, not even light. We drop goldfish down. They clean the water; cleanse our fortune—clearing the murk (eating the algae). Sometimes their furry White Bodies lay still on the mud after a storm, an overflow—deflated, hollow-eyed, peck-marked flesh.

We dine perched on the dirt and sleep on wood frames carpeted with bamboo mats woven to comfort and sometimes

pinch; woven to keep us together. Three
to a bed, unless you are bed bugs—
yellow dots tip-toeing... white dots...
invisible dots... Mites creeping,
crawling on our eyeballs, warily
grazing. The tickle of their toes. The red
bumps no longer faze me, but we still
drag the mattress and frames into the
sun's (laser) rays. Dots loathe the flare.
The purifying purge.

President Ford retreats.

As a family of eight in the trench of
Quy Nhơn, we may not have a wide

enough crevice to flap our wings, but it
won't keep us from chirping our song.

THURSDAY JUNE 17 2010
BASKETBALL PLAYOFF FINALS GAME 7

<u>Entry #</u>		<u>Line</u>	<u>Point Total</u>	<u>Opening Odds</u>
1	Boston Celtics	+7	187	+270
2	Los Angeles Lakers	- 7	187	- 330

Whale Tale

Up \$400, we left Gold Coast to take a half-hour drive (the scenic route) to M Resort Casino, everyone's favorite. Hit & Run, as it is called, as we call it. In this city—in this family—breaking even is considered winning. Isolated from the Strip (the clique of popular kids), M is the new kid in Vegas at only a year old; winsome... quiet and winsome.

Horseshoe Hotel closed last year, at least what used to be Horseshoe (now

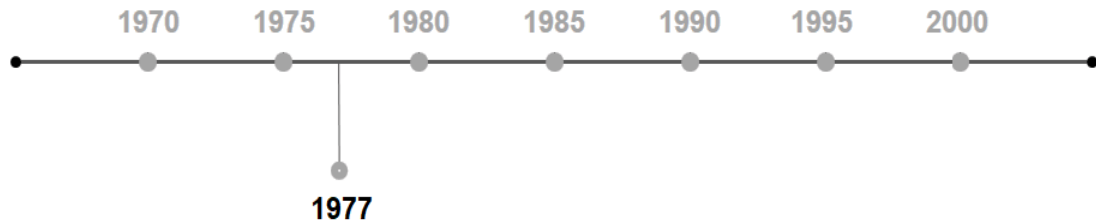
owned by TLC, previously by MTR Gaming, but initially by Harrah's). Horseshoe was the easiest place to win, even with its cigar pollution smokescreen suffocating the crowd under its low ceiling: blackjack dealers told players what card(s) they needed to beat the House, without the permission of their managers, so players had a lower chance of losing.¹ Casinos need to make millions a day just to stay open, not to mention profiting. Look at all the

¹ Casino dealers are only allowed to check their faced-down card when there is an ace or face card facing up.

lights. Somebody needs to lose...
whales need to be harpooned.

Horseshoe lost: Ahab the whale.

Casino hosts are only there to take.
They drop shrimps—dangle them:
golfing, helicopter tours, cruise ship
dinners, girls on call, private jets, drugs;
hook the whales and drain their
precious oil—drain them dry. Whale to
deflated squid. Casino hosts aren't there
to be the whales' friend. They don't talk
to nor look at them once there's no
money left to strain. Nothing is free.
Ahab didn't hunt squid. Casinos need to
make millions a day. Someone has to
lose.



He Coughed Too Much

I remember—it was so skinny. 1976;
I was twelve. We are both snakes—
same animal. Scary when it walked
around—whenever it could. Something
wrong. Má held it. Something missing.
It laid there...

still

...waiting for commands to squirm, but
only puppet strings could have done
that.

Its eyes: two lines.

Its nose: tiny.

Its mouth: wide open.

Seemed like it tried to cry (preparing for
the world it had just been born into), but
only a ventriloquist could have done
that. No screams. No tears. *Don't move
it too much*; its head might fall from its
frail, fragile frame. She gave him a
name, and we all went to sleep.

* * *

Má & Ba didn't sleep. Chronic
Coughing. Chinese remedies. Anything;
everything...

hoping.

Chinese Recipe: Mix Crushed Honeycomb with Milk. They fed the coughing child, sprinkled on his head. Weeks passed. Nothing... Nothing but continued coughing.

Neighbor's Recipe: Mix Pig Feces with Water. They added rock sugar to make it tastier. Weeks passed. Nothing... Nothing but continued coughing.

* * *

Má & Ba didn't sleep for months, trying to chase away the whirlwind of coughs that plagued their child. They persisted with Chinese remedies.

Finally, they decided to see a **Monk: Steam Basil Leaves with Lemon Juice and Rock Sugar; leave it outside to accumulate dew.** He suggested they stop feeding their child shit and start feeding him this.



Cannibals in Hiding

The Selection Process begins. The stronger, the better. The older, the more likely. The livelier, the tastier. Over a tin bucket with one hand, the pinkie finger holds its legs while two fingers grip its head and flailing appendages with one unforgiving pinch. Restrained and throat in sight, the other hand slices it red. Headless, it is left to run—writhing, panicking, pleading, warning—while the second selection is made. Hanging by their legs, blood drains into a bucket—worms surface in this red sea. Both bodies are dunked into boiling water to make stripping

easier. No skinning; that's where the nutrients are. *Stew tonight.* Má chops and plunges the manageable corpses into a pot over the fire. *I'm hungry.* Vegetables are swept in with a pinch of salt. *Done.* The kettle whistles. *Tea is ready.* It sits. Covered in dirt, Ba sits on the bamboo mat—next to his papercutting table—towering over his ration of rice. The pot is opened; naked legs and breasts exposed, surrounded by greens. There's not enough soup to go around, and Ba can't eat without soup; the rice will be too dry. He dumps tea into his bowl and picks at the chicken non-stew and veggies. We all eat

together as the sun descends behind the
hills.



Dirt Vault

Every morning, I hope for an anthill;
however, a mountain fills my eyes.
Largest of the countless hills here on the
outskirts of Quy Nhon. The road does
not seem to end, but the journey does, at
a quaint farmhouse. Ba is digging a hole
to hide a small rice sack; "When the
People come to collect what's ours, they
won't take all of our leftovers," he
would say. Striking luck on our acres of
farmland would appease the most
morose pirate. Ba was one of the first to
do this. The problem is, he doesn't mark
the spots well.

"The gold is walking," Má would say.
He continues to dig...

FINALLY
MIKE TYSON VS. EVANDER HOLYFIELD
SATURDAY NOVEMBER 9 1996
WBA HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPIONSHIP

<u>Entry #</u>		<u>Odds</u>
1	Mike Tyson	- 500
2	Evander Holyfield	+500

His Natural Habitat

Dim lights. Soft music. Solace. Maze of passages always leads to slots. Free alcohol delivered by alluring women. No clocks or windows; erase the passage of time. Oxygen pumped into the casino keeps gambling fingers awake and far from cramping. Incessant symphony of bells and sirens: the illusion of someone winning every second; encouragement—just enough to keep money flowing into frigid machines and onto felt tables. Frigid indeed.

Ba didn't have bad luck. Ba didn't have any luck. The flight to Vegas, lively.

The flight from Vegas, narcoleptic. Sleepless in Las Vegas. The (Original) City that Never Sleeps. The City of Light Sleepers. Eden. After just a few years in Hawai'i, Ba would disappear for months at a time to the city where his addiction was encouraged. He didn't even need to know English. Tapping the table twice is the universal gesture for "Hit," and side-chopping the air universal for "stay."

English was unnecessary; that is, unless he needed to eat. Still, pointing is the universal gesture for "Get me that." Sometimes he'd end up with some inedible thing, like French onion soup... He knew how to jump a bus to

his step-brother's in LA for *cháo* (rice soup).

If he won, he couldn't sleep—cash in hand only served as an enabler. If he lost, he slept soundly (happy even). Ba didn't have any luck. Ba never won at Horseshoe. There's no such thing as luck in Vegas. If the casino wants you to lose, you will lose. If the casino wants you to win, you will win. The only sure thing is itchy skin.

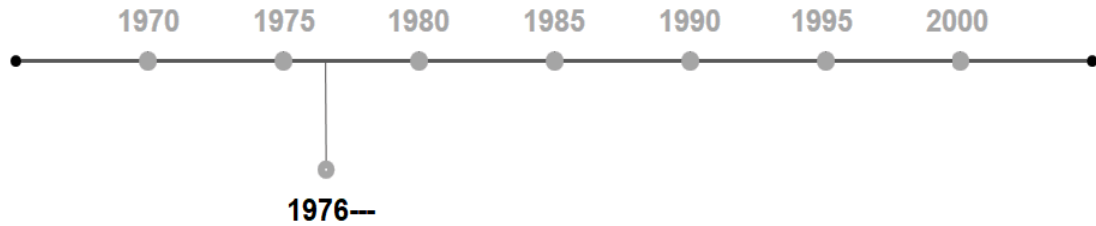


Country Life

a city, a capital, a beginning. Quy means precious. Nhon means sharp. Precious sharp? Sharp precious? Sharp and precious? Precious and sharp? What's so sharp about Quy Nhon? What's so precious? Maybe I'm not looking——like really looking. Chickens scatter over sparkles of dirt pearls on a curvy path, crossing to thin blades of grass. Talons stab at worms and anything that dares to look delicious. When I pedal toward them, they don't flee flailing their mud-stained wings. I could use some of their tenacity. Litters of hills that render the zigzag biking tactic useless. I stand and push down on the pedals with the aid of

gravity; pacing. Muscles in my legs push on against gravity; is it helping or hurting me? The road never-ending. I begin to wobble. My lungs grip my throat. Forehead floods, dripping rainbow pearls into my vision. With every brief breeze, I wonder if it is the moment I crash and burn on the gravel road. Ankles popping (maybe muscles ripping)——ascending the tallest hill in the world, or at least in Vietnam. About half way up, I jump off and walk, kicking up puffs of dirt with every step of my bare soles. Going to the farmhouse is (almost) an everyday routine. Behind termite-infested walls, this is where we hide from the monsters. This is where we hide our

treasures in the crops. This is where we
feel safe.



City Life

In Quy Nhơn, my naked toes don't stomp on soft soil but on shimmering shards divorced from windshields, windows, spectacles, bottles, the unknown—mingling—and finally hitched to the rough bottoms of my heels. Distractions of echoing whispers—whispers that evolve from screams. Whispers; flying whispers vanishing through space, through hyperspace, through skulls. The repetition of crumbling crackers——echoing. Wide panicked eyes, wide adrenaline-filled eyes, red eyes blinded by the unknown (fighting for the

unknown); blindness overcome by the absolute—panicked eyes to absolute relaxation, eternal hibernation. An entire nation covered by a ruby red curtain—a red curtain that shows no signs of ever scabbing; *fin.*

Hordes of citizens turned criminals jump through broken windows to loot what is more valuable than integrity. I pop through and search for something to quench my thirst. Shelves tipped over. Smashed groceries: bread with footprints, cans cracked open, flour scattered, juice spilt. I find a good bottle of milk and leave exact change on the

counter. The dingy coins will likely be taken by other “patrons,” but it is what Ba taught me.

Pallid Walls

The property manager in Vegas told me a story. Professional property managers are supposed to have tough skin—the ideal bully/bouncer/cut-throat butcher. He told me of tenants with a myriad of eviction letters in their back pockets and eviction notices plastered on their door [Hoarders]. He knocked on their door to personally kick them out; he came in peace. He was invited in. There was no gullet gutting, no bloodshed: the tenants led him to the refrigerator and opened it. Empty. Bare walls; it was the whiteness of the walls that appalled

him. He opened the freezer door. Empty. Bare white walls (aside from two trays of ice cubes). Here, whiteness did not enhance beauty, not like the exquisite polar bear. The property manager gave the tenants \$20 before leaving; property mercenary turned benefactor.

In May 2010, 1 in 79 Nevada homes received a foreclosure filing. The economic crisis in Las Vegas was made possible because 65% of homes in Nevada were underwater¹; therefore, it was much more beneficial for

¹ According to RealtyTrac.

homeowners to walk away from their mortgages and take the bad credit hit. Banks were in debt and stuck with thousands of homes worth less than 30% of their original price. A nightmare for Las Vegas, but a dream for investors.

Looks like the 99¢ buffets will be making a comeback.

Blackjack

There are Players (me) and the Dealer (or the House).

First card is dealt to each hand, starting with Players first and Dealer last, and then the second card is dealt in the same order. All cards are dealt faced up,¹ except for the Dealer's first card.

Cards #2 through 9	Worth face value in points
Cards #10, Jack, Queen, King	Worth ten points
Card Ace	Worth either one or eleven point(s)

To win, a Player's hand must be closer to 21² than the Dealer's without totaling a point value of 22 or more (bust³).

A blackjack is when an Ace and a 10 (or Face card) are received as the first two cards dealt (payout is typically more than a normal winning hand).

If point values between a Player and the Dealer is a tie, then neither hand wins (push⁴).

After the first two cards are dealt, there are two basic options for each hand's turn:

- Hit⁵—get another card.
You can hit as many times as you want, until you go over 21.
- Stand⁶—keep your hand unsullied.

Other options:

- Take Insurance⁷ (only when Dealer has an Ace faced up)—the Player can place a separate bet (up to half of the original bet) that will be paid at 2-1 if the Dealer reveals a blackjack, which will result in breaking even since the original bet would be lost.
- Double Down⁸—the Player can double-up his or her bet and will be given *only* one more card.

¹ We were transparent, forced to reveal and give up all that we had...

² The MiG-21 won the air for North Vietnam.

³ ...but not give up all that we were.

⁴ Is this possible if my hand only has four fingers?

⁵ Necessary; seek and solicit as many opportunities as I can.

⁶ Impossible; keep moving forward.

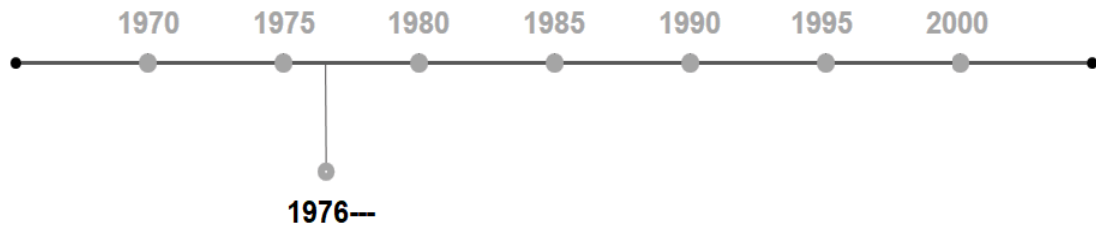
⁷ Outside of Blackjack, there's no such thing as taking insurance. There's no reset button; there's only hard work and luck.

⁸ Doubling-up, we got more than *only* one more card; boat, Hong Kong, Hawai'i, Swap Meet, Waikiki.

- Split⁹— if the two cards are the same value, the Player can make two hands from one (separating the two cards and receiving a new card for each) and place a duplicate bet on the second hand.
- Surrender¹⁰—the Player can give up half of his or her bet (without playing) after the hands are dealt.

⁹ Twelve kids, no twins, and we all stuck together.

¹⁰ 1955-1975: USA to a T; 1955-1979: us to a T.



Beyond the Foliage

Lan Mỹ: the fertile frontier. These are the voyages of Liêu Dữ Tài. 1976; My mission: to explore the strange new world, to seek out new life, to boldly go where no man has gone before:

Behind the farmhouse towers a forest lined with bushes and fog. Sometimes, I sleep over in the cottage on the forefront of the expanse. When the stars come out to dance, so does the imagination. But, is it all imaginary?

Does a branch not have eyes and a leaf no ears? Will curiosity indeed kill? Are the whistles friend or foe? What do they want?

Sometimes I cross through crops of yucca and marvel at *their* stature. A pawn before the chessboard's backline. Jack in front of his green thumb creation. I marvel at *their* skin—wrinkles mean wisdom. *What do they know?* Breaching the tree line of sages, there is a stream / a simple stream / a whimsical stream / a steady stream / a conscious stream / a truly endless stream—a stream by any other name wouldn't sound so sweet.

The silence is deafening.

The stream is the only place to bathe up here. Silence evokes my foresight: monsters, rabid abominations, mischievous entities, shadowy ghouls and ghoulish shadows, lions. Nature is conscious. I trade the sanctuary of the cottage to smell tolerable; however, only for a moment. The openings between timbers elicit my eyes, but the water feels nice.

Learning to Swim

Pond blue. Pond green. Pond's ghoulish grin.

No floats, a coach, scuba gear, a fin...

Needn't her nor him

to learn to swim

the sultry smirk says jump right in.

Pond deep. Pond shallow. Pond swallow and slaughter.

Buoyant are our bodies in water...

Until, that is,

we flail with closed fists

will we lose all our sons and daughters.

Three Card Baccarat

Place bets¹ on either the Player's² hand or the Dealer's³ hand.

(Some gambling houses charge a commission⁴ on each bet)

There is only one round, as opposed to the two rounds in *Baccarat*.

In this round, the Player receives three cards,⁵ and the Dealer receives three cards.

Cards #2 through 9	Worth face value in points
Cards #10, Jack, Queen, King	Worth zero points
Card Ace	Worth one point

The winner is determined by the hand with the highest point⁶ value.

A Natural Win⁷ is when either hand receives three face cards.

If the point values of both hands are equal, then the hand with more face cards win.

If the point values are equal and quantity of face cards in each hand is equal, then it is a tie. No wagers are exchanged.

¹ Sometimes the best decisions are made on a whim without considering the odds.

² Leave the known; leave home; leave for the unknown.

³ Stay.

⁴ Everything we had but a few grey-plated cups.

⁵ Fate decided on the draw. Was it worth the gamble? The answer is on the faces.

⁶ Racing up the hills in Lan Mỹ would consist of 50% biking and 50% running; getting back down was another monster.

⁷ Julie, Brian, and Kenneth.

THURSDAY JUNE 20 2013
BASKETBALL PLAYOFF FINALS GAME 7

<u>Entry #</u>		<u>Line</u>	<u>Point Total</u>	<u>Opening Odds</u>
1	Miami Heat	- 6	189.5	- 260
2	San Antonio Spurs	+6	189.5	+220

The Chase

Up \$600, we left M to take a drive to Red Rocks Casino. Hit & Run... killing Time (our enemy, our nemesis, something worth killing). For a free room at the MGM, they ask that you play for four hours (win or lose), and another hour for a free show: David Copperfield (\$70 value). Do studies really show that the longer you play, the higher the chance of losing? It's probably true either way, unless you're one of those notorious Megabucks winners who've won within two minutes—one pull—of facing the legend, the omnipotent, the omnipresent, the behemoth.

Killing Time each day keeps the eviction notice away.

Ba had a gambling problem; Má had warned me. He stole from his businessman father and used the proceeds to gamble in every way. Because of it, his parents threw him out of Quy Nhơn; he went to Saigon [1972] to work and live, while Má stayed at his parents' house to do housework. "He's a bad boy," his step-mother said, but they kept her—they liked her. He inherited nothing. A few months later, he procured his wife and three kids to live in the Aluminum Palace. Ba had a gambling problem, and if he won, the people would follow him outside and take the winnings back.

Má & Ba sold their wedding bangles and rings to open their business. He sold balloons on the streets. She cut fabric for children's clothing. He sold anything that would sell. She took care of the kids.

He made money fast, but he lost money just as fast. His "friends" would take advantage of him. In cock fights, the apparently weaker rooster gets a knife or other kitchen utensil tied to its foot. Ours was always weaker. We never got a knife—or even a spoon. He was easy. He was mocked. He didn't argue. Blinded by adrenaline. Deafened by the thrill. He made money quickly, but he'd play it away. Má would hide the

money—wrapped it with newspaper and hid it away. Ba had a gambling problem. When she would check on the cash, she'd find a bar of soap in its place.

He would lose it fast. The Sith had the Jedi. Coyote had Road Runner. Kobe had MJ. Ahab had Moby Dick. Gatsby had Daisy. Tom had Jerry. Ba had Lady Luck.

What Happens in Vegas...

The first step to recovery is acceptance.

The last step is to help others in their journey to recovery.



A few years ago, I used to see a Vietnamese guy at the baccarat tables... laughing, drinking. A few years later, I saw the same guy begging a casino host (who he thought was his friend) for comped food. The host wouldn't even look at him. Why should he? The casino already had all his money.



A lady from China didn't mind losing thousands. She just wanted to learn how to play blackjack.



The blackjack dealer said that a few days ago, an elderly woman won at the slots, and she won big. Megabucks machine; the jackpot starts at ten-million dollars and keeps going up. She didn't flinch. She received notification and just kept playing.



Whales easily lose a few hundred-thousand. But for good service in return, they don't mind.



A guy sold his business in Hawai'i for around one million dollars. He wanted to open a nail salon in Vegas; he even put a down payment and moved there to wait for the renovations. He didn't work. He had nothing else to do. Two weeks went by. He lost his million and couldn't open his salon.



\$1 oxtail soup from California Hotel with *Vacations Hawai'i*. Oxtail soup only served after 11pm.



Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
The plane ride to Vegas is loud.
The plane ride back is quiet.



**What They Also Don't Tell You
About Riding a Bicycle**

...is the pain.

Rolling down a steep road, dirt path,
grassy plain. *No, not the wheels.* Hands
first. Body thrown. Spine next. Legs
tossed. Elbows then. Knees crash
together. Elbows; Knees; Elbows;
Knees; Elbows; Chin. Gain control.
Claw at the ground to brake. Getting up
quickly is always the {immediate}
reaction. *Always.* Getting up quickly is
always the {worst} reaction. But
avoiding shame is a necessity. Next
arrives the smile—a mask. Elbows

sting. Knees sting. Shoulders sting.
Silver lining: pain is a portal, a brief
escape from reality, a brief escape from
the nightmare of reality, a brief escape
from the thrill.

No Apprehension

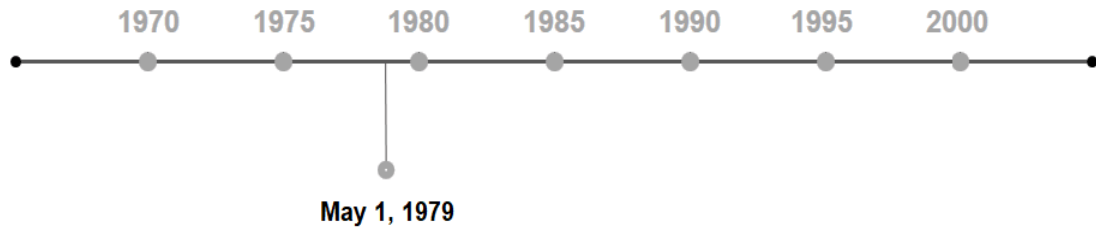
Stride over a brook.

Leap over a creek.

Swim across a river.

Wade through a stream.

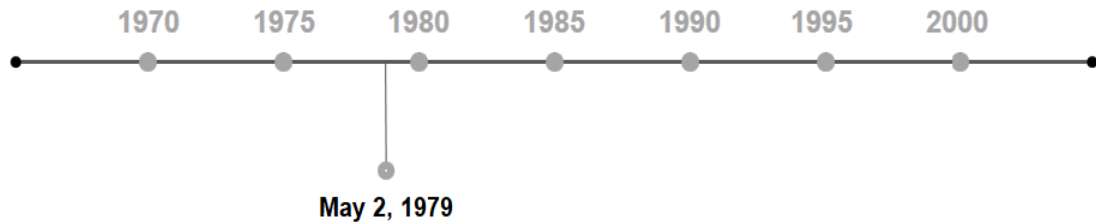
Aspire across an Ocean.



Farewell Home

Clouds drift, covering the day's residual light. Six years after the eagles vanished across the horizon, we board the boat, trading each sullen step for a howling creak to escape our infant idiom of home bitter home. Victor Charlie sent serenading waves toward Sierra—chased—destroyed, defaced, devastated, invaded/invading the nightmares (once dreams) of all in its path, of Quy Nhon. [Sierra had lain down] Cold bullets. Glass shards sprinkled on freshly penetrated bodies. Peeking of a skull with an absent eye. Motionless carcass faced down in a brown pond. Buzzing

flies over rotting corpses—*the smell*.
Now where? **WHERE? WHERE?** We the fourteen stand with(in) the crowd of 400 creaks. Clouds drift, telling us the Earth is still spinning.



Help Me Gravity

I'm watching—waiting for the men to stop scooping human-excrement-infused fish piss overboard. *Let's just sink and get it over with.* Waiting for it to dissolve, dispel, disappear, die: the headache. They can sometimes be cured by mentally squeezing your head.

Closing your eyes and evacuating all thoughts; imagine gravity surrounding your head, compressing it—implode! Roll your eyeballs up as if you're trying to tear blood vessels and nerves holding EVERYTHING together. Hold this position——this moment——until the migraine dissipates. Má always says,

“thumb your temple and rotate.” *Never works, does it?* This is not a headache. Occupying the same space for countless spiraling sunsets. Nothing but gagging noises and the sound of Satan banging on the vessel. There are creatures below——waiting; pushing and rocking our belly.

I find a seat on the moist, splintering floor. There's not enough gravity to save me.

Us Amongst the Constellations

Rout's Log...

Don't be like the sun. Don't hide behind grey billows. Don't be afraid of the sharp-tipped moon—one with the dark side—the [real] Big Cheese. You're not afraid of the Big Bad Luna, are you? You're better than that... You're brighter than that. Guide us. Steer us in the right direction. Why won't you point toward our point of destination? You motioned constantly, battling with the night, but we couldn't understand you. You spoke constantly—battled with the silence—but we couldn't

understand you. You stalked us, campaigned to communicate constantly, struggled with our seasick eyes and ears—jaded by the vast South China Sea—but we couldn't understand you. We speak different languages. You were supposed to lead us away from darkness, not lead darkness to us (with us). Nói chuyện với chúng tôi. Speak to us, Twinkling Ambiguity; say something we can understand. At least tell us if the moon is really made of cheese, or if it is just a grey, dead piece of land?

Questions Linger

Dubiety's Log...

Where will this floating vessel halt?
Where will I be when we cease to float
on this dream boat, boat of dreams, boat
filled with dreams, dreams filled with
boats, dreams filled with this boat—just
this boat. This fucking boat... Will
there be broken shards under every
step? Will there be brass rounds
piercing faces covered by gunpowder
and scarlet shadows? Will there be
startling echoes of shrieks and crackling
gunshots carried in the whispers of the
wind as I join riots of carbon copies

crawling through broken windows,
euphoric for old milk and stale
crackers? Will there be hatred haunting
my every action, my every thought, our
ears; screams of savagery and... bombs
upon bombs bombarding our bombable
bodies; flying bullets grazing our being
by an earshot; danger in everyday
decisions; blood immigrating from
foreheads to earth caked on apparent
look-alike but unknown faces?
Understandings disguising delusions;
affliction; agony; anguish? Will there be
love?

If He Did Not Shout

Đá lớn! *Big rock*. Munched. Chewed up
by the ocean's belligerent molar and
swallowed, despite our rotting odor.

Smell rock, can ya? I guess it's true: eat
with the eyes first. But we're repulsive
too. Spit us out! {No} Why not? Its cold
pool of saliva tries to wear us out—
weaken us—prune us. Bobbing heads
fill and grow heavy, sinking into the
arcane abyss. We are sponges.

Hundreds cling to the molar, watching
other lifeless eyes vanish. We are
plaque. Plaque rinsed into said pool of
spit by swells of mouthwash, rising and
breaking in sets. We are disgusting. Spit

us out! {No} Why not? Kicking.
Flailing. Sinking. Paralyzed. The
Kraken pulls us down. Luster turns to
blur, and then to oblivion.

——Hush——

Sun eclipsed by the South China Sea,
shrouding green corpses peacefully
bumping against heads of cabbage.

But he did shout.



Heatstroke Seaway

Gusts of waves create ripples in the sea.
Barren. Arid. I crawl through this
ligneous Gobi/Sahara/Mojave toward
tinted shadow. Scorching heat from the
spiral sun runs the grainy wood boards
dry. Scorching heat from the spiral sun
turns my eyeballs to raisins. Scorching
heat from the spiral sun tenderizes my
fingertips and kneecaps, procrastinating
my pleasure in the still sultry shade.
Scorching heat from the spiral sun
obscures—blears clouds fogs blurs
dominates—my vision. Scorching heat
from the spiral sun buzzes in my ears;
sizzles the surface of my eardrums,

birthing life in the dingy, cryptic tunnel.
Scorching heat from the spiral sun
keeps my thoughts in a gyre. Shade
dissipates. Gone.

Just beyond the overcast... palm trees.
Just beyond the haze... salvation. An
island: Hainan. Mirage? Here.

Six debark for food and fresh water.

Six days have passed.

We should all debark.

Ode to Cabbage

Pyrrhic's Log...

Oh! leafy green, you lust-worthy sheen,
floating as I too float—floating on this
god-forsaken boat. This closed-lid toilet
flushed away all but my memories—my
euphoria ecstasy escape, the only
reminder of terra firma draped in
mysteries of lost hope. If only we the
famished—we the hungry—we the
desperate could have more of your
rippled greens, we would be thrilled
elated glad patient. Lord of Leaves,
Round Ruler of Ruffles, Phenom of
Farms, Valiant Veggie, Slayer of

Starvation: how your tasteless limbs
make this journey tolerable. With the
last bite, I dream of nothing but the next
time I may devour your decadent
crunch, you cabbitch.



Out in the Distance

Premature expulsion of partially digested cabbage on the deck drips through cracks into a veil of darkness beneath. The disease has been spreading. Cabbage discharge; looking better coming out than going in, chum the obscurity in the bilge, blurring unwelcomed nightmares with our nightmare. The sinking coffin sails northward (we hope) following the lead of ignorant stars, the wily wind, fickle flying creatures, anything that doesn't start with (the letter) sea. Beyond the bow offers the blinding shadow of uncertainty; within, the metamorphosis

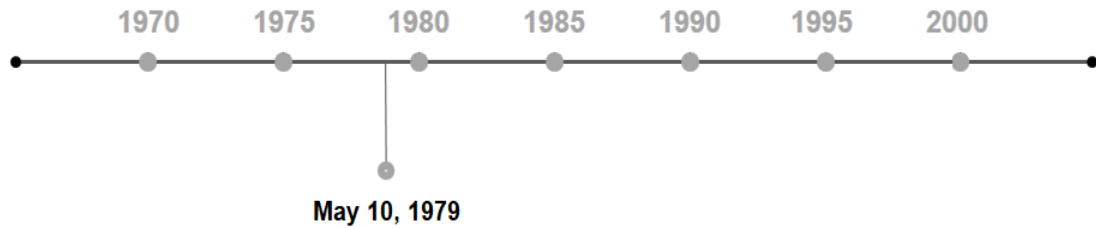
of standing bodies to hunchback creatures expressing their agony through familiar sing-along jargon—some slithering on their bellies. Something bright, something not a star, walks on the water into our sight—entering in the cold of night. Bit by bit, the outline of a boat comes into form.

Verbal Pact

Log...

Pitch black solemnly renounced for orange—orange for pink—pink for a cerulean sky. Everything is clear. Everything but their intentions. The vessel approaches. Watchful eyes widen. It gets nearer. Jaws hang in awe. It gets nearer. Our cabbages drop to the abused/abusive floorboards. It gets nearer. Sounds drown my ears with the fortitude of their bow splitting the South China Sea. The leviathan hovers beside us. I salivate at the scent of fish and lick my sunburned lips with a blistered

tongue as a thought-bubble bloats with (leafless) food. We are well-prepared to speak their language... whatever their language is—French, Vietnamese, any Chinese. We are asked to surrender all gold and valuables. Ba gives his watch. *May we board the ship now?* “We will be back for you,” they tell us. Those six words keep me company—keep us company—just as they had when the eagles left a few years ago, never to reappear over the horizon. The ship shrinks over a timeline, over the ocean’s line, and we pick our cabbages back up.



Bound

May 10, 1979 – Sanguine’s Log...

Shrinkage turns to growth. Radiant light turns to shrouding darkness. Rolling of gray clouds; gray as ash. The phoenix [renewed] arises from ashes; their womb soars. Our (new) beginning. Uncertainty covered by an obscure curtain of unknowns, of mystique; even uncertain of the uncertainty of the uncertain. Women and children up in the fishing boat—Heaven—and men in the hellhole below, constantly defending themselves with buckets and cupped palms against the invading

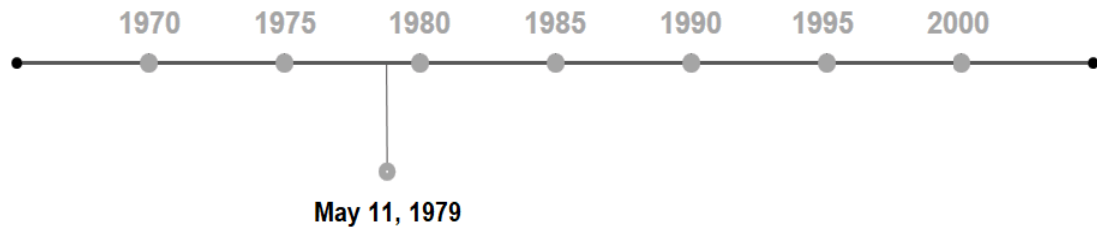
ocean just enough to not join the fishes. Bail. Bail. Bail. Simultaneously, the back lines damage walls and wreak havoc to the organs of our decaying whale, knocking out teeth and bones—fighting and scorning the beast—perhaps hoping to share Jonah’s fate. Bail. Bash. Bail. We are not in the storm, though it lies ahead. On this taut thread toward our future, we distance ourselves from an endless spiral on its spool only days in the past. The fragrance of fish frolics from my bubble onto my rice. Eaten: Satisfied; but, cabbages continue to twitch in my memory.

Still Astray

Rotting ship—crumbled, crippled,
comfortable—tired from its long travel,
further pollutes the filthy ocean outside
of Hong Kong. “They can’t refuse us if
there’s no boat to haul us back.” Ocean
phobia; echoes of creaks trapped in a
collagen box, and the purging of liquids
squirming with life; an allergy to
cabbage: these all follow. *Give us your
watch*, they said. *Give us your plates*,
they urged. *What else do you have*, they
raised.

We have nothing.

They towed us to shore within twelve
hours. We gave (almost) everything to
those fishermen to dump us in an
unfamiliar ditch. We were lost for nine
days and nine nights (half way), or so
they said. I refuse to believe; the lambs
have not stopped screaming.



The Taking of Our White Dots

Quarantine camps—buildings of bare walls—ears of immigrants fill the emptiness with the aroma of sea salt and seasick saturated on their husks. We clench our belongings with boney fingers. White Gloves seize our leftovers and collect them on the dirt-stained floor. They sift for contraband... digging for treasure. Mini riots spark over the aggressive method of inspecting all that we have left, except for our (too dirty to reap) hair. Nothing of us can do.

The month is engulfed with sitting in a warehouse filled with the people we've been barfing with for nine days and nine nights. White walls. Bare white walls. Empty. The whiteness does not cause us any distress; the whiteness enhances what beauty is allotted to us after being in darkness for so many nights.

Taken to another warehouse. White Gloves pick through our hair and pull out little white dots—moving dots—our dots. The process leads us not to warm sunlight, but to more bare walls.

At least we're dots-free.

Another month of inspections before
Sleeping Quarters grant us two three-
high bunk beds for the 14 of us and our
unpirated belongings. We herd into bed
and doze off into long-awaited dreams.



Factory Finger

The land is unfamiliar. Má & Ba
unmask the gold of any remaining paint.
Scavengers: three little ones borrow
money for ice and soda to sell at camp;
four to factories within the smog of
Hong Kong; five too young to walk.

Father knows fragments of this eerie
language. "Ngō wán hézuò" ("I need
work"). I find a factory. The grey door
is twice my height: "ngō wán hézuò."
The secret password opens the passage
{Smoke – Steam – Screeches – Sweat}
Screw the antenna onto the radio
{*Grab, screw, pass; Grab, screw, pass;*
Grab, screw, pass} Next day: "ngō wán

hézuò." Door remains shut. "Móuh
hézuò," another boy tells me ("No
work"). Next factory: "ngō wán hézuò."
Door opens. Screw wheels onto the
toy... {Bags, Televisions, Fans,
Guitars, Lightbulbs, Clocks, Motors}

A new door almost every day,
sometimes open... sometimes stagnant.

* * *

Poised with the monstrous machine
before me. The giant's mouth. Jaw
wide-open. Hungry. Right foot on a
warm pedal. Smash a metal rod into a
frame. Curves for a coin purse; the kind
of pliable curves any tchotchke could
ask for. Pass it on for its stitches—

plastic surgeons for our tchotchke patients. { *Grab metal, put it down, step on pedal to smash, pass. Grab, put, step, pass. Grab, put, step, and pass. Grab, put, step, SMASH* }. Zigzag of ice through my right hand—up my arm.

Numbing

Numbing

Numb

The jaws open without any hesitation, without any idea of what it bit. Partially perplexed and wholly horrified, a third of my middle finger hangs by thin webs of skin—meat severed—bone snapped—ready to disembark on its

journey to the warm, cozy factory floor. Ba says things belong in the ground, not on the ground; although, Home showed me otherwise.

Hospital: I wait for Ba to come from a faraway town to sign papers; no amputation before then. The air conditioner jolts more cold into my finger. *So, this is what capital punishment feels like.* Heart panics... a balloon ready to pop.

* * *

I wake up and look for a new factory that needs things put together.

The Third W

Birds.

They aid in controlling the population
of rodents, lizards, and insects.

Animals of Stability may as well be their
title.

They transport seeds to make Earth
just a little more botanic—a
little more green—a little less
gray.

Ecologists perhaps.

They teach the skies and the trees

to serenade and harmonize.

Song Gurus are they.

They give us inspiration

to adapt.

They give us inspiration

to fly.

They give us inspiration

to sing.

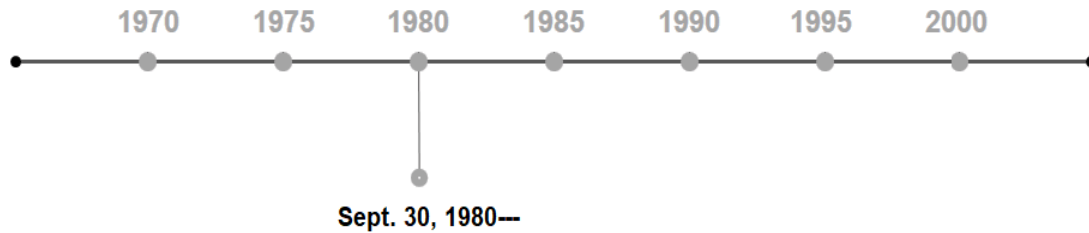
But where are they?

- Lieu 53

What a Dime Will Buy

TheBus costs a dime to ride. Faces aboard look focused. Some frustrated. Some lifeless. Some asleep. I can't decide whether the air conditioner is making a whistling sound or a buzzing noise. Nothing to do besides stare out the dreary plastic window. Green blur passes by; red; another green. Red light stops all movements, slows the vibration. Starts again briefly before pulling over with a whine. More faces focused, frustrated, lifeless. One falls asleep as soon it sits, but no snores; maybe overwhelmed by the whistling or buzzing—still haven't decided. Blue blur; white; another blue. There are too

many stops. I'm going to be late to school again.



No Breaks

Four boats left Vietnam. Three reached Hong Kong. We should feel fortunate. After over a year, my aunt sponsors us to another island: O‘ahu.

The Office gave Ba money. They call it welfare; we call it salvation. People put us in schools; I attend Dole Intermediate. They call it a place to learn how to be an American; we call it a place to learn English. We find somewhere to sleep: Kalihi. Four rooms. They call it a place to live; we call it a dream come true. The landlord lives above. Their footsteps are barely heard. We should feel fortunate.

Since arriving on September 30, 1980, Ba constantly mumbles about his nightly disappearances—always to the same place: Waikiki. Shops of trinkets. Endless crowds. He has always been intrigued by open markets. He was born to sell—to do business. Even before I was born, he would ride around town on his bicycle selling balloons, pencils, hats—anything that made money. *Let's open a shop in Waikiki.*

New House (a walkup): Waikiki; seven teens in the upper apartment, five babies in the lower apartment with Má & Ba. Five barely squeeze onto two (queen) beds connected, and one (twin) bed in the dining area for two, but we make it

work. We are in Waikiki. We should feel fortunate.

We venture into the International Marketplace, gathering intel. Ba was right. Another marketplace? The sign reads "Duke's Lane." Narrow passage enveloped by stunning shops selling the same things, familiar things; maybe I will find a coin purse with a piece of me pressed in. *One person's treasure is another person's... daily bread.*

Summers in Hawai'i are hot.

New House: Hawaii Kai; far but manageable. I learn to say, "I need a job." I ask the Office. First Job: sweep up trash and dry leaves at the Waikiki

Shell, Zoo, Aquarium. I feel like kindling. I am kindling.

My friend gets me a job at a local favorite: Sekiya's. Scrub dishes and utensils, wipe tables, sweep up crumpled straw wrappings.

Resume: Savvy Sweeper

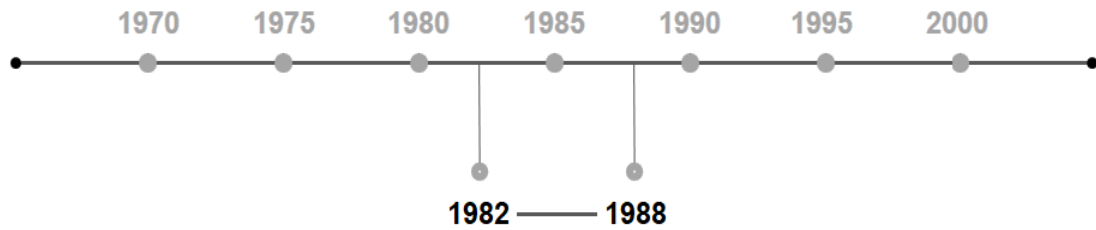
We discover another marketplace: Kam Swap Meet (flea market). We find a wholesaler and buy costume jewelry to sell; the jade and pearl necklaces, bracelets, and earrings look genuine, but the prices suggest otherwise.

Success is 20% Luck

80% Toil.

Four of us haul two boxes of jewelry
into the car: four hours after midnight.
A few dollars to enter the lot as
entrepreneurs. We park, unfold a table,
and expose the costume jewelry to be
sifted through once the sun rises over
our heads.

: Bread & Circus.



Fridays After the Disco

Sixteen yrs. 125 lbs. Saturday. Wood plank laid across the driver seat and a box (no passenger seat) in our step van. Nose pressed on the steering wheel and the vinyl seat alternatingly. Elbow persistently stubbing the stick shift. Anxiety of not sleeping pulls and stretches my stomach. Alarm goes off: five hours after midnight. My callused hand runs through my hair. Catapulted dust pollutes the air. Key ignites. Stick shifts. Line of 30 vans in Stadium Mall... waiting. File in front of the gates to Aloha Stadium at five. Asphalt Heaven. *I got a good spot in line...* waiting. An hour of stop and go tempo.

Shoes falling from shelves. Squeaks from old brakes. Thumps of the engine. I park. Connect poles. Put up the tarp. Sweat; but not like in the summer. Steel echoing in every direction—banging, vibrating, scraping: sounds of competition. Family arrives ready to sell: nine hours after midnight. Crowds materialize and venture the junkyard jungle. Unbearable heat blurs my vision. Deals are still struck. Signs of 15 crossed out; five marked beside it. Fatigue hands. Fanny packs. Signs of 50 slashed; 20 at its side. *What a deal.* Break down poles: fifteen hours after midnight. Everything back into the van. Clanks of steel. Ten hands make for

ease, but the sun is unforgiveable. Back to Stadium Mall: seven hours before midnight. Need a good spot for tomorrow... waiting.

The Right Way to Do Things

5 Bdrms. 2 ½ Baths (including master). Two stories with a two-car garage. 1776 sqft. No yard. Two mango trees. One shed. *1133. 1+1+3+3=8. It doesn't equal 10. In Three Card Baccarat, 10 means death. In Vietnamese, it means misfortune.* \$700k. Red sold sticker. American Dream (achieved?).

This is the American way.

{Get multiple estimates} The single-wall wood panels are unappealing. Add another wall to make it double-walled, blue-walled (somewhere between Blue Veil and Lauren's Surprise); *anything but aluminum-walled, please.* Get rid of

the monotony of the faux wood cabinetry. Replace with Eggshell. Remove the wall dividing kitchen from living room: *Open plan.* Replace granite island—White... no, Black... no, Gunmetal. Vinyl flooring, so junk. Do laminate, Koa Laminate. Remove the cast iron eyesore; do like the model homes in Vegas: walk-in shower. New lighting. Windows can stay jalousie and ~~glassy~~ classy. [\$62,000 (incl. demo)]

This is Our way.

{Get multiple estimates} from experts, and then do it on our own. No need contractors. No need designers. Get ideas from the estimators. Find out

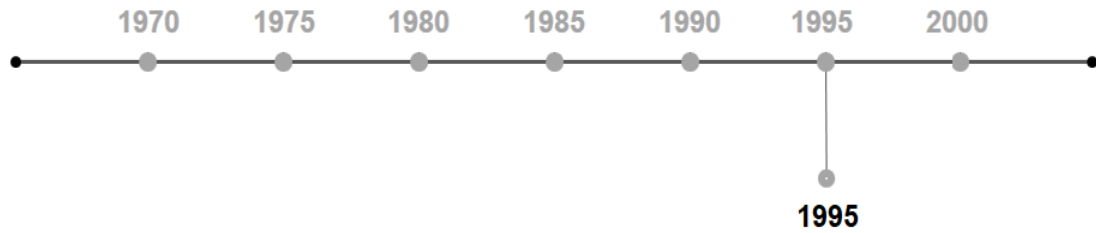
where they plan to buy the materials.
Buy direct. Do it ourselves, or hire
Chinese. [~~\$45,000~~ \$42,000 (no demo)]

American way.

Wait for a business to be successful.
Wait, or don't wait, for the business to
go for sale. Take a tour. Contact
accountant. Buy business. Hostile
takeover.

Our way.

Go to the shop for sale. Watch them.
Let them show us how they run the
business, where they buy or produce
their products; how. *Where's your
income papers?* Open a business the
same way. Hostile replacement. They
didn't want to stay in business anyways.
What they gonna do?



Silent Cardboard

Shoved into the depths of the step van—neglected—paying little attention to whether I sully its interior. It's a rental. Transparent tape screeches as I stretch it taut and lay it over two flaps—sealing the deal; taping boxes for hours. There are four back here. One more before I traffic them back to the islands. Turn the key. Clench the wheel. Drive. Horrid holes in the ground remind the occupants to bang the cardboard walls, hoping to bust free of their bars; however, they belong to me now. It's dark out in Los Angeles. The sparkles stand out in the shadowy sky—spiders in the garden of death—keeping curious

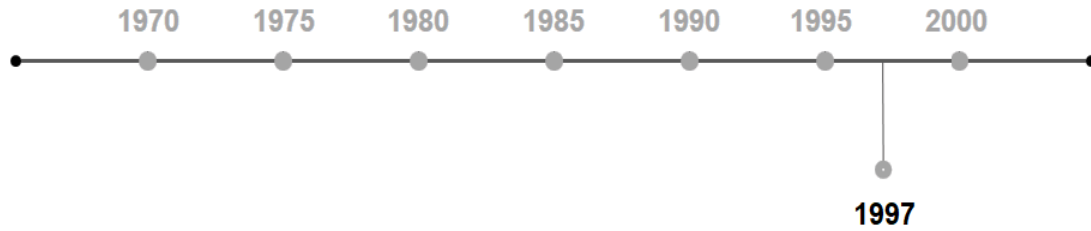
eyes on me, watching me. It's just business.

Tracing the veins of the map, switching between red and yellow—dissecting, slicing down its integral intersecting arteries; driving around the block a few times. *Where is it?* The beatings against the barriers of the boxes persist. *Shh...* *Don't worry. It'll all be over soon.* I pull into a musky gas station for a lighter and directions to Keeping Time. The clerk gives me a look... Perhaps because he doesn't agree with the way we Chinese take care of business. A cold stare... Perhaps he knows what I possess. Probing...

Through the foggy twilight, I pull up to the bright lights of the watch shop. Apprehensive, the van veers to the back lot to avoid potential witnesses. Engine off. Cigarette lit. I peek back at the four dead silent parcels. "I called earlier about the package." His right hand is tucked behind his back. *What is he hiding?* Through a beaded curtain, floating particles of dust stalked by the scent of rainwater-soaked bamboo permeate. There in the desolate room sits the cold cardboard. Lifeless. After examining its inanimate inhabitants, I cuff its reluctant flaps with tape. We force it to join the rest. John's glare alternates between the five boxes and

me. "You have a big interest in whales, don't you?" He wants to know what I plan to do, but if I told him, then I'd have to kill him. I hand him the envelope, giving him the luxury of counting the cash at his own pace.

Seated on the cracked leather seat, I pressure the button below the G-Shock's digital face, and a laser whale illuminates the time, arguing with the surrounding darkness in the dead of night. *What do the Japanese see in this thing?* It continues to blink until I release it—set it free from my grip.

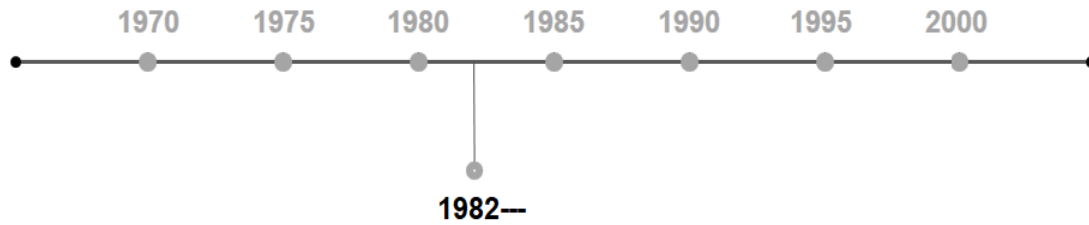


Buying Time

Speed (1994): Keanu Reeves wears a Casio G-Shock DW-5600C-1V; qualified by NASA for space missions and only produced from 1987 to 1996. In present day Hawai‘i, Japanese tourists ask for “Speedo” (the discontinued watch from the movie), ready to pay over \$800 for a \$120 (retail) timepiece. In present day Hawai‘i, Japanese tourists ask for 鯨 (Kujira; whale)—a clear “jelly” watch with an image of a whale that pops up as the light—ready to pay over \$1000 for it.

John calls me, saying he has a few boxes of DW-5600 watches (some “Speedo” and some “Kujira”), totaling \$70,000. This model can easily be flipped for more than triple its price.

But Japanese fads can fade overnight.



International Marketplace

Grass shacks, swaying palms, streams, waterfalls, tiki carvings, outrigger canoes, dancing Natives. The old Hawai'i, the Pacific in Waikiki, the living vision of Donn Beach and George Wimberly.

Then, requirements and upkeep became lax. The International Market Place became crammed with shops and overcrowded with sellers, who spoke little to no English, selling tchotchkes. It's 1982. We are a part of all the above, and this is our living vision.

Duke's Lane



: Bacon.

The Beckoning Cat

Legend has it,

the paws draw in customers and bring good fortune (left paw raised to bring customers, right paw raised to bring luck and fortune). *Does size matter? What do you believe?*

Legend has it,

Lord Ii Naotaka sought shelter from the rain under a tree. From there, he spotted a cat calling him into the nearby temple; the sight was so strange that he surrendered and obliged. Just

then, lightning struck the tree, and it collapsed. Naotaka credited the cat for saving his life and became the temple's patron, helping it prosper.

At the Gotokuji Temple today, many Maneki Neko figures have been donated by people who believe that they've been blessed by its good fortune.

Black – to protect kids and women from illnesses and evil.

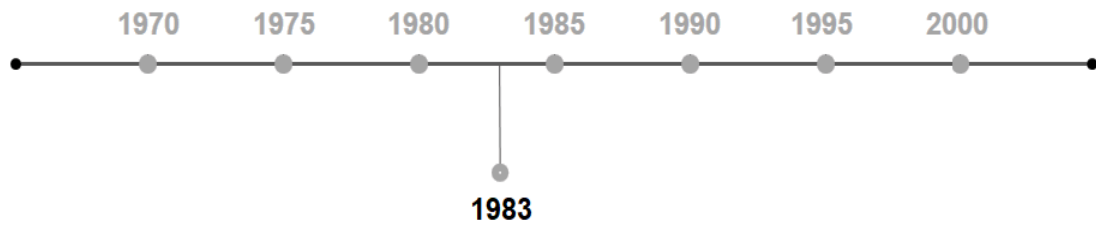
White – to represent purity.

Gold – to bring in money.

Pink – to attract love.

Some have one or two next to their register. We have four; and yes, size matters.

Who needs hope if there's luck?



The One

Duke's Lane: narrow; snug. Not a centimeter of space spared. Everyone knows everyone. 'Ohana, Asian style. 1983; the neighbor's chair beside me is no longer committed to Isabel, the salesgirl. Isabel, the one with whom I practice English through conversations. Will Mr. Sasaki be working more? He's not exactly the guru of selling tourist trinkets.

No, the chair is occupied by someone else. Who is she? And, more importantly, is she able to hold a conversation in English?

Hawaiian Godzilla

Common House Gecko
Hemidactylus Frenatus

Mourning Gecko
Lepidodactylus Lugubris

Stump-Toed Gecko
Gehyra Mutilata

Indo-Pacific Gecko
Hemidactylus Garnotii

Tree Gecko
Hemiphyllodactylus Typus

Orange-Spotted Day Gecko
Phelsuma Guimbeaui

Gold Dust Day Gecko
Phelsuma Laticauda

Tokay Gecko
Gekko Gekko

Madagascar Giant Day Gecko
Phelsuma Madagascariensis Grandis

Transparent eyelids.
Chirps.
Pudgy, bulbous toes.
Spontaneous spastic gestures.
Luck-inducing

The ball of yarn unravels broken tales
(or short sentences) of lucky geckos (or
geckos getting lucky) ... if one drops on
your shoulder, you're blessed... if one

runs across your hand, you're endowed with luck... if you move into a house without a gecko already living in it, fret...

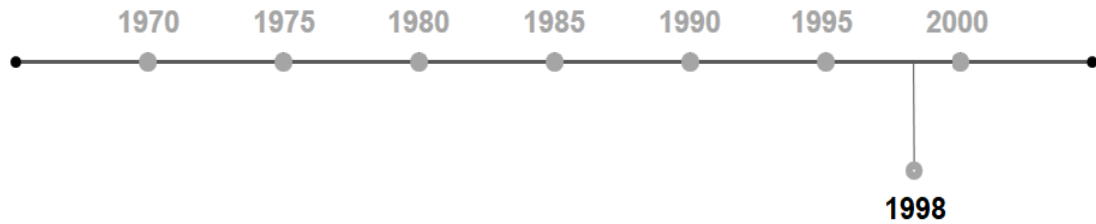
Mo'o were greatly feared and revered throughout Polynesia. Most mo'o are female shapeshifters capable of appearing as maidens or thirty-foot reptiles that live in or near a body of water. A well-known mo'o is Kihawahine, who lives in a pond in Moku'ula. King Kamehameha even married Keōpūolani (a descendant of Kihawahine) for the power that came with their union, maximizing his own

mana, and helping him win the Battle of Nu'uanu (a war that was to unite the Hawaiian Islands).¹

Maybe rumors of the good fortune gecko materialized, with the arrival of immigrants and tourists, to protect the reptiles—the sacred beings—from harm, from disappearing [not in the camouflage way].

“Killing a gecko will bring you bad fortune.”

¹ Barnfield, R.C. “Kihawahine.” *Hawaii Alive*, Bishop Museum.



The Stranger's Hum

Gathered on the lanai at Má house in Kapahulu, we gossip—announce—chicken scratch—reminisce—laugh. Lawn chairs from Costco. We eat. The night is loud; a usual Sunday, only unusual with the absence of the neighbors' complaints and barking dog—only unusual with the absence of mosquitoes and flies swarming the air, mimicking WW2 flight patterns—only unusual with the buzzing...

We are mostly uncertain how the zapper lantern got here. Every so often, an electric hum accompanies our gossip, sits with our stories, binds with our

past; the electric murmurs of our past. A moment of silence ironically fosters momentum for the next story, for the next swarm of laughter—laughter sinister alongside the sizzles of insect corpses (capital punishment for flying in the no-fly zone).

At the end of the night, I find a shriveled gecko carcass on the electric fence of the lantern (capital punishment for eating in a no trespassing zone).

I throw the lantern away.

When Rain was Milk

The Aluminum Palace. Our Tin Mansion. Homes; they protect people from dust, from the world's insanity, from times when nature chooses to be especially antagonistic, except when the heathens dance for the Rain God, except for that day—the day Allen was born. Má is reminded of this day in 1963 by her sister-in-law at least once a month, the story broken up by puffs of Marlboro Golds, though it's not exactly a forgettable affair.

Sounds of the beating rain on the tin, firecrackers above their heads; the creeping of fluid fingers slithers from

beneath the barriers of their Silver Safe Haven, tickling their feet then ankles to the shins quickly to their knees thighs embracing their love handles. Má became a human submarine... or almost did. Raindrops in the veil of night struck less fear in them than the molestation of dirt water, aroused and hungry. On the roof, she pushes. The red river mixes with the dirt sea to form an odious estuary, now in the gutter only a foot away. Pushing interrupted with cries of life (for life). Rising water continues to envelope the house. Tears masked by rain. Without milk available, someone scoops water from the gutter to feed the newborn hungry wails.

A single motion of two taps to send
ashes into a Coke can. One last puff,
and the corpse joins the ashes. She
lights another and takes a drag before
the next narrative.

Vietnamese Cutia

Everywhere there's life, there's music.

The Mother is always singing Her
songs.

The male cutia whistles to a female
that will never come.

Life slips through our mortal fingers.

Now his voice is gone.

Their species was a symphony;

one by one

each instrument departs.

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