SARAH BIANCO

Jump #7, 2012
Oil on Panel, 16 x 16 in.

courtesy: the artist

ANDREW X. PHAM

Hawaiian Blues

I've lost count of how many times I've come back to the Hawaiian Islands. Every time has been different. Every island is different, but every arrival is the same. It's an unmistakable feeling when I step off the plane and onto a Hawaiian tarmac. A womblike recognition, an earthy warmth. I can smell the soil. The air wraps around me, all my pores opening up at once. I'm making the same promise to myself that I've always broken: I'm never leaving these isles. I have always felt *right* here.

Shouldering my backpack, I walk out to Kauai's main highway, a two-lane road that runs nearly the whole way around the island, and hitch a ride to a backpacker hostel fifteen minutes down the coast in Kapaa. On the way into town, I spot a gray Ford Fiesta with a "FOR SALE $500" sign on its cracked window. At the hostel, I dial the number and ask them to come by with the car as soon as possible because I want to put some distance between myself and this dump. It is the second-filthiest hostel I've seen. The first was in La Paz, Mexico, but it had characters who were shaken down by the Mexican police daily. This is just a ramshackle of bunks with plastic-covered hospital mattresses and a blond Rasta guy at the reception desk, who says vaguely that he's out of receipts and to please pay cash.

It is late in the afternoon. Two guys are on the lawn, smoking and drinking a six-pack of beer. In the TV room, a stunning redhead in her mid-twenties with skin the color of shortcakes holds court with three suitors. Backpackers track in and out, some opting to pay higher hotel prices elsewhere to avoid the hostel's toilets. I sit at a picnic table on the veranda and chat with a short, powerfully built man. Bob claims a mixed ancestry of a quarter Cherokee, a quarter Filipino, a quarter Hawaiian, and a quarter Japanese—"*one hundred percent ai-lan-daa*." He tries to sell me a plastic bag of homemade pork jerky. He shot the pig full of arrows himself. Kauai is overrun with them. Wild goats and chickens too. He swears it's a paradise, the sea dense with fish, the valleys rife with fruits. A man who knows how to walk the land can eat well.

"Slice 'em up real thin, yah," he says, dicing with his hand. "Sauté 'em with lots of butter, onions, Tabasco, and black pepper. Eat 'em over rice or eat 'em plain, yah. Da best jerky on da island. Try some."

"Look, Bob. I just got here. Don't have a pot, don't have a stove, don't have nothing," I say. "Aren't you worried about trichinosis?"

"Worms? Never heard of them!" Looking properly offended, he commences to give me second-hand testimonials on his product.

A shuttle van delivers a batch of backpackers. Among them is a small woman, a head shorter than everyone else, in her late twenties or early thirties. She seems to be alone, looking rather lost. She has a soft voice and I can't hear what she is asking the guy at the reception desk. It is strange how sometimes you can sense that an extraordinary person has come into the room. There is rarely anything unusual about her, not the things she says or the way she carries herself. But it is there, a certain marker, unmistakable, as if the gods have designs on her.

I am waiting for an opportunity to approach her when a couple arrives and introduces themselves as the owners of the car I called about. We take the two-door beater out for a mile and manually shift through the gears with the slippery clutch up to fifty mph, the island's legal limit. The pint-sized vehicle rattles and bounces—feels like sitting on a blender—but nothing falls off. I give the owners a thumbs-up. Back at the hostel, it's getting dark. We review the paperwork in the headlights. I tell the car owners that I'd offer them the obligatory low of $400, and that they will probably counter with $450, so why don't we just say $450 and have it done with? The husband grins, Okay. A

soft tropical rain begins to fall. In the steaming beams, the tens and twenties are counted out. Bob hovers nearby, so I buy some of his jerky as well.

When I look for the small woman again, she is gone. The reception guy says she hitched a ride to the north with a group of backpackers who were going to hike to Kalalau the next morning.

I drive north along the dark coast. The radio doesn't work, but there is a shark-shaped bottle opener on the key ring of my "new" car, so I pick up a six-pack of Hawaiian brews from a mom-and-pop minimart and continue down the winding two-lane highway. The drizzle thickens into a shower, then the shower blossoms into a gushing downpour so heavy I can't make out the center marker on the road. I pull onto a gravel path that curves into a cane field and park. I sit in the black, pounding rain, chewing sweet teriyaki jerky and chasing it with the local beer. It has a bitter aftertaste. Stephanie might have gotten a kick out of the jalopy or the beer, and certainly the dubious pork. She loves Hawaii.

A year ago, Stephanie and I came here looking for a monkey pod tree. Armed with how-to books, we were going to build a three-room tree house with kitchen, bathroom, and bedroom, the works, twenty-five feet off the ground. I had recently come into a modest sum of money—just enough to buy a monkey pod tree and a spit of land within the shade of its foliage. There would be a trapeze for her. A reading nook with a view for me. High in midair, a hammock to cocoon both of us. A world of our own, to leave behind all that was wrong between us.

* * *

In the vacant, purple hour, ten degrees from dawn, the island is silent, the air sweet perfect. A cock crows in the valley below. You roll a joint and look out the window of your rented room, watching the sky change color. The mind rambles; there is a high indistinguishable from wisdom. You find yourself in aberrant company—and liking it. It is infectious, their dissipation, sense of liberty. They are nihilists, men to whom life has given nothing. And are obligated to nothing. Men of short fuses, neither proud nor ashamed of their disposition, undaunted by the fact that in the end, they will be reduced by men with property, profession, and progeny. You can see them, a decade from now, dead, condemned, or given to drink and violence. Lives crushed by their own weight. But, before that, they have the ungoverned days, the aimless years worthy of envy.

I am subletting a room with a band of surfers, mostly riffraff and small-time crooks in their twenties. Tiffany and Mike hold the lease on this three-bedroom bungalow, and at any time there could be as many as fifteen people sleeping all over the house. Most days, it's just them, me, and Bill (the Big Island surfer and ganja cultivator). The rental of their spare bedroom includes the use of their array of toys: snorkel gear, mountain bikes, windsurfing rigs, body boards, surfboards, and kayaks. The accommodation also comes with two free weekly meals at the upscale bar-and-grill where Mike works as a waiter—if I don't mind sneaking around. I don't.

Every day before sunrise, the phone rings, and the series of calls begins as their network of friends report on the surf conditions around the island. Once the morning's site is settled, we pull on swimming trunks, still damp from the afternoon before. Then we stand in the gravel drive, apply lip balm, and slap on sunblock. Mike drives us down the hill in his creaky, rust-burnt truck. Tiffany loads the waterproof camera just in case one of the surfers catches a good wave. Bill and I bounce in the bed of the pickup with the boards. Bill grins lazily, winks, a cigarette in his mouth. We ride in silence.

Orange dawn, the red dirt road cuts a raw gash through the sugarcane fields. Dewy leaves hold glints of sun. Off in the distance, across the river, the cemetery lies patiently in a flowering meadow, awash in the sea breeze. Along the coast, daybreak surfs take the color of butter. The streets are waking up. People call greetings from passing cars. Islanders are stirring and cheerful. Mainland tourists have been up for hours because of the time difference. At a convenience store, we shuffle down the aisles barefooted with fistfuls of change to buy coffee and doughnuts. On the beach, a dozen hardcore surfers congregate. They charge, crashing into the water like young gods. Yesterday cleansed away by the cool sea. Tomorrow sits below the horizon and does not concern them. They play in waves that have traveled many thousands of miles from storms in the Bering Sea.

By ten in the morning, it is over. Those who have menial jobs have gone to them, glowing with sun and salt.

SARAH BIANCO

Jump #6, 2012
Oil on Panel, 16 x 16 in.

courtesy: the artist

Others go in search of free lunch and then lie beneath the palms, expiring like beached fish, waiting for another session with the afternoon breakers. Later, night falls around their campfire to stories of legendary surfers and mythical breaks in exotic locales. Everyone is buzzed on weed and cheap beer. We load up on potato chips, hot dogs, sandwich bread, and whatever anyone managed to filch from work. The talk stays along the line of surfing and surfing legends until enough marijuana unleashes the collective's paranoia, then the rest of the night is wasted on government conspiracies and Armageddon. They are unaware of their perfection.

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Restless, I wander aimlessly around the island, driving from the rainy end to the dry end day after day just to be going somewhere. It's the onset of island fever. I've been here a month. Everywhere I go I catch whispers of hibiscus fragrance, sometimes thick as perfume. Always, the smell of approaching rain. I go to gawk at beach mansions of movie stars. I go to historic landmarks and museums and try to feel their gravity, but end up feeling cheated and silly. I take random turns into the slums of the island where the houses have always been in decline. The surrounding fields are strewn with the salt-charred carcasses of vehicles, plucked clean like shipwrecks.

I pick up hitchhikers indiscriminately just to hear their stories. Some won't talk, but what they wear and carry betray them a little. Nearly all feel obligated to at least mention the places where they've been. Some haven't washed the clothes on their backs in days, possibly weeks, and smell so bad that we have to drive in the rain with the windows down. A third of them are European backpackers. Hawaiians won't even bother looking at the new rental cars, but when a rust bucket like mine—a true island vehicle—comes down the road, their arms shoot out for a ride. You're expected to stop, or at least give one of many hand signals to indicate why you can't: *going a short way; car's full; sorry, nothing I can do; wife wants me home fast.*

Hawaii is popular with the counterculture crowd. Many are homeless who were chased here by mainland winter. They come for the weather and the easy-to-obtain welfare and health care. A sort of rainbow gathering: artists, runaways, come-too-late flower children, and traveling grungers pass through my car. Once I pick up three tall bearded young men with waist-length hair because, apparently, no one else would. They wear sarongs and urinate on the side of the road by lifting their wraps like skirts and squatting. On a scalding afternoon near the Barking Sand Beach, I give a lift to a young family: a starry-eyed nineteen-year-old father; a beautiful, good-natured eighteen-year-old mother; and a six-month-old infant in cloth diaper. I try to pile them with chocolates, cheese, canned beans, and sodas, but they decline everything. Firm vegetarians, they won't consume "nonorganic" food with animal by-products or additives. In the end, they accept ten bucks and two bottles of island beer.

On one pointless excursion, my car overheats. I am stranded with plumes of steam rising from under the hood. I walk to the nearest house, a plywood construction tilting on four-by-four posts and pilings. In the front yard is a huge monkey pod tree so dominating that it gives the impression that the house and the street grew around it—which, of course, is the case given the age of the tree. I almost overlook the elderly woman in a rocking chair under its canopy. The mongrel at her feet growls at me. She taps it smartly on the head with her cane and the dog settles back to its nap. She has a pitcher of guava juice next to her and says I can have some if I'll fetch a glass from her kitchen. Her knees hurt from gardening.

I have nowhere I need to be, so I stay and listen to her stories. I can't understand half of what she says because of her heavy lisp and island lingo. It feels peaceful just sitting in the shade in the middle of the day and sipping sugary guava juice. Like most older Hawaiians, she has many relatives who have moved to the mainland—half of them to Las Vegas, the other half to Alaska. Go figure. She has never left these isles herself, but she knows what happens to people who leave: they don't come back the same, if ever.

I can see it in her eyes. Islanders know everything there is to know about departure. Their young grow wings like birds and fly away, never to return wholly. They know a certain sweet melancholy, a different way of grasping time. Someone once told me that you wouldn't feel at home here until you understood the way time flew around the islands.

She asks me why I came. I say I'm not sure. The islands feel different to me now. I still love Kauai, but it's different. I've always wanted to live here, but somehow I could never stay. I say, I think I lost something the last time I was here, or maybe I'm looking for something new.

"This is an island, a very small island," she says, patting my arm. "If you didn't bring it here, you won't find it here." She giggles, her face twisting, the folds of her cheeks lifting like spent balloons, her mouth a dark, toothless maw.

Basking in the humor from that prune face, I realize I have never seen an ugly smile.

* * *

Kauai is, indeed, a tiny island. I've combed it a dozen times over, and I still need to be going somewhere. Nowhere else to go. The only place left is inaccessible by car and, in this season, by boat as well. I abandon my clunker at the northern end of the road and hike into the Na Pali Coast. In my backpack are a twenty-dollar tent, a two-dollar air mattress, a blanket, clothes, four bottles of wine, bread, instant noodles, rice, pork jerky, salami, coffee, chocolate, and cheese macaroni.

The trail is narrow, muddy, and downright treacherous for much of its ten-mile length. The narrow valleys and ravines are cloying with the tropical scent of musk, mold, and greenery, sweet like a rotting papaya. Vibrant life grows on top of decaying life, rich, fast, without respite. When the trail climbs the ridges, the views make me weak in the knees. Eight hundred feet below, the shivering ocean; the waves march to the claws of cliffs, then turn over like fists, trailing white veils of mist. The emerald mountains are strung with pearly necklaces of waterfalls. Near evening, I climb the last ridge overlooking Kalalau Valley. It is quickly filling with dusk.

On an outcropping of boulders jutting over the cliff, a woman meditates in the lotus position, looking west to the valley and the setting sun. She is the small traveler I'd seen weeks ago at the hostel, my first night on the island. She waves, and I wave back. Without saying a word, she points out the way down to the valley below. Smiling, I nod and continue down the trail of crumbly red gravel, leaving her to her solitude.

In paradise, there is a waterfall not twenty yards from the surf. A wide, pristine beach tapers up toward a verdant valley filled with brightly colored birds and wild goats. Here, between the impenetrable cliffs, dwells a band of misfits and welfare dependents—all nudists on the beach during the day. They congregate at a fire pit deep inside the forest. There is a tarp to keep the ample supply of food and sundries dry.

Tonight is special. One of the longtime vegetarian residents has lost his resolution and gone off and murdered a goat. Once the deed is done, there's no point in letting good meat go to waste, so they're having a barbecue. The real vegetarians wander upwind to cook. Racks of ribs and a huge blackened pot of stew are hung over the fire. It's a true vagabond potluck. People simply toss in whatever they have: carrots, potatoes, fists of rice, bacon, mushrooms, onions, beans, sun-dried tomatoes, oregano, bay leaves, and peppercorns. Occasionally, someone tastes the medley and adds a bit of seasoning. No one seems to mind, and, surprisingly, the stew turns out spectacular.

* * *

The small woman's name is Bea. She has been staying in this valley since the first night I saw her. She wants nothing. There is always food at the communal kitchen. She comes here to find peace and courage, to listen to her inner voice. Bea carries a rare hereditary disease similar to muscular dystrophy. She knows its debilitating effects well, having taken care of her ailing father, who had suffered the same fate. Her ambulatory days are numbered, and she spends them crisscrossing the globe, working with humanitarian organizations in war-torn, famine-stricken countries. She wants to make as much difference as she can, while she can.

We hike deep into the valley, sun ourselves on the beach, and body-surf in the fast breakers. She wants to remember how it feels to walk the mountains, run barefoot across meadows, and swim in the free waves. She wants to safeguard her memories. She says they are like loose photos, unsecured in albums; their colors will fade, their details will blur. Entire events will be lost. Whole periods will rot away to nothing. Bea wants to keep vivid accounts of all the good days remaining to her. She wants to write it all down, keep writing until all that remains for her is the writing, even when she can no longer use a keyboard.

She is like an old soul on the final go-around. I don't imagine she wants another reincarnation. When her time

comes, she will pass beyond. So for days we sit on the beach, naked and innocent as toddlers, and talk about the art of words, about how she might begin.

* * *

It's cold down here. The warm bands of water flow higher up. Someone is playing with the light. Green going murky, then wands of light, dark again. It's so noisy under the pounding surf. I think I am drowning. I am bouncing, rolling along the bottom of the ocean, being dragged further out by the undercurrent, above the whole heaving chest of the sea. It is stupid to die body-surfing only yards from shore. I paw at the surface, desperately kicking for the light. I have always been a lousy swimmer, and lousy swimmers shouldn't be body-surfing in big waves. There are no lifeguards on this beach. It's the proverbial "one last one" that's doing me in—catch one more good wave and I'll call it quits. I have stayed out too long, past exhaustion, past good judgment.

I'm up, sputtering. I turn in time to see a huge wave breaking. It doubles over and crashes on top of me. A half gasp filled with surf foam. A great hand of water pushes me beneath again. Why is it so lonely? All those connections we make throughout our lives, inaccessible at the very last. I am hauled deeper, the undertow as heavy as a whale. The panic has passed. You just get so tired. You just get plumb tired.

Then, as if it were only making a point, I am released, or spat out because I no longer have the strength to fight. Effortlessly, I rise to the shimmering surface. The first breath comes as great gifts often do, with great agony.

* * *

I stand beneath a Hawaiian luminescence, on a moon-bleached beach, smiling at the ripples tickling my toes, the water black, gel-like. Offshore, the surf breaks white like the dust bank of a chariot battalion, held in permanent stasis, approaching but never any closer. The shadowy palms, the crinkled face of the sea, the sand reflecting many shades of midnight blue. Beneath the stars, the ocean's tang is not sharp. A scent of lush grass. The air so soft it is difficult to find the boundary between one's skin and the night. Tomorrow, I'll make my way back to the mainland, back to my unfinished life. So, I'm leaving the islands yet again.

I walk across a vast rocky field. The trail appears and vanishes at will under bushes, through clumps of grass, and around boulders. Rats rustle boldly in the shrubs, the mongooses have long gone to nest. At first I am startled to find a scarecrow in a barren land. But it is a man. He stands limply, giving the impression of being strung up by his own clothes, his head canted at the moon as if in conversation. A thin, bearded face, deep eyes hidden beneath the brim of his straw hat. Sandals on his feet.

Ow's-it? he says. Good, I say. We shake hands. He has been drinking. He wants to know why I came to the island. It feels like home, I say, but I could never stay long. He is from Portland, Oregon. I admit that I have lived there and that I loved it despite the rain. His voice lights up, Really? What a small world! I lived behind Common Ground Cafe, he says, tipping back the brim of his hat, peering at me. Have you been there? Yes, I reply, the feng shui in that place is still terrible. We share a chuckle. He flings questions at me, anxious to know if I have been there, or there; did I remember so-and-so? I have the feeling that great pains lurk in his past. I can tell by the way his eyes search mine that he is a man crushed by loneliness. A face of irreparable grief. I'm so glad to see you, he says; most people can't appreciate this beauty. I nod to be agreeable. Really, anyone can see we are both fugitives. Cloaked in his aura of sweat-liquor, we stand there and talk about things gone, as a fat moon climbs over us. When our legs begin to ache from standing too long, the night growing old, it is time to bid goodbye. He pulls me into a crushing hug, shivering as if a violent gale is sweeping through him, then he hurries into the dark forest.

I stand alone, looking at the moon.

I stand there a minute, or, perhaps, a full turn of the stars as the invisible rats scurry around me in the silver weed.

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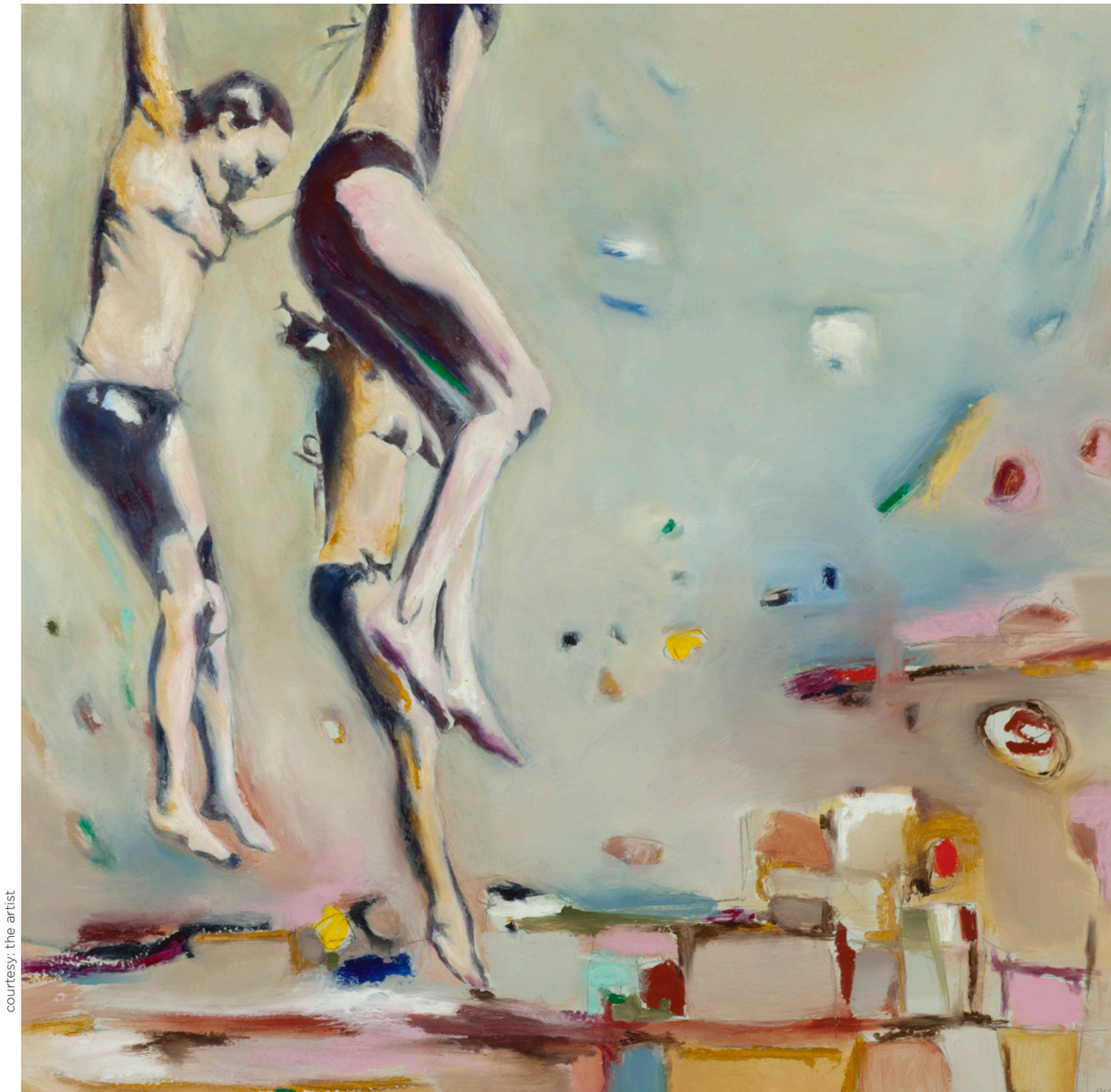
SARAH BIANCO

Jump #3, 2012
Oil on Panel, 16 x 16 in.



courtesy: the artist