

The Pearl  
By Gwen Gordon

I had come to Hawaii hoping to melt instantly into the lush tropical paradise promised by the travel posters. I was not prepared for the scene that greeted me as I drove from the South Kona airport. A vast, barren wasteland of tar-black lava stretched for miles in every direction, jagged heaps jutting and crumbling like the charred flesh of a mammoth beast. Not a single weed peaked through the cracks nor insect tickled the skin. Like closed captions, white stones strung into the shapes of letters inscribed messages on the side of the road. "John was here." "Joe plus Sandra." "Eat Shit." The stark and the profane mingled for miles while dread knotted in my stomach.

As we turned west toward the beach, however, a spontaneous "AAAAaah" sang from my heart. A great bulging Baobob tree! I'd never seen one before. More trees came into view, and I pressed my face against the shuttle window to get as close a look as I could. Some had flat, wide, tongue-shaped leaves as if to lick the sun directly from the sky and swallow it in great gulps. Others had long delicate needles hung low, tickling the ground. How precious every living thing felt to me. My spirit rose swiftly to meet them all, life resurrecting life.

As soon as I arrived at the retreat center, I started introducing myself to all the creatures I'd never met before. I had never heard the Gecko's song, nor seen a thousand sand crabs rise from their holes at sunset as if the beach itself were on

the prowl. I had never glided underwater alongside a sea turtle, nor stared into the sober eye of an octopus. With each encounter I felt myself become more and more alive, as if each creature were a part of me, a forgotten, sleeping limb finally waking up, tingling, and stretching in the sun.

With each meeting I also felt humbled. Each being I met was a teacher, an expert, master of its mode -- Gecko, king of crawling up sheer surfaces; weasel, queen of liquid burrowing; tongue-leafed tree, expert at drinking light. It occurred to me that the act of admiration itself might be one of my own species' unique gifts -- human being, supreme appreciator of beauty and the myriad forms of life. I felt as if I had been made for it.

In addition to being great appreciators of beauty, our species has another extraordinary ability-- to build and bend the world into new shapes. We have turned sand into glass, iron ore into automobiles, fossil fuel into Tupperware. What we make and how we make it, however, has devoured the world and diminished its beauty. I had come to Hawaii with the question: How could we as a species and I in particular learn to make things that actually add to the life and beauty of the world. I wanted to create something as alive, as connected, and as worthy of a place in the world as a tree. But to do so, I would have to be as alive, and as connected as a tree. I knew this would require stillness. A women's meditation and poetry retreat on a tropical island seemed like the perfect setting for this exploration. On the third day I wrote:

## OUT OF THE SILENCE

Snakes of words rise  
Out of still waters,  
Like forest green seaweed vines  
Winding their way up and up  
Toward  
A star-drenched sky  
Where poems wink their secrets.  
Hold on and they will take you high.  
Hold on, let them pull you  
Out of your seat,  
Past the flagpoles, the chimneys, the church steeples,  
Whose jutting fingers point  
Scolding and envious  
Toward oblivion.  
Who wouldn't want to shake off  
The lifeless  
Drone  
Of everyone else's dirty business?

Hold on, these words are alive.  
They have attitude  
And they know where they're going.  
Feel the fresh breeze as you rise,  
Licking your eyelids,  
Kissing your cheeks,  
Wiping you clean of polite smiles and  
False promises.  
You have been babbling into the black bulk of telephones  
Long enough.  
Hush.

Fly up with these beads of silence-steeped words  
That have been traveling from all beginnings  
Just to meet you.  
Let them carry you  
Into everything that matters.

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The retreat began each morning with aerobic movement, "sweating our prayers" to the five rhythms of Gabriel Roth. My spirit, open and exuberant, burst to the beats. I wore my favorite polka-dotted mini dress as a shameless display of delight in being sensually alive, then swayed and whirled my wild body until I

disappeared into the music. Several women in the group complimented me on the freedom with which I moved and nicknamed me Polka-Dot Girl.

There was another question I brought with me to Hawaii. I had recently discovered a hard black casing of shame pressing down on the life at my core. Strings of white stones lined its edges with well-placed profanities. “Back off.” “No trespassing.” “Eat shit.” I had so thoroughly confused it with my own deepest nature that it had taken years to even notice. Now that I could feel the weight of it and see its toxic ripples throughout my life, I yearned for relief. I came to the retreat to learn how to be free of this shame.

One answer came the first day of retreat. Simple. Lose yourself, shame, pride, and all, by falling madly in love with the whole world. I wrote:

There is only one choice, every moment, only one. To melt or not. That simple. And while a thousand excuses honk their fears like a gaggle of anxious geese, the silence holds out its wide blue arms and kisses each one into a shower of white feathered ecstasy.

As the glow of communion faded, however, the question of shame returned.

After all, any attempt at creativity--not to mention in the context of a weeklong retreat watching the naked contents of my mind amidst a group of strangers-- is an irresistible invitation to the demons under shame’s hire. It seemed perfectly designed to both attract and reveal new dimensions of shame. When and if it should arise, I was determined to taste its acid drops of bitterness undiluted, to look it in the eye and in doing so dispel its powers.

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Twenty two years before, when I was fifteen years old, I had looked my father in the eye hoping to dispel his powers. Instead, I ended up in the fetal position on the kitchen tile floor as he kicked me repeatedly. When I could, I got up and ran out of the house into the wild starry night. I would never live at my father's house again. Like so many people victimized by violence, I left alone and took with me the weight of shame for having been mistreated.

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One day, many years later, I randomly opened The Old Testament to Leviticus 16. I read how Aaron approached God on behalf of his people to be absolved of all sins, forgiven forever. It is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. God tells him to take two goats to be sacrificed. One is killed, the other is sacrificed in a different way. Aaron places both hands on the head of the goat and confesses all the wickedness rebellion and sins of his people.

Once the confession had taken place, the goat was sent off through the throngs of people. As the goat was led away, the masses parted to let the now sin-bearing goat leave, to go far out into the desert, never to be seen again. I imagine what a joyous celebration it must have been as the people watched the silhouette of the goat disappear over the horizon, etching indelibly upon their hearts and minds a profound insight into the nature of God: God completely removes our guilt and shame.

I also imagined the goat, a knot in its stomach, wandering through the desert lost to itself. This is the origin of the scapegoat. The goat, holding all of our

sins, disappears into the desert. The scapegoat and the wild are one and the same for it is often the wildest among us, those most associated with nature, or nature herself who get scapegoated. But in the wild, unlike in the Old Testament, there is no need for scapegoats. The wild casts nothing out. There is no such thing as “out.” Everything is swept into the great cycles of death and regeneration. Where there is a strong divide between the civilized and the wild, good and evil, life and death, there is bound to be shame. And where there is shame there is the need for a scapegoat.

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For the first several days of the retreat, a young family shared a beach with us. Their two toddlers were in toddler heaven practicing their first steps on the warm sand, screeching with delight as the waves licked their toes, reaching into crab holes and stuffing seaweed into their mouths. One morning I spent a few hours rolling around in the sand with them, planting kisses on their cheeks, tossing them in the air, letting them nap on my belly. One of the babies had little red dots all over him. His mother said they were sand fleabites.

The next day, the same little red dots appeared on my own arms and face. Sand fleabites. Still, I was the only one in the group of women to get them. On the fifth night, I got nauseous and threw up. There was no question in my mind that it was the result of bad food combining, overeating, and wild dancing. I was not the least bit concerned. But while I was resting, paranoia spread. Someone had seen me playing with the baby who was covered with spots. Now I was sick.

Could it be Chicken Pox? Scarlet Fever? Both? All precautions should be taken -- no touching, lots of hand washing, keep a wide berth.

Until then I had been sleeping in the meeting room with three other women. We had gotten close quickly, climbing onto the big bed together and telling stories late into the night until the dishwasher stopped sloshing. Now my things had been gathered into a pile and my roommates had disappeared. I needed to be moved to a room with a bathroom, but there seemed to be a problem finding someone willing to share her room with me. Finally, I was given the most private room in the retreat center—all because of some fleabites and a little nausea.

When I came out into the meeting room to collect my things, people held their breaths and took a step back. I felt the familiar dread knotting in my stomach as it had in the car ride from the airport. One of the participants, a former nurse, took charge of me and led me to my quarantine. She asked if I needed anything, placed a bucket and a glass of water next to my bed and left. The next morning I was still a little weak. I stayed in bed wondering why, if they thought I was so sick, had nobody come to check on me. I looked at the time. Breakfast was over and the morning meditation had already begun. It was the last full day of the retreat. Had I been forgotten?

Polka Dot Girl, with her wild moves was no longer the object of admiration. When the polka dots that had decorated my dress appeared on my own flesh, they became a scarlet letter. I was now a marked woman carrying a

dangerous contagion. A flush of primordial terror rose in me as I felt my spots spread like a dotted line, or perhaps more like a perforation linking me through time and space to gay men during the AIDS epidemic, to the gypsies, the homosexuals, Catholics and Jews during the Second World War, to the women burnt as witches during the Black Plague, and to a goat cast into the desert. I was part of every plague and threat of death that has required a scapegoat. Like the goat, I was carrying the greatest sin of all -- the sin of mortality.

I lay in bed frozen and confused. I could understand the group's health concerns, but I could not understand being deserted for so long. As I waited, the knot began twisting in my stomach, the nausea returned, and I shrank into the fetal position of shame. Determined, I turned to find and face the demons. I picked up my journal and wrote:

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### Digging

After all these years I am still digging,  
Hitting rock, root, and clay packed hard as judgment.  
The turning shovel finds maggots  
Writhing in the innocence of shame.  
There is nowhere to turn  
But in.

With blind faith  
I slide into the  
Dark suck of earth  
Alone.  
Digging in my heels,  
Starting over and over again  
Like a second hand.  
I grow bitter at this hard labor  
Moving ancient boulders  
Into pointless piles,

Pulling up root stumps  
To find black shining grief  
Slithering for cover.

I can't turn back  
Time,  
But I can turn over  
The hard black clay of regret  
Cleaving the knotted clods wide open  
Breaking apart their hard lava lies  
Until steam rises in relief.

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In eighteenth century puritan New England, scarlet letters were an historical fact.

The capital "A" for adultery was branded onto those who succumbed to their passions, for this was surely the mark of the devil. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel, the scarlet letter burns upon the fallen woman Hester Prynne's breast. It casts a lurid glow along her pathway, it isolates her among her community and is at the same time the mystic talisman to reveal to her the guilt hidden in other hearts.

The story is set in a small town in Massachusetts. There Hester lives with her daughter Pearl in a cottage bordering the woods. She has sewn the scarlet letter onto her dress with gold thread and meticulously maintains the secrecy of Pearl's father's identity. Her husband, Roger Chillingworth, eventually discovers that the town minister Dimmesdale is the father of Pearl, at which point he spends every possible moment trying to torment the minister. Dimmesdale becomes so distraught by his secret sin and so overcome with shame that he finally breaks down and invites Hester and Pearl to run away with him. They decide to go, but the day they are due to sail, after he has delivered his

most powerful sermon, Dimmesdale instead goes to the public scaffold, and confesses his sin to the whole community. He then rips off his shirt to reveal a scarlet letter on his flesh, falls to his knees and dies. Hester never removes her scarlet letter.

What fascinated me most about the story when I read it years ago was the character of Pearl, the bastard child, born an outcast in the world of christened children. Pearl is the scarlet letter made alive, capable of being loved, and so endowed with the power of redemption. She is both original sin and original innocence, the wild and the wise, embodying the freedom of a broken law. As Hawthorne puts it, she is the "lovely and immortal flower, (that grows) out of the rank luxuriance of a guilty passion," yet like nature and wild animals, she lives outside of moral law. Her vital untamed spirit and almost preternatural intelligence give her a strangely fiendish quality. There is, as Hawthorne says, "fire in her and throughout her," as befits her passionate origins and it is a fire that seems to have in it at least as much of an infernal as a heavenly quality.

Pearl shows us how the scarlet letter is the heritage of all people. What is wild and beautiful in the innocence of childhood becomes a sin as it matures into adulthood. And yet Pearl is a guiltless child, fresh and spontaneous, the true Polka-Dot Girl. With no chance of ever belonging to the puritan community around her, she belongs instead to the whole of nature. She is the vital energy of life and passion locked within each of our wounds, rising up from between the

thick black crust of shame like a bold weed. As her name suggests, Pearl is the sacred gift formed by the grit or poison stuck inside the oyster shell.

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Still weak and light-headed and with red dots splattered across my face, I got out of bed, put on my polka dotted dress, and headed for the meditation hall. A few days before, I had shared some reflections about poetry with one of the teachers. She asked me if I would share them with the rest of the group on the last day of the retreat. This was that day.

I felt a great peace in me as I joined the group, even as others seemed unsettled by my presence. The teachers welcomed me, then mentioned that those with health concerns may want to be a little more conscientious about washing their hands and keeping their distance now that I was with them; otherwise we would simply continue with the program. One of the women gasped, "Wait, I'm starting to get the dots." Others began examining their arms and legs anxiously.

I told the group that I was certain I was not contagious and that if I had had any doubt, I would not put them at risk. Even as the room squirmed, I wore my scarlet dots with dignity, for I knew that they belonged to the whole group. I had felt the pain of this burden, its isolation and loneliness, and survived. It was not personal. I was embodying the shame that we all carry, wearing the emblem of all of our mortality.

I imagine that the scapegoat did not die in the desert, but instead became wilder and wiser for its time there. Perhaps years later it even returned to the Israelites as a sage. Those busy avoiding their shame learn slowly. The wilderness is a great teacher. In a small way, as a scapegoat, I had been set loose into my own wilderness to find belonging in the wildness that everything belongs to. I went to Hawaii so that the shame I'd been holding my whole life could grind and turn in my belly until I gave birth to a pearl. I wrote:

This blessing is a belly laugh rolling with warm ocean waves. This blessing talks too loud, interrupts, and insists it's right. This blessing is a three-year-old tumbling down a slide. It has red curly hair, leopard spots, and a wild hair sprouting from a mole. This blessing licks up the sky, splashes starfish, and sings in green. It says "yes" and "yes" and "yes" over and over again, until everyone is free.

Soon after the group had settled down and the program began again, the teacher turned to me and said that this was the time, if I was up for it, to share my thoughts on poetry and ecology with the group. I did not hesitate.

I spoke of how our poetry that week had been a gift from all the beings of the land, that our imaginations are not ours alone but come from and belong to the whole of life. I told them that a poem far from being something in itself emerges only from these larger relationships, and that when we reject any part of the world, our poems cannot be whole. At its best, writing is an act of restoration, taking us into the wild to find anything that has been cast into the desert.

I do not remember much more of what I said, but I know that when I spoke, I spoke sand crab and lava rock crab. I spoke sea turtle and octopus, weasel and wide-tongued trees. I spoke flea-bitten baby and ocean waves, lava-locked land and velvet breeze. And I know that the words that rose through my body were as alive, as connected, and as whole as any tree. A deep silence lingered long after I had finished.

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On the drive back to the airport, I looked again at the lava-covered landscape. For the first time, I saw in it a kind of primordial beauty. The lava no longer reminded me of the stark loneliness caused by the shame encasing my soul. Instead it glowed with purpose and dignity. It was not killing or suppressing the life on the land after all. It was invisibly replenishing the soil. The dark magma that erupts shamelessly from the earth's core, so rich in nutrients, had made the Hawaiian Islands as fertile and lush as they are. I too had felt how the rejection and shame that seemed in one moment to be suppressing life had actually been nourishing new life. The white stones assembled on the side of the road glistened like a string of pearls in the late afternoon sun.

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