

Return by Water

Return by Water



THE NEWSPAPER MENTIONED that she'd been dead 18 hours, the art store girl. So that's a night, a drizzling morning and into the first of a clear afternoon that she'd been missing. Onshore winds eased off briskly approaching dusk that day, and before the sun hinted it might sink down, several big clouds came out of the north and sat on the horizon. The kelp bed began about two miles out and stretched along the coastline like a wide, green oil slick. It was on the inside edge of the kelp bed, the lobster fisherman said, that he noticed the strangest thing he'd ever seen a group of birds do. Ten or 11 seagulls floated around a disembarked patch of kelp and sea grass. With a dying wind, a settling ocean chop and those big clouds waiting out there on the horizon, it looked to the fisherman as if the gulls had sat down to watch the sunset. In hindsight, the fisherman said, the gulls were probably just tending the woman's body, which floated intertwined in kelp leaves and sea grass just beneath the surface. After raising his lobster traps, the fisherman's curiosity pressed him to probe the mass of flotsam with a gaff. The gulls backpedaled from the lunging hook. The large clouds at the horizon shifted in urgent hues of red. By 6:14 p.m., the sun had vanished, reds and oranges chasing after it, and at 6:17, the lobster fisherman discovered the art store girl's nude, mutilated body.

El Brazo

ROCKING LIKE AN idiot savant seemed to ease the pain. I sat on a bench outside a thatch *cabaña*. I cradled my right arm and rocked. The arm swelled, visibly, from what must have been 50 mosquito bites. I'd laughed the night before while crawling under a girlishly yellow mosquito net—this netting draped over a bed of horse blankets looking as though it was prepared for a native princess. Wads of tissue paper were stuffed haphazardly between tears in the netting. The white puffs floated above me like plankton caught in a drift net. I felt silly and impish lying under it.

But in my sleep, my right arm fell against the netting, and the invisible mosquitoes descended, tapping my flesh through the weave. The swelling woke me just before sunrise—the arm rippled with punctures from elbow to pinkie. It pulsed. The skin grew taut, a 10-pound package in a five-pound bag.

An indignant rooster cackled as the sun rose, and the smell of ineffective mosquito repellent gave way to a daytime odor of trash fires. This trash-fire ambrosia engulfed the smell of ocean salt and the musk of a far-off jungle. As the sun slid up over the mountains to the east, the odor expanded like a low-lying fog.

It's obscene now to think it, but before my first morning in Ecuador, I anticipated a broad swath of artificial color extending

Father Joe's Invitation

“KALAUPAPA NATIONAL HISTORICAL Park was established on December 22, 1980. Still in its formative years, it is dedicated to the past, the present and the future. It is dedicated to preserving the memories and experiences of the past in order that valuable lessons might be learned from them. It is dedicated to providing a well-maintained community to ensure that the present residents of the Settlement may live out their lives in this, their home. And, it is dedicated to the education of present and future generations with regard to a disease that has been shrouded in fear and ignorance for centuries.”

—Hawaii Park Service brochure

A FRIEND OF a friend warned me. A woman who lived in a Honolulu ghetto and spoke thick pidgin cautioned before I boarded a plane for Molokai, that I'd find the real Hawaii there. Then she added, chortling, “It's just a rock, though. You can walk around it in a day.”

When I saw that two passengers aboard the tiny island hopper carried ukuleles, I had a sense of what she was getting at, and the sound of her “ee” placed sweetly at the end of Molokai sang to me. But soon enough I'd learn that a Hawaii really does exist beyond the garishness of Waikiki's International Market Place. And it