

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