

WENDI ADAMEK

GREEN BLOOD TAHITI

The crayfish seemed to know which surfaces of my body were invisible to me. If I'd had hours they might have ventured into view, semitransparent and fragile as stickmen. They crawled lightly up and down my spine, delicately explored the backs of my arms, the crooks of my knees, the undersides of my thighs. If I moved I was abandoned. I might see a blur of thin legs as they disappeared beneath rocks.

Then they would emerge again, beginning at the base of my spine and working their way up and around. There was no pinching or poking, only a busy polite scraping. They were eating minute flakes of my skin. Dead skin, people say. But isn't a flake still alive, part of me, until it's detached? I thought -- what if I was a rat? What if my body was washed down by winter rains, coming to rest in this pool? I'd be fine brown fur moving with the current, pink hands curled around a crystal ball of water, ears as thin as the filament veins they hold. Then there would be no need to hide, no underside. The crayfish could claim every surface, they might take me with them to their holes. I would be their guest, their ghost, their host.

PAPEETE

I love my family, but they can be rough if I'm craving peace and warmth. To join my parents and siblings on this holiday, I've left behind a tribe of people who know what I've lost along with my job. I've gone from the centre of something to the edge of a circle. Yet my colleagues, however sympathetic, will not be able to give me house-room if things really fall apart. At noisy family meals no one's said a word about it, not yet. Well, maybe a joke or two. It's not that they don't care. My wound is their wound, we have to find out if it will drag us down.

This is a dream trip to Tahiti. It was my father's dream, but he died before he made it. It's my stepfather's birthday and his friend's money. It's our first cruise.

Urban Tahitians are quirky and complex; they've got French sharpness and cafes, Polynesian graciousness, post-colonial hustle. They seem to be in charge, but I really don't know. There was a party in the hotel restaurant that started at four in the afternoon and was still going strong when I fell asleep,

well past midnight. Live bands played local music that was like our local music in Hawai'i, yet different enough to resist a sense of being at home. My brother Wayne, my sister Lani and her husband Mark went to check it out. They said even though the bar was open they didn't feel welcome.

I dreamt of the apocalypse that night. A Tahitian boy came up to me, pulled at my jeans. He was unhappy so I put him on my shoulders. I told him to hold tight because I needed my arms to fly. We drifted high over a compound of angry people, their hatred weighed us down. I put my heart into it and we rose higher, beyond their swelling faces and open mouths. I faced the sun rising over the hills, opened my mouth and began to sing. I don't remember the words, but it was a song naming each thing that was allowed to die. My wings and singing burned, I had no arms. The boy, dark and naked, perched on my shoulder. Playing angel and cupid of the endgame, I kept naming the neglected and he kept time. There was nothing to do but watch and sing and immolate with everything.

As I boarded the ship next morning it felt like I was joining the chorus of the last performance of a hit show. Against magnificent backdrops of eroding volcanoes fringed with millennia of coral industry, our smiles are real. We meet for dinner dances over radioactive depths, local guides lead us through sacred groves selling black pearls that were his eyes. Avenging angels let loose on ourselves, the bodies are falling too fast to count. Numbers flicker in the iridescent eyes of neglected gods.

MO'OREA

Mo'orea means "yellow mo'o," we have them in Hawai'i too. They're the magic dragon-lizards of hidden pools and undergrounds. Our ship's anthropologist led us on a hike above Opunohu, a bay named for the belly of the poison rockfish. Trails loop the marae, sacred platforms where clan members gathered and made sacrifices.

Basalt slabs rounded like tombstones were set in the lichen-softened lava of the marae. Chiefs sat with their privileged spines resting against the slabs and spoke to the cliff-face of the crater cradling their people. Now it's called the "Bali Hai" mountain, but the bones of ancestors are hidden in its clefts. The platforms are shaded with sturdy branches for hanging clan enemies with roped hooks thrust under the chin and through the brain.

A rare survival, this forest was not logged and still has old-growth kukui and mape trees. Mape roots look like the backs of mo'o, sinuous and sentient. I

kept smelling something dark and sweet.

It was on the trail between two marae that my heart slowed. I know the feeling but these invaders were unfamiliar, heavy and rich as forest mud. Beginning at the base of my spine and working their way up and around, they filled each thought and then they ate it. Like a faultless tide the deified dead claimed the reef of my strange bones. As they swallowed my heartbeats they said, "We cannot spill the blood of those we hate without spilling our own. The blood of our enemies is in our grandchildren's veins."

I stood in back of the crowd of pale shipmates at the edge of the large marae. I could no longer hear the guide's lecture but saw green blood welling from the ground, tasted the salt of their love-strangled rage. I saw with their eyes how a kindly old woman stepped onto the platform of their people, straddling the low lava wall. She reached for a kukui nut. I saw how the lips of her withered cunt were poised, empty, over their sacred boundary. The sole of her shoe in the place of their fathers soaked up the blood of enemies whose names they knew.

A white bird with a long fluttering tail flew over the crowd, brilliant in slanting afternoon sun. It seemed trapped in the beams of light like a frantic fish in a narrowing net. Everyone made noises of surprise and delight. The anthropologist shook his blond head and exclaimed, "That's a fairy tern! The Tahitians say it means the presence of a god; it's a good sign. I've never seen one in the forest before, they're usually out at sea."

I felt them smile heavily, their massive jaws and curling tongues holding fluttering seafoam wings. I opened my mouth, the bird shot up through the trees and was gone.

They pulled me right through the ground as we walked down the mountain. An old man from the ship was having trouble breathing. My sister Lani and the young Tahitian guide walked beside him, holding him when he stumbled. It got quiet as we fell behind the crowd.

The old woman who stepped onto the marae was the wife of the faltering man, she fluttered around us. Once she turned back to speak to me. I could see that her thin face was beautiful, her hair floated white and loose in the light. I looked at her; she opened her kindly, withered lips but nothing emerged. What did she see on my face while they were seated on the marae of my heartbeat? She closed her mouth and hurried ahead to rejoin her husband leaning on the arm of my sister.

I was pulling apart but I followed my family back to the ship. When I reached

my cabin the last molar on my lower left jaw broke off. I stared at it, whitish-grey in my pink palm. There wasn't any pain or sign of decay, but I had a piece of something my body had made. It seemed clear to me that I had to leave it in the forest, not as a gift but an acknowledgment of debt.

Next day at lunch I slipped slices of raw tuna and salmon from the sashimi buffet into a plastic bag in my pocket. That plastic has perhaps joined the continent of trash growing in the Pacific even as the atolls shrink. I needed an offering, I knew they'd like fish. Boarding the shuttle-boat to the pier, I assured my family that I'd be back before the ship sailed in three hours. I told them I wanted to look at pearls.

Taxis, it turned out, would only go to the shopping areas. Then I spotted the hand-painted "Avis" sign propped on a card table under a palm. When someone tracked down the agent, a large Tahitian woman, it turned out I didn't have my driver's license. I had my credit card. When I convinced her I was crazy enough to pay the full-day rate to drive a car less than three hours and fifty kilometres, she did the paperwork.

In fifteen minutes I was in a tiny Euro car with the windows open, winding my way above Opunohu Bay. I found the trailhead, a grassy hollow beside the road. The transmission was a mystery and I couldn't do reverse, so I put it in neutral and set the parking brake.

When I entered the forest, there was a handsome Tahitian man with three little girls at the first stream. The girls giggled and splashed like little girls in a stream anywhere in the world. I smiled and continued down the trail to the silent marae. I bowed at the foot, facing the mountain, careful not to touch the stones. I prayed, "May the waters return, may the forests return, may human beings return to wisdom, may we care for the earth and not fear death." In their green blood my prayer dissolved like a grain of sugar. It left no flavour.

So I wandered. I took a side trail, came to another stream, followed it, and then another. I knew when I reached the place. It was a narrowing of the stream flanked by huge mape trees, a dark canyon of water between twisting roots and trunks. There were faces and bodies in the wet wood.

In a sunlit pool below the dark canyon I bathed, then I rinsed the pink fish slices and wrapped them in ti leaves. What would the shipboard sushi chef think if he could see the fate of his handiwork? Where had this tuna and salmon travelled, by what hook or net had they died? Was this flesh offering cut from the bodies of two fish, three, or nine?

I climbed down the silky cascade into the dark pool and placed the squishy green packet on a lip of stone. Their backs curving high above me, mape-mo'o bodies coiled around the crystal ball of water. I settled on smooth stones, water lapped my shoulders. Holding the pearly fragment of tooth with underwater hands, I thought of how its shape connected me to genetic dreams and food in the mouths of ancestors.

Reaching into the dark tangle of water beneath the falls, I dropped the tooth. Then my hands floated, my body rocked gently. After a while the crayfish came out.

Salt ran down my face into the sweet pool. Sunlight came like a hook between twisted trees, pierced my bared throat and came out my eyes in rainbows, tiny galaxies unravelling in filaments of blue, gold and red. Crayfish I couldn't see walked with bodies full of light across my ribs.

Then the earth turned and the sun's hook slid into another gullet, the pool went dark once more. As I walked back through the forest it walked through me, but their blood no longer felt unbearably heavy. I coasted down the mountain in the little car, a cinnamon hawk drifting alongside. At the bottom of the road it wheeled away where my gaze couldn't follow but my skin could still feel the brushing of its flight.

Nothing showed up on my credit card statement. I had watched her take the imprint. Did she decide not to charge me because I only took the car two hours and left a full tank? Was it a gift or did the papers get lost? Did she smell green blood?

I thought about sending a check to the rental car office. Then I thought -- what if this was her part of the acknowledgement? What if her ancestors or mine shuffled the papers so there was no record of my trip? Would it cause her any trouble? Could she lose her job? Somehow I felt sure that she was the one in charge. She would have a counter-spell for the instruments of economic rationality.

I let go of the questions but I kept the debt. Money I give away is swept into veins I can't see, but a continuous sentient line threads me to Mo'orea. My blood will be drawn in such a way that it runs like the tide between my strange body and theirs.

BORA BORA

When you arrive at a new job, having someone who offers to initiate you into the mysteries and the personalities is delightful. Someone takes an interest, it's flattering and comforting. She told me, at length, whom to avoid and why. Yet I didn't recognise the real danger even when I saw what sharp teeth she had.

There are many forms of worship of flesh-eating goddesses throughout Asia and the Pacific. When one turns up, it's best to offer bits of your own flesh on a regular basis so she won't go for your viscera. What a flesh-eating goddess really craves is to be seen, to receive homage. If you dare to look down her throat you can see that she's been swallowed. Someone who once loved has been consumed yet lives on in the darkness.

I was on the afterdeck at midnight of the New Year, warmed by lamb (rare and bloody), sambucca, and my tipsy family. Flesh-eating gods, we've been feasting on all kinds of beasts and gifts four times a day, including high tea. In a light rain we slide around on the wet deck and splash each other. We cheer the spattering of fireworks erupting from shoreline homes ringing the inky caldera. Flying fish challenge the ship's lights to duels. The teeth of Bora Bora rise jagged to catch shoals of stars.

There was a place between my shoulder-blades where the person who'd called herself my friend had stuck a professional stiletto, like the Italian ancestors she was fond of evoking. I'd been carrying myself as if it hurt. I finally realised she hadn't been anywhere near my heart.

She had no idea where my heart was, she'd never been interested in finding out. That flat, dead space that cropped up in our conversations, into which I tossed questions and sympathies and bits of flesh, was her lack of interest in anything but these offerings. I'd let her get much closer than I should have. She may have thought in ways I didn't understand. But that night I recognised with relief that I'd never told her the most important things. It was like counting one's limbs after waking on a battlefield and realising they were all there.

The marae were for hosting the dead. Those tangled in life welcomed their ancestors, ancestors welcomed the things that fall apart. Enemies were left hanging until the flesh fell to the ground, ants and insects did the rest. The treasured dead were laid in burial cavities nearby, then their long bones were exhumed and hidden in the cliff where nothing escaped their gaze.

In the forest on Mo'orea I let others' ancestors weight my flight, the fluttering soul of a white girl, an enemy. They were curious enough to come and look

through alien eyes, become tourists in their own ancient forests. They picked and scraped at the furnishings of my soul to see if they'd unravel. Something came loose.

Is it a failure of my civilisation that I won't offer forgiveness to my enemy? Is it a failure of theirs that forgiveness wouldn't have shown up on any statement? I turned down ritual submission and ritual revenge masked as a battle for justice. I chose expulsion from the marae. My enemy's exercise of power showed me the limits of power, I'm off the hook and all over the ground. I'm giving attention to the tangle of filaments living through my heart and lungs, pulling my body into the mud and knotting my voice with the sound of water over stones. My enemy -- she and I are bound in the networks of a frenetic community, a coral reef, a Tahitian forest, and the ordeal of tribal scarification and sacrifice. To insist on bestowing forgiveness is to insist on paying as you go. I accept that if I am anything at all, I am my debts. I depend not on everything, not on nothing, but on you.