

L I F E W R I T I N G

RACHAEL JOHNSON

RABAUL — NEW GUINEA

I can't remember what I thought when my father told us that we were going to Papua New Guinea but I don't believe that I complained. Perhaps I knew that the nation was new and free, and that the bird of paradise flew its skies.

But Papua New Guinea had not been free throughout most of the twentieth century. Both the Germans and Japanese had exploited those lush, useful islands. The most recent 'mastas' were white men from the South with big shorts and long socks. They had only given Papua New Guinea independence in 1975.

Did my father tell us about the land's true peoples? Did he tell us that they had recently exited a time so radically different from the twentieth century that the knowledge could only leave a European child drunk with wonder? Their tools, I would learn, had been made of bone and stone.

Did we understand where we going? Did he point to Rabaul, New Guinea on the map? Rabaul had been the Pacific headquarters of the Japanese during World War II. It was there that Admiral Yamamoto had his bunker. I didn't know this at eight but I saw their deathless traces, a gun garden, cool, black and green, a bower, a strange yet lovely bower, somewhat enchanting to me.

Had the Japanese baptized Submarine Base? To behold its pristine perfection was to feel the loneliness and terror only Paradise begets. Was this the last time that I understood the great explorers? I saw sharks gliding through its reefs as I swam and snorkeled in the bay. I saw them all the time but I didn't dare tell anyone. The inner space of that ocean was delicious and terrifying to me, its strangeness unmatched. Surely, I never swam over the wall.

I thought at eight that nothing was more perfect than a cowrie shell. Their shape and size made them almost edible to me, their tiny-toothed mouths so very intriguing. For two years, I stole them from the Pacific Ocean.

The waves were sometimes colossal in New Guinea but I allowed them to swallow me.

Did I want to die at eight?

The beaches were black in parts as volcanoes cradled Rabaul. They were a family, a mother and two daughters as well as Vulcan and Tavurvur. I was told that they were sleeping.

There were many other wonderful things: men armed with stones and catapults, smiling companions passing close by me, white cockatoos and cocoa plantations, the rich, sappy bush and the shaking of the earth. The land was a force and I think I loved it.

But I remember your ocean-front house most of all. We flew over black waves on a battered tyre roped to monstrous-strange, salt-fed tree. We ate plain-delicious biscuits from an ancient biscuit tin in your cool, dark kitchen. I ate mine greedily. What did I think of you then? I now believe that I wanted to fuse with you: I absorbed your gestures and mirrored you completely. I didn't want to be like my other little friend- a fat white girl all the Tolais kids called Jumbo. So I stopped eating or rather I only ate chocolate bars when I wanted. I measured my waist with the spans of my tiny hands. But there was no *Vogue* in Papua New Guinea and I was only eight years old.

I preferred to smell. I loved the smell of pork roasting on hot stones in the earth and cheap Australian pies. Fish markets and Fanta Orange still mean Papua New Guinea to me.

It was in Rabaul that I began to write about the Lala nut girl. I still don't know who she was.

There were other things I didn't completely understand: fears of being watched on flood-lit tennis court, human faeces found in our car (why?), an angry man chasing a woman, wild with fear, around and around (where?). Strange things were spoken. To my teacher father, Australian men said, "These people can't be taught." At my mother, they shouted, "Get out Sheila, this is a man's watering hole". Were men surrounding the tennis court?

My father worked and played hard while my mother watched men who stared at young children. But I felt no fear. I made my bike pretty with the flowers of the frangipani tree and frowned at the fine haze that the sun makes over the Pacific.

Did we swim with limbs entangled over dark, slapping waves? Was it with you

that I first felt the dizziness of infinity?

The day before our departure, my mother bought me a book on shells. The shine from the pictures matched the shine of my cowrie shells. When has this been repeated? From the plane, I saw a maze of islands so small that they could barely be called islands. I wanted to step on and off them in hopscotch fashion and bathe in their pools.

Only on those islands were time and space made wonderful and strange.

Without warning, we were in England, with grandfathers in cardigans who winked at you and ate fish and chips in ink-stained newspapers (why?). I was forced to wear shoes again and the sun just disappeared.

On 19th September, 1994, Tavurvur and Vulcan awoke and burnt Rabaul off the map. There is a group on Facebook called 'Did you ever live in Rabaul, PNG? I have joined it and found you again.



ASHLEY CAPES

WASHING — BASKET

the word 'backyard' suggests a lawn
at the least, and possibly
fruit trees, a shed,
a woodheap and an old trailer
or bike, then kids
with makeshift rules for cricket

but my strip of concrete out back
with its metre-span clothesline
doesn't really measure up,
at least, not until the moon comes
and pours its silver across
the washing basket.