

LOST NATIVE

I can vividly remember the moment I entered my ocean again and felt a rapturous catharsis washing debris from my soul. Memories of that steaming quagmire in Asia, fleeting bits of ersatz enlightenment crossing the world, and the hyper-drug daze in London vanished as I bodysurfed wave after wave.

Kela gossiped with her girlfriends on the sand, overwhelming them with tales of our journey, sensibly omitting her spaced-out hubby's retrogressions. I tried to give as objective an account as possible when asked, covering my experience from both points of view: the brooding introvert and flamboyant extrovert that made me whole. To many of my gang, an unhooked brassiere was still as close to paradise as they'd progressed, so it was difficult to broach subjects beyond their realms of reference. What HADN'T happened to me out there?

And so, alone, I took to my reefs once again, talking to the fish, whipping lures around shadowy coral heads, and stalking the great barracuda in the far reaches of the channel where he'd eluded me earlier. The Koolau Mountains rose in a velvet curtain like Khyyam's veil, shrouding the enigma beyond, but nothing had really changed. The creatures of that watery world seemed to know this, even if I didn't.

I hummed little ditties and muttered with the life forms around me, almost missing the tide's rising and sun's setting. I was up to my armpits in near-darkness when I climbed into the mangroves near the Marine Base fence with my catch on a stringer. A jet screamed off the runway in the lavender afterglow, balanced above the mirrored water on a night training mission. I crouched on the slippery mud silently alert for patrols in familiar sights and smells...waiting for Meers.

We cooked the fish at my parents' house, and the whole family came together in a rare reunion to hear our tales of adventure. It was actually a good gathering, marred only slightly by my father bringing up the subject that had always struck fear and anathema in me..."normalcy." He was sure I'd like to get settled, take a job the next day, and work my way up the corporate rungs of the construction industry's ladder like he'd done all his life. He started into his, "Goddam...Create!" speech, and I got up to leave. Kela and my sisters had to mediate a truce...good grief, I'd only been home ten hours from a trip that would've shattered most minds.

My brother got me alone and wanted to hear about Vietnam, but I found it impossible to divulge its essence with someone who hadn't been there. It seems strange to find

such a vacant spot between brothers, but the subject could not be broached. It wasn't that I had anything to hide or feel guilty about. Rapport I found later with vets in rap groups lent a common ground to pour something into...an empty space simply could not hold its tragic context.

I told him about the fish and surfing, but its true reality was beyond us. I felt uncomfortable whenever the subject came up, as if I was altered by simply having been there. I could hear Pop yelling about my lack of appreciation, and something about "growing up" from across the swimming pool at the main house. My brother patted me on the back with, "It's gonna be OK," and I tried to grin back, but had already accepted that my adjustment was gonna be futile.

I lay awake most of the night thinking about fitting in somewhere. I actually wanted to, almost as bad as I'd desired that nebulous elixir of truth I'd sought to bring home. I even cried in my boyhood bed, with Kela sleeping in the lower bunk, for fear I'd never be normal...and had never been. When I was small I didn't think I had bones or blood like other kids, and now I suspected my very mind was the part askew. Reason finally slept and the jungle whispered over a silver rice paddy in another place and time. Out of the reeds, two dark shapes waded in silent ripples, weapons held above them, eyes omniscient in that calm just beyond horror.

In the months following, I tried. I really put some effort into making it work. I drove into town, pounded nails for eight hours with the rest of the carpenters in the union's training program, and returned to my ordered world like a regular earth person. We had everything any couple could've wanted...an old house nestled behind a tiny island on the North Shore, an ebb and flow of far-out friends, and a future that included a farm and room to grow a family in.

It simply wasn't enough...that's all I can say in retrospect. Everything wouldn't have been enough to fill the void, I guess. I was actually making a go of it, you know, organizing a car pool to work, planting a garden, and fishing after a day on the job...part and parcel of Nixon's worldview. Then the wraiths called, and I left to meet them.