

THE MELODY STONE

Simbo and Mbabanga, Solomon Islands

November 2002 and January–February 2008

Michel Lippitsch

with Orla Doherty, in Book One

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This is a work of memoir. It reflects the author's recollections of events, locales, and conversations from his own experience over time. Some names and identifying details may have been changed.

PREFACE

This book gathers two visits to Simbo, in the Solomon Islands' Western Province, six years apart. *Book One* tells the fuller story of ten days there in November 2002, when the author, Eddie, and the crew of the *Heraclitus* worked with the village of Nusa Simbo to revive the Ey Omba dance ahead of the island's 2003 centenary — the same visit that Chapter Four of *Sea People, Still* compresses into a single paragraph (“the dance performed, we’re told, for the last time”). Where that log moves on quickly to Honiara and the dolphin hunts at Malaita, this book stays with Simbo and tells what happened there in full, drawing on the author’s own contemporaneous account interwoven with Orla Doherty’s, without separating the two.

Book Two returns to the same coast in January–February 2008, nine months after the earthquake and tsunami of 2 April 2007, mostly on Mbabanga — a Gilbertese (Kiribati) community also in the Western Province, resettled from the Phoenix Islands — before a difficult few days back in Simbo itself. Eddie, his parents Stanley and Lina, Ovaline, and Mason all appear again; the Simbo pages open with the news that John Tione, who taught the Ey Omba at the melody stone above Batu Simbo in *Book One*, had died the day before.

Neither half was written with a reader in mind, or with the other half in mind either. Six years separate them — a wedding, a war's worth of change on Simbo's coastline, a friend's death — and they are put together here because, read side by side, they say something neither says alone.

CAST OF THE BOOK

People who appear across both visits, six years apart.

Michel — Author; his own account interweaves with Orla Doherty's in Book One

Orla Doherty — Heraclitus crew member; writes the second interwoven voice in Book One

Eddie — Simbo guide and friend; central to both visits

Lina — Eddie's mother

Stanley — Eddie's father

John Tione — Caretaker of the Ey Omba dance, taught at the melody stone in Book One; dies between the two visits

Mason — Custom-site guide and dance master's family, in both visits

Ovaline — Young woman of Nusa Simbo, in both visits

Ferdi — Heraclitus crew member; dances the Ey Omba in Book One

Somo — Simbo local and ship regular in Book One

Peter Ben — Landowner of the hilltop taboo site; Mason's father-in-law

Keana — Michel's dance partner in the Ey Omba

Tannang — Mbabanga elder and dance teacher, Book Two

Kiribas — Mbabanga elder and fisherman, Book Two

Clifford and Tonga — Family friends in Simbo, Book Two

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Book One

Simbo, Solomon Islands, November 2002

Our Meeting on Arrival in Simbo

The ex-premier of the western province has called a meeting. He tells me: I do not approve of what you are doing here. There is some talk that one man has taught you the Ey Omba dance, and that it belongs to the people. Silence in the room. So I launch into a fifteen-minute speech, every argument I can think of, trying to convince them that what we're doing will be good for the island. Eddie, being Melanesian, watches me, and in his eyes I see anger. Like all Melanesian meetings, it comes down to money in the end. So after we settle the fee for the landowners' rights and anchorage, there are more bullets in our pistol to shoot for our target — and our target is a cultural revival on the island of Nusa Simbo.

There was a lot of concern about our mentioning filming — we'd learned, from past experience, that a man we know well, Billy Barber (who, thankfully, also brought us Eddie), had spoiled the trust people here have in media. Deep down, the filming will only be a medium, a way of giving direction to the ship. What matters is the expedition itself — to experience whatever is left of a very ancient and powerful Stone Age culture. Experience is the key word: not passive spectators, but active participants, at the highest level, receiving transmission through gesture, sound, song, word — the energies of Simbo's ancestors.

Eventually we reach an agreement to carry out our plan. With Eddie, I run across the island to Nusa Simbo to talk to the chief about calling a general meeting of the whole community. One of the men at the meeting with the ex-premier has claimed more than two-thirds of the land of Simbo. Coming back to Gizo with a man who works for a Malaysian logging company in the

Marovo Lagoon — who had also been at a meeting about the centenary that will take place in Simbo in September 2003 — it became clear to me that the whole land dispute is really about timber. That man told me he expects to be the successor to that land; he and the landowner are partners, and their partnership is in the wood. His guilty conscience was audible as he took passage on the *Heraclitus* from Simbo to Gizo — his eyes never once met the crew's.

So just when I thought everything was settled — the ship had arrived, and so on — I realized how much opposition was still at work, and how crucial it would be to meet everyone who'd be involved in the celebration. The chief of Nusa Simbo was receptive; he understood, deep down, that this was a chance to put on a feast, gather his strength, and show a power he doesn't really have. The village is split between clans, and the chief can't reconcile them. Over the ten days we spent in Simbo, I was called privately by every clan leader in turn, each one working through, in intimate conversation, their own version of events — what they owned, what they had a right to, what was their heritage.

A Morning Scene in Nusa Simbo

Arriving in Nusa Simbo on the morning of the feast, I find Ovaline, Cathy, Susie, and friends gathered at the table under the tree, surrounded by buckets of cold water holding blossoms freshly picked from the frangipani trees — white, pink, and a crimson red I've never seen in a frangipani before. They pass a needle through the stem of each flower, and a head garland slowly takes shape in their hands. Ovaline's face is intent, completely concentrated on making the biggest, bushiest garland, to frame her beautiful face. The girls work at it for three hours straight, and by the end we all have head-dresses and neck garlands that smell almost more spectacular than they look.

Batu Simbo, Taboo Site

With John Tione, Mason — pronounced “May-so” by all the villagers — and John Tione’s son, we walk through the bush. We stop at a stone, a beautiful stone with a lush green air plant growing on it. John starts to talk to me about the Ey Omba. This quiet, peaceful place is the melody stone, the harmony stone, where the songs were composed and transmitted — they came from the ancestors, through the stone. The Ey Omba dance is “owned” by John, from his tribe, Patutai, so instead of asking for too much detail, I ask him to sing the song on the stone. He starts softly, finding the right tone, and then John and his son and Mason begin to sing the Ey Omba in its original birthplace. It’s at that moment I ask John to teach us, and to allow him to perform the Ey Omba with us. We talk about the ancestors, about the spirit, about the importance of transmission through gesture, song, and tone, instead of just talk.

We move on, through the bush, to climb Batu Simbo — the name means “the head of Simbo.” It was, in fact, the first place my gut told me to visit, thanks to a line in the Lonely Planet guide. Batu Simbo is a natural fortress: a huge stone rising out of the jungle all the way to the sky, fig trees growing up from their own roots, almost cocooning the whole rock. There’s only one way in, a small spiral trail climbing to the top. On the way, John cuts a leaf from a tree and holds it up for me to smell — a strong, musky smell, a smell with power. Worn on the body, it’s what gives strength to the warriors. I ask if they eat it. He laughs — no, it’s the smell that matters. We’ll wear this leaf on the day of the feast, for the dance. I keep a bunch of the leaves in my pocket as we start the climb.

Most of the shell money and ornaments here have been vandalized, by kids or by who knows who — but the spirit of the place is still there. Halfway up, there’s a huge flat stone where the chief used to sit, talking to the tribe gathered around him. I can picture him there, imposing, on that beautiful stone — the perfect place to hold a speech. We keep climbing. Higher up we come to a place with stones standing erect like phalluses, a ring of shell money on top like an altar, remains of skulls and

bones among them. At the base of this altar is a fig tree, and Mason cuts a piece of it that will later become a bark-cloth garment for one of the dancers. We keep climbing. Near the top, with a view of the lagoon and the reef and the mountains on the other side, there's a small window in the rock — a cave where lookouts once hid, watching for intruders.

Then we sit, and John tells us an old story, from before the traders. When the men of Simbo were out on a head-hunting raid, leaving the women and children alone on the island, different conch shells were blown for different warnings. A raiding party from Choiseul was approaching. The conch was blown, and everyone knew to make for Batu Simbo, to shelter from the attack. In those days Batu Simbo was also guarded by walls of coral stone. All the women and children took refuge as the attackers came for them. One woman stood close to the entrance with a *takiru* — a paddle-making tool — in hand. All the axes were out on the raid with the men. Warriors carried the axe in the right hand and the shield in the left, but the entrance to Batu Simbo was built so that you had to pull yourself up with your right hand — forcing an attacker to switch the axe to his left. The women guarding the entrance, faces painted, began striking the men with their paddles, screaming, while others threw stones down from the walls, killing some of the raiders. Believing they'd run into fierce, well-prepared warriors, the raiders fled, and the women and children were left unharmed.

On Top of the Volcano

Standing on top of Ove, the sulphurous rocks of the volcanic crater crumbling underfoot, I shyly point the camera toward Michel, who is being made up by Mason for the Ey Omba. Four dark bodies have already stripped down and tied bark-cloth strips around their hips. Their fingers are smeared with the chalky, wet powder of the volcanic clay; they draw circles around each other's legs and arms. Keana paints Eddie's back and face. It almost feels like watching two young brothers dress for a theatre performance — and this is theatre, in its way, but there's so much meaning behind it. Michel's spotty bottom

makes its appearance; Ferdi, too, is down to the bark cloth. The white paint barely shows on their pale skin, where on the dark skin it looks like swathes of cream. It dries, intensifies. They tuck leaves into the cloth, into their armbands.

I feel like I shouldn't be watching — like I should be down below, tending the coconut crabs and sweet potatoes steaming in the hot vent on the beach. Somo catches my eye as I press record. I look away. I think he was telling me it was okay for me to be here, and at the same time, kind of not. Somo doesn't talk to me in words — he looks at me, an upward flick of his head, sometimes a smile, sometimes a straight face, always a dance in his eyes. That's how he communicates. His left leg is completely withered; he looks like he might have had polio, but in fact a severe boil once kept him off that foot so long the muscles wasted and never came back. He walks on the ball of it, that leg shorter than the other. But when I first met him, I didn't even notice — hypnotized, maybe, by his eyes and his mouth. He smokes as much as he can. He sells us megapode eggs as often as he can, so he can buy tobacco. He becomes part of the ship almost from the moment we anchor. When I ask Stanley where he lives — whether it's Nusa Simbo — Stanley just waves his head around: he lives here, he lives in Lengana, he lives everywhere. The man carries a spirit of freedom about him, untethered by geography, by his leg, by the ways of everyone else on the island. He's his own thing entirely. He is Somo.

I watch Eddie begin to paint Michel. In this moment of contact between the two of them, there's an affirmation of something I've watched grow on the ship. Eddie is proud that Michel wants so badly to dance the Ey Omba. He's proud to put the paint on him as the sun starts to wane, the light beginning to fade. There's strength and beauty in it at once. Eddie isn't an emotional man, on the outside — but sometimes his guard slips, and what's underneath shows. And then the men are ready to dance.

The Eomba Dance

The crowd is waiting. The original members of the Ey Omba group have already finished their own dance. The sun is blazing, almost unbearable — most of these men are not young; more than two-thirds of the group are elders, past their fifties. We disappear where nobody can see us, into the unfinished house of John's son. Earlier we'd drunk green coconut and eaten fresh watermelon from John's garden, seeds still scattered over the untied planks. Now Ferdi and I are being prepared. Someone ties the bark cloth around my hips, carefully, covering me — it takes over three minutes, the cloth not being quite wide enough. There's no shame or awkwardness in fingers working that close. "You never show your private parts," they tell me. "They are yours." Meanwhile another man ties strings around my biceps, tucking in the fragrant leaves; someone else ties two pieces of custom money around my head — Mason's own, one ring of clam shell, another serrated like a row of teeth. Eddie, John's son, and someone else paint my face, legs, and back with the colored earth from the top of the mountain. I smear extra on my own pale skin, trying to cover it. The rattles — once used on the Sepik River with the Tambuan spirits, and again in a performance in Bali — go on my leg now, big and bushy; I try them, and the sound is impressive. That's the leg I'll stomp three times after each close of the Ey Omba refrain. In a quick run-through, we're shown the moves. I had no idea we'd also be singing *kooley, kooley*.

The crowd is waiting, so we step down. Keana is my partner — I always wanted him, because he's a good dancer and he goes for it completely. Stanley's canoe is called *Egotu* — "go for it" — which I'd already picked up as a toast for Sunday-night speeches. Now we're ready to go for it. There's no uneasiness left in me. Everything flashes through my head at once — the custom sites, the skulls, Batu Simbo, the moves Mason taught us in synesthesia. For the last two weeks I've carried the words of the Ey Omba in my head, sometimes lying quietly in my bunk, rehearsing, waiting for the moment I'd incarnate the warrior spirit of Simbo's ancestors. And we start to sing — *koee, koee*,

kooe, kooe. John's son locks eyes with me: go for it, look mean. Our feet stomp the ground, marching slowly toward the center of the village. We can hear the kids laughing as we arrive, but it's only background — total concentration. We walk and stomp and sing the Ey Omba. I know I've fumbled some of the choreographed footwork; it doesn't matter. My whole being is in it.

There's a cue — a word John will call — and I'll start to fight with Keana. The word is *tue*, and we start. Nothing else exists, no crowd, only the fight, and we fight and fight. It feels like it lasts forever; watching the video afterward, I'm surprised how few moments it actually took. Almost out of breath, I fall into line with the other dancers. My feet keep moving on their own, holding the Ey Omba rhythm. My voice sings while I try to catch my breath — learning, in real time, what it means to always keep something in reserve. Then Ferdi and John's son fight; I want to turn and watch, but it isn't mine to see — I'm part of an ensemble, my face forward, my feet stomping in unison with the others. We fight again in line; I break my axe hitting the shield too hard. It doesn't matter. The spirit is what matters. When we finish, I get the best compliment I've ever had: the only difference, they tell me, is the color of our skin.

Lina, Eddie's Mother

I have developed something like an infatuation with a beautiful woman. Her name is Lina, and she is Eddie's mother. She radiates an inner strength — the acknowledgment of her duties as a mother and a wife, as the firstborn of her family — and she offers that inner beauty to everyone close to her, especially the children. We spend a night with her and the Zuna family, our first time in Simbo. She brings us food, hot water for coffee, makes up our bed. She holds her head slightly bowed as she talks, in her half-English, half-Pidgin. Her eyes are soft but always alert; her head flicks side to side, following the talk. She listens to every word, understands every gesture. Her shoulders are a little slumped, her breasts fallen, her stomach settled over her hips, but she is a beautiful woman. I find my gaze landing

on her wherever we are — on the ship, in her house, under Mason's, at the market in Gizo. She's the one who makes our meals, and the one who sits with us as we eat — a Simbo custom, that someone from the island sits, or walks, or talks with a visitor. She dances with Ovaline and six other small girls after our own island dance; she's self-conscious about it — Eddie tells me she isn't a great dancer — but there's an innocence to this middle-aged woman, and a worldliness, both at once. Right now she's tending her dying father; her days go to the preparations for the feast, and to his side. As I write this, she's approaching the ship in *Egotu* — she and Eddie will spend the night with us here in Gizo.

A Taboo Site on the Shore of Lake Ove

We walk up the hill, past the shores of the green lake, Ove, and arrive at a clearing in the bush. I see round, shiny objects scattered over a pile of rocks. Michel has the camera out before I realize they're skulls. The landowner who's brought us here asks if everything's all right — should he rearrange them? Michel says okay, and turns some of the uppermost heads so the eye sockets stare straight into the lens. The skulls don't feel quite real to me yet, but I look closer and see, between several of them, a set of teeth. Now they're real. It takes long minutes before I can lose myself in the story of these skulls, and once I do, it's hard to shake the feeling of death — violent death, at that. Michel shoots them from every angle; as the camera passes over, one of them shifts slightly, resettling from having been touched earlier. But that night, when Eddie and Mason see the footage, they're shaken. Did you see that skull move, Eddie keeps saying — we have to go and dance at that site. Not knowing it had been touched that afternoon, something, some message, comes through to them in that moving skull. And maybe they're right.

Michel takes stills too. Ferdi stands at a slight distance from the skulls, and only slowly realizes that the further back he steps, the closer he gets to another pile behind him. We're surrounded by the heads of men slain by Simbo warriors who once danced

this same Ey Omba. The bush around us thickens the feeling of being lost in history. Walking back to the shore of the lake, I'm not looking at the green water, or hoping for a glimpse of the crocodile that's said to live there. My head is still full of skulls.

"For the first time, the time of headhunting becomes real. Until now it has only been talk, words, something lost in books and speeches. But now it is real. I feel it is a special place. There is a deep respect moving through me. And I feel uneasy, but at the same time excited, to take the camera out. As I press record, the eyes of the skulls look back. They do not seem dead, though the rational mind says they are only bone. I get flashes of axes taking heads, brought home bloody in a *tomoko* as a sign of victory. I look for marks on the skulls and find none. There is a whole process of imagining going on, and now the Ey Omba we will perform on top of the volcano takes on an entirely different dimension. It is as if we never truly understood what the dance meant. It was a cultural curiosity, an aesthetic dance — but now the Ey Omba is the dance that prepared warriors to go on raids."

Walking down, the site's owner shows us his grandmother's grave, among the ruins of an old stone wall — she was the last person to live on this island. It's a slab of cement with a Christian cross and a name, but engraved into the same cement is a custom-money ring — two worlds side by side. On one side, the "savage time" of headhunting; on the other, the coming of Christianity, and the slow vanishing of a cultural heritage the people of Simbo lived by for tens of thousands of years. There's no judgment in it, only the simple fact of a culture changing.

More Taboo Sites

Four tall stones stand as an altar to weather-making magic. Two are kept for calm weather, two for rough — meant to close off the narrow passage into Nusa Simbo. Whenever a raiding party went out, they'd ask for rough weather, to keep the passage blocked against any invader — rough weather meant security, back then. Ironical, for us seamen. Eddie tells me that sometimes, in more recent memory, boys wanting to keep a girl on the

island would steal the rough-weather stone and hide it, and it had to be found again to restore the balance. As I pan the camera over the four stones, I hold my intention deliberately on the two calm ones.

We climb a trail through the bush to the largest altar on Simbo. Some of the shell money here is worn thin by weather that must be thousands of years old. Three conch shells, each with its own sound, lie skeletal, colorless, riddled with holes — also ancient. The shrine itself is more of the same phallic stones, some twenty of them, rising from a huge mound of rock and flat slabs — and beneath those slabs, the heads of chiefs, from different islands of the province: Choiseul, Ranongga, Roviana, Kolombangara. No one remembers any more which is which. Most of the more recent shell money has been stripped, probably sold to tourists, and the trees that once shaded the place — and the ones that had grown back over it more recently — have both been cut, leaving it looking unkept, disrespected. But that may only be an impression: unlike the mound of skulls at the earlier site, these heads are carefully sheltered from weather and sun, each in its own small chamber.

We move to a third site, where one of the chiefs waits for us in full traditional dress — he'll perform the Ey Omba here later. More skulls; the site is split in two, one part for women, one for men. I can't recall all the details, but I think these bones are not from raids on other islands but from their own people. After probably annoying the chief by asking him, five times over, to redo a gesture — wanting to layer his image over the ancestors of the place — we head back down to the lagoon separating us from Nusa Simbo. Mason and Mason's son were with us. Sitting under the great mango tree in Nusa Simbo, talking to the chief, I learn that each site has a separate owner, meaning a separate fee — so instead of the twenty dollars I'd expected, it came to sixty, for the two of us, since Sean had come along too. Economics again, especially once I was told I could have gone to Batu Simbo later, even when the time and the guide had both been there for the asking. The chief owns the weather-magic site, and beyond its story, it's just four standing stones — which explains, perhaps, why he made sure his site was seen first.

Night Fishing

It's almost ten at night. The full moon rides high, and Eddie jumps to his feet: I want to go fishing. Keana is aboard — he'll become my dance partner in the Ey Omba, one of the most agile and full-on dancers in the whole troupe, and the only young man in a few generations to want to be part of it. He's already brought us lobster once. He knows how to catch fish, and Eddie knows it too. Eddie runs to the stern, grabs every piece of fishing gear he can carry, and turns down Mason, who wants to come too — somehow they already know, tonight, they'll catch fish. It's a good night for it; plenty of canoes are already out, plenty of fishermen who know exactly what they're doing.

Then a radio call — Eddie, who never calls — saying they'll be back in fifteen minutes. Did you catch anything, I ask. You'll be surprised, he says. As the boat comes alongside, the tender is loaded with twenty huge barracuda. His fingers are cut from the lines, every lure lost — I wish I'd been there to see the frenzy, two-meter barracuda piled on the floor of the boat. There's no way all this is going into our freezer, and with Mason, Somo, Peter Ben, Keana, most of the ship's crew, and Stanley and Ovaline all on deck, I ask how we're going to divide it. Everyone stops watching the movie and comes out to look. Mason and I settle on the ship keeping six; I watch him reach for the biggest ones in a pile and switch in the smaller ones instead, partly because I'd heard someone on the island got sick eating barracuda once, but mostly for a fairer split. I suggest Keana gets the bigger share, since he's the one who caught them. Suddenly everyone wants to take their catch home. I start filleting on deck, with Somo's help — I tell him he can keep the heads, so helping me means he gets home sooner, though he isn't much of a hand at filleting; that's a Western thing here, where fish are cooked whole and nobody minds a few bones. As I cut and clean, everyone else goes to bed, leaving me with the dirty work — but I don't mind, enjoying the moment, the feeling of catching our own. Eddie is beaming, and past one in the morning we're still scrubbing the mess off the

deck. Now we know what fishing at the right time, in the right place, really means.

Dolphins Are Called

Beyond the breakers, a school of spinner dolphins is hunting — cruising the reef in two groups, disappearing together under the swells. I know they're feeding, driving a school of fish tighter and tighter; it's rare to catch them from shore. We're with Mason, Sean, and Carol, drawn in by a family preparing pandanus leaf, bright green, but my eyes keep drifting to the ocean. Once the dolphins are spotted, the kids start calling out to the sea. I get the words from an old man — *rasa tuni bangarra* — something like “king of the dolphins, jump.” The kids are shouting themselves hoarse from the boulders, their voices thrown out toward the water. I find myself calling the same words. I keep the camera running, waiting for a jump. After ten minutes I finally turn it off — and of course, that's when one leaps, a big spin. The kids scream louder. They keep jumping, unpredictably, and I keep missing the frame — a beautiful excuse to stay longer. By now, Carol and Sean have already left; I was supposed to meet the chief an hour ago. But the moment is too beautiful to give up, and the chief will have to wait. Dolphins have always been something like a totem for me. Every time I try to pack the camera away, they leap again, higher, stronger, and the kids and I are back at it — *rasa tuni bangarra*. I finally catch one jump on film, though I'm not quite satisfied, still enjoying watching the whole pod hunt, sure that one of them is playing with me. They come closer to shore, holding my attention, and I can't move. By now I'm very late. But the moment will stay with me. Being late stops mattering.

The Anchorage

The ship is anchored in one of the most scenic, sheltered places we've found — it took three tries, each one drawing us closer to shore. I dive on the anchor the first time and find it on coral rubble. Somo, whom we've just met, points to a spot; I dive there instead and find sand, good holding ground, though it

feels tight. While I'm down, five guys meet me halfway on my ascent, looking at this strange creature. The ship is quickly surrounded by canoes. A young kid with two bleached streaks in his hair, leading one canoe, paddles in exactly the style of the *tomoko* of Munda, his crew of six boys paddling in time, hands moving as fast as they can. That same kid comes around the ship every day — during our water runs, and again on our last day, called to a meeting with the man who supposedly owns two-thirds of Simbo's land, about an invitation to the coming-of-the-church centenary, set for the fifteenth of September, 2003. I drop three containers by the fountain to fill; our desalinator is broken, so we've been doing water runs by hand. It would have taken me forty-five minutes to fill them myself. When I get back from the meeting, I find all three containers full, waiting — that same kid had filled them while I was gone.

The ship gets visited by so many canoes carrying trade goods — lobster, coconut crab, and most days, young girls from the two surrounding villages bringing vegetables to trade for shampoo and soap, left over from our stay in Singapore, at Raffles Marina. So many tomatoes come our way that we end up inventing a tomato soup, smoothed with megapode eggs. Our main supplier of eggs is Somo — to quote him, I try to sell you as much as I can because I want to buy tobacco. He's a total addict, seizing any chance to roll a cigarette, tobacco cut with a knife, rolled in lined paper — the only real use paper gets here, since nobody writes during our whole stay; everything is remembered orally. Every meeting, every schedule, held in memory — except on the feast day, when John Tione's son writes the program on a piece of paper and hands it to the chief.

One dusky evening, the most beautiful sight arrives beside the ship: two women and their daughters, or whoever they are, carrying huge bouquets of flowers, bunches of bananas, nuts, and fruit, climbing aboard. The small boat that carries them fills with fragrance. The young girls are beautiful, wide-eyed, and I can't help pointing the camera at them — shyly, they hide behind the flowers, but once they see their friends' faces on the small screen, it flips, and now every time I frame a shot a new face appears, knowing it'll be caught. Meanwhile a tour is under

way for the women aboard. Everything here moves by canoe. A man arrives towing a giant chainsaw ahead of his canoe, on his way out toward the volcano to finish felling a tree; we trade him some old engine oil for an old trader's pipe from the 1800s, a tall ship carved into its bowl. That small object made the whalers and traders real to me in a way nothing else had. The first traders here were actually Frenchmen — the Pratt family, arriving in the 1800s, the first white settlers on Simbo. Our own canoe goes into the water, and a few of the crew, Carol and Justin mainly, learn to paddle — awkward, stiff, next to the natural ease of the Simbo people. Their kids stand erect in a canoe with a paddle like it's solid ground; they seem born in them. By some kind of osmosis I manage, after five seconds, to stand in a canoe without falling. Mason, never done fishing, keeps catching. A school of surgeonfish and batfish have discovered that what we throw overboard makes an easy meal. Lina gives us some custom pudding that finds no success with the crew's palate — it sits there, uneaten, until Mason finds a use for it on a fish hook, and the surgeonfish take to it happily. Despite all the beauty, all the energy building on Nusa Simbo, I sometimes find my nerves fraying at the nonchalance of some of the crew — not quite realizing the privilege of the moment. Later, most of them will remember Simbo as a magical place all the same.

Feast in the Village

The men have danced the Ey Omba. The bamboo pipes are playing, children scream and shout through a tug-of-war, coming perilously close to Michel's camera as he films their straining faces. There's almost a fight before the game even starts, one small boy clinging to the end of the long black rope; bigger boys jostle for his spot, but he won't give it up. Keana stands in the middle of the line, oblivious to the commotion. One frantic shove finally displaces the small boy, and his face storms as he hits the ground — size and age have won this one. The feast starts to break up, the crowd thinning as we wait, and wait, for the ship's crew to come ashore. The chief wanders off, more interested now in getting permission to run the village

generator that night, for a movie. There are still island dances to come, but we can't begin without Carol.

After a long wait, the crowd down to just the small children, still imitating the dancers' moves, the group finally arrives, and without pause we're whisked into a veranda behind the square to dress. The grass skirts are a little curled at the ends, the frangipani garlands dripping from their rest in buckets of water, kept fresh. We're dressed in seconds — no banana-leaf tops, much to Chelle's relief, worried they'd fall off, and to Carol's dismay, annoyed nobody told her, since she's already wearing the "wrong" top, and to my own disappointment, at not going all the way. We rehearse at speed, kids lining up outside the veranda, peeking in at this black-and-white parade, laughing and copying our attempts at the dance. We hear the other island group singing and Carol marches straight out to watch; I realize we should stay out of sight, already dressed and ready, but there's no explaining that subtlety in the moment. We watch from behind the smaller, regathered crowd. Some of the women dancing aren't entirely fluent in it themselves, others keep the energy high, but all of them have a fluidity I'm struggling to find — their hands so light, their fingertips so airy. They sing beautifully, in classic Pacific harmony.

Then it's our turn. We take ourselves out of sight again and enter properly. Ovaline leads, I'm behind her, then Susan, Chelle, Cathy, and Carol. A guitar accompanies us, and a few women gather to help carry our weak voices — I can't project, the melody sits too high for anything more than a soft voice, and booming isn't their style anyway. Cathy opens the dance with the word *tarupa* — ready — our cue to set our hands on our hips. And we're off.

*Hea sa rane ginetu getu
Na rane tinamonai
Leana hola sa rane ninoroi
We dream this day today
As we sing and dance
We welcome you this happy day in 2002
We wish you all good luck*

*And may God bless you all
As we share our dance
Happy day in Nusa Simbo*

I stare past the crowd, to the trees behind them, mostly losing myself in the moment. I'm aware of Michel's camera, of the children staring and laughing, of the faces of our audience — a little astonished to see white women dancing in grass skirts, singing in Roviana. I try to capture something of the Solomons' spirit, using the gestures to carry my own femininity, aware of what the dance is for — to lure, to captivate, to entrance. I don't entirely manage it, but the attempt lifts me past simply moving my mouth, my hips, my arms in time with the others. Within minutes it's over. We step back, and Lina and seven children — Ovaline, a natural performer, among them — take the floor for a dance they've made up themselves, "stylee, stylee." The little girls wiggle their hips furiously, then groom their hair, coy already at five or six. Watching them all day through the feast, watching how they play with the boys — flirting, seducing, then turning their backs in an instant — I feel how physically blocked we are by comparison, how pent up with our own mental gymnastics, that lack of freedom showing through even as we sing and dance to this Pacific song.

Stern Conversations

I ask Mason, one night on the stern, about the place up on the hilltop where he wants to gather the dancers again for the Ey Omba, when we return to Simbo. A level plain at the top. Is it a special place, a custom site? Oh yes. He has the story from his father-in-law, Peter Ben — a connection I only understand after we've already left Simbo the first time. Two young boys once lived up there with their mother. The mother died. The boys cried and cried and cried. After three days, she was resurrected and came back to visit them, but she looked different, and they didn't recognize her. But I am your mother, she said. No, you can't be — you look so different now. She told them to go and kill a lizard and bury it in the ground. They did. After three more days, she returned and said: see, that is what happens when a person dies. And then, instantly, they knew her. But

before they could reach her, she leapt from the top of the hill and dove into the ocean — surfacing once in a great bubble, which is where woman reef is now, then diving again to send up a second bubble, where man reef sits.

There's a taboo site up there that only Peter Ben's family — the landowners — can visit. Anyone outside that clan who comes near risks contracting leprosy, or so it's said. Mason is terrified of the place; his wife can go freely, to clear the growth and keep the shrine clean. Once, a friend visiting from Australia (Mason uses the word "boyfriend") urged him to bring him there. Mason wouldn't go close, only pointed toward the shrine and told him to look for himself if he wanted. That night, back in the village, the man broke out in a rash all over his arms, itching terribly. Mason brought him to the old healer — Lina's uncle, since passed — who touched his arms, rubbed them gently, and within two days the rash was gone. Another time, one of Mason's own sons developed a bad rash on his face and arms — I think he too had strayed onto a custom site he should have avoided. The same old man, with the same gentle rubbing around the eyes and cheeks, cured him in two days.

Mason describes how all the custom sites of Nusa Simbo were stripped of their power soon after the missionaries arrived, in 1903 — the chief was asked to send the *kulau*, the woman chief, to every site to render them powerless. That's why, he tells me, he was able to sit on the melody stone and sing the Ey Omba beside Michel and John Tione without any harm. But the custom sites of "the mainland" are still full of power, and Mason won't go near them. When I ask about the site above Lake Ove, he tells me he first asked the landowner to speak to the ancestors, to let them know we were coming, and that we would be filming — he describes how tourists who take photographs or video at these sites without asking often find their cameras stop working, or the film comes back blank.

There's a tree whose bark is used for the dancers' cloth. It grew between two gardens, and the landowner sent a man to cut it down, not realizing — or ignoring — that it was a special tree.

Two men arrived with a chainsaw, ready to fell it. The chainsaw would not start. They tried everything. The tree is still standing.

At Anchor

Every morning brings a small procession of canoes to visit the ship. Some children come out of curiosity, to watch our strange morning rituals — cigarettes and coffee on the stern, faces looking like the world ended overnight, gongs ringing, plates of food drifting across the deck, then everyone vanishing below in a rush when the meeting bell goes at quarter to eight. I come out myself, some mornings, to watch the show. But others come as more than spectators — prospective traders. There's no shouting, no sales pitch; they simply pull alongside with baskets of tomato, green pepper, eggplant, leafy greens, spring onion, young coconut, and wait for one of us to acknowledge them first, before any business begins. Our own trade goods are soap from Raffles Marina, a bagful Maik and Helen gave us a year and a half ago — many of the bottles have leaked down to just a splash. The children and young women ask for it, to wash under the free-flowing taps of Simbo. Our baskets fill quickly with green, red, and purple vegetables, more cherry tomatoes than we can use fresh — I boil the surplus down into a sauce. It feels almost decadent, so many plump tomatoes in my hands.

We are like the trading ships of a hundred years ago.

"One day, long, long ago, a man was fishing on the reef, and he saw something out in the sea. It appeared to be an island, but it moved. He ran to the beach shouting, an island is coming here — and quickly the people gathered on the beach to watch a sailing ship approach and anchor off the reef. The inhabitants of the island came ashore, and our island world ceased to be."

— Casper Luana, *Buka! A Retrospect*

Simbo was first approached by whaling boats, following the sperm whale's routes. Their presence is still tangible — a man trades us a pipe bowl, carved in ceramic with the motif of a sailing ship, not unlike the *Heraclitus*'s own silhouette, for a

container of old engine oil. What is waste to us is perfectly useful to them. The whalers were followed by trading vessels bringing iron, and iron turned a Stone Age culture into an Iron Age one almost overnight — tasks that once took forever, carving shell money from clam shells, building canoes for a head-hunting raid, suddenly became fast. The whalers came for food, water, and women. The traders who followed came for coconuts.

Meeting for the Community

The chief blows the conch. Its sound draws all the villagers toward the center of Nusa Simbo, under the great tree. A bench sits in the middle — the chief, a translator, and myself. Orla sits beside me, on the ground; she is a woman, after all. We wait there, in full view of everyone. The chief briefs me quickly on the order of things: he'll address the crowd first, then I'll speak, then there will be questions. People gather slowly, in twos and threes. Stanley sits under the mango tree; Eddie lingers at the edge of the forming circle; Mason is nowhere to be seen. There's a tension in the air, hard to name, but this meeting has clearly been called for more than an announcement — and Mason's absence is telling. We've already heard rumors that part of the village is unhappy about him teaching us the Ey Omba, probably more from jealousy than anything else.

The chief starts to speak, holding up the hundred Solomon dollars given for land use, so pointedly that I start to feel uneasy at how much weight the money is being given. Then I stand to address the crowd, explaining the ship, the idea of the expedition, our three pillars of seamanship, science, and art. Our stay in Simbo is a voyage of discovery — of its reef, its people, its past. We aren't here just to look, but to experience. Cultures pass from generation to generation, and having traveled the world, we know well how ancient cultures disappear — traces of it are still here, in Simbo. When we first heard Eddie sing a few lines of the traditional songs, we got excited: where does this come from? Having a man from Simbo aboard, we realized we needed to come here, to help strengthen

his own cultural heritage in his heart. Since we're here to experience, and given our own involvement in theatre, what better way than to learn, through gesture and song and meaning, the spirit of Simbo's ancestors? So we're planning a feast, this coming Saturday — not just a platform, but a celebration of a culture. We'll film it, to keep a record, and in the hope that a film might one day benefit the island itself. I stress that this isn't commercial — we have no interest in making money from it; if anything, we're investing the ship itself, its crew and equipment, into this. The film gives our stay a through-line, a focus. Beyond the dances, it's the relationship between this community and its environment that matters to us this week. We've dived most of the world's reefs, and we carry something like a planetary view of them and their importance to communities that depend on them. The people who use this reef hold knowledge they may not even recognize as knowledge — so I propose an exchange. We'll dive the reef, film it, and report back on its health, on what we've seen. We'd also like to invite a few people from the community aboard, for a seminar on coral reefs. In many parts of the world reefs are badly sick — in Indonesia, more than eighty percent destroyed by dynamite and cyanide fishing — and people will come here, to the Solomons, to take advantage of a reef that, so far, is still plentiful. So during our stay, this can be a real exchange, between your knowledge of this place and what we've learned elsewhere about managing what the sea gives you. And I remind them that they already have, aboard the ship, someone who can be seen as their own ambassador — Eddie, who will travel with us to America and represent this island to everyone he meets there. That, in short, is our plan for our stay. I invite any question, doubt, or reservation.

A man stands almost immediately, his first concern the community's sea cucumbers — *bêche-de-mer*. What will you do, he asks, if you see *bêche-de-mer*? And again I find myself insisting, my voice rising, that we are not a commercial venture, that our only real drive is to learn — that it might sound strange, but looking is genuinely what we're here to do. The opposition in the room is obvious, and that same man keeps

talking, and talking, until some of the younger men start to quiet him down themselves. After a volley of questions back and forth, I feel myself growing edgier. I end by asking whether there's anything wrong in wanting to celebrate, to have a good time, to experience something — whether there's anything wrong in wanting to learn about the reefs, when the island itself stands to benefit too. Is there anything wrong with that? By then the chief, noticing my tone, tells me the community has agreed, and that the meeting is over. The last question, the one that really summed it up, came after I'd already explained, as clearly as I could, that this film was only for us, and for our friends back in America — someone still asked when we'd show it, and how much money we'd make from people watching it. The whole idea of simply doing something because you want to — the concept, really, behind living on this ship in the first place — was entirely foreign to that room. Eddie whispers in my ear: tell them if people see the film and want to come to Simbo, that means they'll have to pay to see the custom sites, to stay here — more tourism, more income for the island. It won't be until two pigs are brought down to the shores of Nusa Simbo that the feast finally becomes real. Until then, it is only talk.

The Pigs

Knowing that pigs would mean a feast, and that in true Melanesian custom the chief, wanting to make something happen, needs to make a feast — since in this culture wealth isn't something you truly accumulate, but something shown through generosity, which is what makes a great chief — securing the pigs early mattered a great deal to our stay in Simbo. It's Somo, after talking to Stanley about where we might find one in Raromana, who comes by canoe to tell us about two pigs of the right size across the bay. We go to see them without delay, and after a little negotiation, agree to buy them; I pay the next day, and we'll collect them two days before the feast. That becomes a whole scene in itself — we choose Ferdi and Sean as the pig-carriers, wanting our own crew visibly part of the feast, but it's Mason, the real pig master, who does all the actual

work. The pigs start screaming before we've even reached the pen.

(See the October 2002 log for the rest of that description.)

The day of the slaughter is a red day. Red blossoms hang on the tree above where the pigs still lie, in the shade of the palms, where we left them the day before. They're untethered by their hind legs and dragged by rope down to the sea. Mason says this is the best way to kill them, and he's right. One strong man holds the first pig down in the shallows; the boys gather round, squealing with delight as the pig squeals under the surface. It takes almost three minutes for it to stop kicking, for the last breath to leave its body. I watch from the shade of a tree, slightly horrified at the drowning, and at the same time struck by the delight on the boys' small faces. Mason brings the second pig down — its hind legs catch on a log lying on the beach, and it struggles to heave itself over. Mason stands on it, in the water, to hold it under. Another man wields the knife that will open its throat. Blood pours out, the water around him turning red; Mason takes his own knife and does the same with the first pig. His white shorts are soon inches deep in bloodied water, and the children swim and splash through it without seeming to notice the color has changed. It's an intense red at first, fading to pale pink by the time it reaches the beach, gone within a couple of minutes.

The pigs are carried back, bled, to the coconut palms waiting for them. Hot water, boiled over firewood just behind the beach, is poured over them, then hessian matting laid on top to soften the skin. Mason and John Tione's son work with coconut-shell halves to scrape off the soft hair of the white pig — it comes away easily, a young pig, none of the coarse wiry hair that clung to our own PNG pig back in the freezer. The second pig won't be so easy; he's carried to another pile of palms, brown and dried this time, and set alight. Red returns to the day, an orangey red now — we sit and watch the flames rise, the smoke blurring the scene. Once he's shaved, Michel begins work on the first pig, the soft white one, slitting him open from throat to tail along the belly. I film as he reaches inside with bloodied hands,

scooping out the bowels. The pig is clean, barely bleeding, but Michel's hands are stained bright red at once. He lays the entrails beside the body and describes each piece to the men gathered round. The children crowd in close behind him, thick enough that I can barely find room to stand nearby; others sit and wave leaves over the pig and its insides, keeping the flies off. I watch them discuss each organ — the liver, the heart, the lungs, the intestines, the kidneys — deciding what to keep, what to throw away. Almost nothing goes to waste. Then Michel begins to break the body down into pieces for the oven — first the legs, then the sides, then the ribs. When it comes to the head, and the tongue, I go a little squeamish, and quietly hope it isn't what ends up in my own parcel when the oven opens. The other pig is worked by a group led by John Tione's son, their method rougher, more hacking, more blood, more mess — but the job gets done, and the meat, cut smaller still, is wrapped in beautiful boat-shaped green leaves, tied at one edge, and set in the oven. The oven itself is a small house — a flat bed of stones over fire, the smell of roasting pig already rising as it sears. Banana-tree stems, cut and laid over the top, then the whole thing sealed tight with banana leaves so no steam escapes, then covered again with old copra sacks. The pigs rest, in pieces, overnight, in their own steam.

PART ONE

Mbabanga, January 2008

1 January 2008

*The words came down,
Given by the universe.*

We enter the *maneapa*, the community's open meeting house, where memories flood like tears. But this time the sacred space is in jeopardy, under the guns of mass-produced DVDs — unselected, some of them moving images, fast food for the senses, unconscious.

Kids are running around everywhere. Old “young” friends are now married with children — there is no marriage without children. How did you meet? “A volleyball tournament. She came from Wagina with her team, and that was it.”

There was one generator on our last visit. Now many of the families own a small portable generator, mainly used to watch movies. There are no fridges or other appliances to plug in.

Unfortunately this year, because of the recent earthquake and tsunami, the dance and singing competition is not taking place. Two of the villages on the coast were wiped out, without a house remaining. The sea people had to move up into the bush, and are still living in tents. Used to cooking with seawater, swimming in seawater, they now carry their “blood” back up the hill — a half hour’s walk each way. Many died, mostly children, unaware in their history of any “big wave.” Instead of retreating to the hills, they went out to see the ocean receding.

Most of the funding went into the immediate vicinity of Gizo town, as a showcase that something had happened. The NGOs “took charge.” The bank manager at ANZ put it plainly: “Of course a lot of money came in. But so much was spent on the hotel. The ‘helpers’ would go on picnics on the weekend, get drunk, and so forth — the gas used for entertainment while the outer islands needed help. Of course, they couldn’t trust the locals with money. Their money.”

Gizo looks like nothing happened, but the stories of despair abound. John Goldie, our friend in Simbo, lost his brother — he found him three days later, all bloated up. Stanley, Eddie’s father, was picked up by the wave, lifted into a tree, and watched his canoe flip over, engine underwater. “I am so lucky to be alive.”

Villages we once anchored off in Simbo are gone. Simbo itself is two meters lower now, the coastline changed, the bridge to Nusa Simbo collapsed and not yet rebuilt, the fresh water supply gone. Ranonga rose four meters, changing the whole dynamic of the island — the reef now kisses the sky. Natural

harbours are gone, and transport has become a serious issue for villages that once had easy access to the coastline.

The people of Mbabanga, on the earthquake that came first: “We could hardly stand up, all the houses were shaking. Then we saw the sea retreating — all the shallows were dry, the sea was gone. We all climbed to the hill, and the wave came and washed under our houses. But we are lucky — no one lost their life here.” The village of Titiana is gone now. That is why they are still busy surviving, and why the dance competition had to be cancelled.

So, for our own sake as much as theirs, we reactivate the space with theatre — to become, even for brief moments, actors.

Their dance tradition is an ancient school that teaches by doing. The dances involve the coordination of four centers.

I need a plug-in. The entire village resonates in my spine, rising to activate my body in meaningful gestures, on the beat, with the magical words doing what they do. The seed planted years ago now reaches maturity in the exactitude of the movement that radiates its inner meaning.

Tannang, *baraka*, took over my teaching, begun with Paia in 2000. One of the elders — a man with a special gift for healing bones — has taken me under his wing. More than a metaphor: the dancing masters hold the frigate bird as the vehicle of their inspiration.

The first song I learned was:

A BAKA MANI BUBUN AM TAEKA
I ONGO NEANA
BE KATEKEI I TABONIBAINA
TE UBA N EITEI
KO RIA RA
KO RIA RA

*The shadows of the words are falling down,
I hear the floating sound traveling through the air,
Every word slides at the tip of the bird's wing,
The wings play the wind, free,*

Gone away, fading — it is gone.

There is no exact translation. The words are ancient, not common to everyday language — multilayered meanings, unfolding as one practices the art of metaphor.

The gestures begin with the showing of the bird's wings, my fingertips. The hands move close to the ear to "hear" the words, gossip-like, and place them on the tip of the wings. Then I take off, flying through the clouds and beyond. The words glide off my fingertips, falling behind, and as I fly, the words still carry a small echo at first, but fainter and fainter, until they disappear and the flight reaches a state of total freedom.

I used the song to get rid of "noise."

The dance "competitions" are arenas where the spirit of dancing battles itself. New songs are tested against each of the masters. The songs are always specific to the present moment, no matter how long ago they were composed. The dancer incarnates the specific spirit of a specific dance.

Tannang told me about the dance masters of the past: "They are called *Tengaruru ni Man*. They received their songs in dreams. They held power with sticks and stones. Lift a stick to the sky, and a frigate bird would come down — they would take a feather and use it. In the competitions, a dancer on the opponent's side would spit blood, a show of power to protect the community. You do not attack a strong magic place. We call them the devils."

Here, Christianity called all spirits and old gods devils. But what I hear in Tannang is not a value judgment — he respects those spirits, and simply uses the word that was given to him in English to describe the undecipherable.

We spent the afternoon talking about the Phoenix Islands, perfecting the gestures of the dance I would perform.

After the song of freedom, I learned the song of the seed and the tree — not any old tree, but a new tree, never seen before.

*E UNIKAKI BA TE KAI AE REIRAKE IANI
KARAWA MANE O
TI NATARARAIA BE KANGA
AO AI TERANA IANGOANA E!
AO AI TERANA IANGOANA O!
AO AI TERANA TERA TEIANGO AE RIKIRAKE*

The gestures begin with the planting of a seed in one's arm, and the seed explodes into a tree. The tree grows to reach the sky, tall and high. The hand opens; the eyes follow it from the base of the tree upward, to show the new. The hands push like a paddle, pushing away and showing the tree, again and again. Both hands, now empty, come together and are pulled back, twisting toward the heart.

The community was originally from the Phoenix Islands, moved against their will, through treachery, to the Solomon Islands — at that time a British protectorate.

The Phoenix group, and the famous Christmas Island, were the site of nuclear experiments. It was off Christmas Island that the first hydrogen bomb was tested.

"We saw a big bright light in the sky that almost blinded us. Then all the coconut trees lost their leaves, and the fruit came down. The coconut trees stood like bare masts."

On our last stop I went with a young reverend to interview an old man. He claims he was ordered to put salt in the wells, to fake the drought that became the official reason everyone was evacuated. Canton was populated with American soldiers, and a huge airfield was built — at first as a refueling station for the transpacific Pan American flights.

Amelia Earhart supposedly crashed on Nikumaroro, one of the islands in the Phoenix group. No one has yet found any remains of her plane.

After use, the Canton base was abandoned, leaving behind a mess of toxic waste and dilapidated buildings. Now only three families live there, on behalf of the Kiribati government,

keeping a presence against the fishing fleets of Asia — not that they can do much about it anyway.

After their settlement in the Solomons, the British left. The Solomons are mainly Melanesian, with a couple of Polynesian islands; the Kiribati people are Micronesian. Countless land disputes are now arising — nothing new, land dispute is the norm in Melanesia, a complex affair.

Theirs is an oral culture, and memory must be sharp — it is checked, for it is the “written” record of history. Genealogies are known by heart, and each person can retrace their ancestors back to the first arrival of the present culture from Samoa.

At around 11:30 we climb ashore, greeted by the singing voices in the church — song after song, until the tick-tock of the clock tells us we have entered a new cycle. The mindset here is one of gratitude for reaching the new year — always a cause for celebration, a marking of time. And what a year: our own tsunami, the exodus from the *Heraclitus*, the challenges of keeping the voyage going. So the light is put out and put back on, to mark the event.

We move to the maneapa. One by one the families arrive, and the elders — and ourselves — are crowned with a garland of frangipani. Then the food starts to arrive: pile upon pile of coconuts, lobster, coconut crabs. Where did they find them? “Some boys are very smart,” Tannang tells me. So here we are, with a feast in front of us. “This is our culture,” I am told.

Now the entertainment comes. Young girls are dancing — goddesses of sensuality, feeding us the best the island has to offer. The dances are amazing, especially Tannang’s daughter Taia, home for the Christmas holidays from her studies in Honiara. Around three in the morning we head back to the *Heraclitus* to find the rest of the crew passed out. The wind starts to pick up, and all attention turns to the elements. The sea swells, the rain pours hard, lightning bolts strike meters away. A few thatched roofs will fly off tonight. But the holding ground is perfect, and we have enough scope to hold. The crashing thunder deafens the few still awake, and I bail the small boat in

one of the heaviest rains I've known — a sense of being alive and wild. The wind finally decreases, but the rain keeps pouring.

OUR PERFORMANCE

It starts with fast-forward images of traffic, city lights, people moving through crowded streets, fast electronic music. Then the stage goes pitch black.

A strange character — a mad-scientist type — arrives with a new pill that will solve all the problems. In a line, a few humans eat the elixir. But something goes wrong, and everyone starts doing their own thing, without coordination. Then everyone collapses.

A Balinese-type god, the god of dreams, enters the stage: *I come from the land of dreams. Step by step, to the beat of your heart, rise to create, together, a vision of hope. Create the vessel that will carry your voices for the stars to see.*

Longing for the freedom of the open ocean, waves upon waves, the sky becomes a screen to see, the wind becomes the road to follow, or avoid. Listen, learn to listen.

The spirit dances around the bodies, and with each beat of the drum, the bodies and minds move and take the shape of a ship. A chantey, and we sail away.

A hip-hop fisherman type, plastic squid strung around his neck, parades with three dancers, bragging about fish, while a hip-hop song about tuna and king mackerel and trolling plays on. He casts his line, battles forever, and catches only a heap of trash. He leaves the scene: *Walk away from false pretenses, and dead ends, roads that lead nowhere.*

The sail enters the stage as the second refrain of the chantey comes on. Three sailors show their discontent and dream of land. Slides of an island. *Land ho — the smell gives the land away. Land ho, land ho. A gift of a sensual universe, carrying in its spirit the circle of life.*

As the sailors reach the shore, four Polynesian women dance. Our sailors can't believe their eyes, watching with stares of bliss. A garland of flowers is placed on their heads, and each leaves with one of the Polynesian princesses.

Now two divers, slapstick-style, gear up to go diving, bumping into one another before finally plunging in. Behind them, reef scenes appear — a jellyfish dances, a school of fish rattles past. Then they spot a giant clam with a shining, gigantic pearl inside. They battle the clam and succeed in bringing the pearl to the surface. All goes dark but for the light on the pearl, radiating around, casting stars.

The other ship's mates pass the pearl around — first in awe at its majesty, but their hands start to clutch and hoard it. All in good fun, drinking, singing — but the pearl becomes their only focus. Two of the sailors break into a duel, a slapstick kung-fu fight, rolling on the floor; a third jumps in and they all end up knocking each other down. The last sailor, holding the pearl, tenderly but possessively, falls asleep with it in his arms.

Explore where we came from, and beware the greed that kills the earth, and loses the hearts of men.

An old man calls out from his canoe — wrinkled, struggling to walk, it takes him effort to paddle. He sees the pearl and tries to get the attention of the crew, who don't really want to talk to him. But he starts a story:

At first there was only light. The sun fell in love with the moon. But the moon, at first, never wanted to hear about the sun. The sun, sad, left every day, but could never resist staying away too long. At last the moon, after so many eternities, started to feel for the sun. But the sun became too hot, burning all life. So the stars took the heart of the moon and placed it in the ocean, protected in the biggest clam shell that ever lived. The clam shell kept the heart of the moon alive, but hidden away from the sun, so that life could start again.

Now you have stolen the heart of the moon. The sun knows it, and he is heating up again — new floods and bigger storms are rising. All the stored energy from the sun, in old trees and oil, is now being burned

in glory to a heartless world. Please, give the heart of the moon back. Send it to the ocean, to start restoring a balance lost. It is the first step. It is the only step.

Reluctantly, after the old man's plea, the sailors place the pearl back in the sea. Uncertain at first, their spirits begin to lift, feeling lighter, and they sail away into the horizon, singing away the heart they found again in themselves.

The young kids are now getting ready to dance. The box — the wooden drum that keeps the beat — comes out, the voices warm up. Mbabanga is finally calling the spirit of dancing, beating on the box. The gestures are rusty, but the voices and songs carry the night away. First the smallest child stands like a statue, full of being, without moving an inch. Everyone, especially the elders, watches every move, eyes wide open. Onward with the small girls, until the time comes to dance the two dances.

Decorations are tied to my arms; the box and the voices enter my body. The gestures flow, my spine sends the energy to the relevant places, moving attention. I feel full — full from the bottom of my feet to the tips of my fingers.

The spirit is still alive, called tonight to experience wealth — a wealth eaten away by a monster that has started to infiltrate every mind. Tonight the intentions were pure, knowledge passed on and synchronized, to remember that we can still do, be, and know.

These moments are rare, rarer, almost gone. It takes the will — the wanting to — to start manifesting other possibilities than reaction, no matter how beautiful those reactions can be.

Tonight we feed. A real feast.

4 January 2008

On a canoe, two huge stingrays are getting chopped up. Kiribas went out fishing this morning. Tannang's daughter Taia comes to carry the pieces of stingray to the kitchen.

The kitchen is a busy little hub. Over the fire, five moray eels, deboned, are getting smoked. A big bowl of fresh coconut oil is cooling, to be bottled. Scrapes of bark from a tree are drying, to be mixed with the oil to preserve it. Three types of stove: one for good weather, an oven, and a rough-weather system made from an old diesel drum with compartments for coconut shells. The remains of the oil — a type of dark coconut flour — are eaten. The stingray is now getting boiled.

I inspect the eel house lying on a canoe — a work of art.

While the fire does its work, we have time to play. A strategy game with a board and cards, moves watched carefully, played with a partner. Kiribas's son shows incredible skill and vision, sticking his tongue out in concentration. He giggles — a sharp intellect. Sipping tea, smoking local tobacco, we exercise our brains.

Time for toddy. I didn't know the practice was still active. The coconut flowers are bound together and cut fresh; a bottle underneath receives the sap, dripping overnight, changed twice daily — once in the early morning, once before nightfall. The key to success is a sharp knife, making a clean scar. I drink a full glass — the last time I drank it was in Tuvalu, years ago. The taste is unique. It can also be used as a transfusion liquid. I've been sick with a nasty flu that clogged my sinuses — I couldn't equalize my ears for almost three weeks. But the toddy is helping me, medicine from the coconut tree.

Meanwhile, I go to say hello to the old man — the last elder who wasn't a young boy when the entire community was moved from the Phoenix Islands to the Solomons.

A game of throwing sticks to tumble coconuts is played to fundraise for the church roof — each player enters for two Solomon dollars. The winner takes a prize of food, and the money goes to the church.

A man, his foot bleeding badly, has just stepped on a broken bottle dumped in the sea. His mother pours a mixture of herbs and coconut oil on the wound.

Rose comes by to say hello, her child in her arms. She's just finished selling the day's catch in town.

I make a round, shuffling the DVDs I brought to the island. Everyone is addicted to movies — a new trend in the world. So I choose meaningful films instead of the classic kung-fu flicks from Hong Kong — a small attempt at historical education.

On the beach, a turtle lies upside down. How could I tell them not to eat it, when I know the real problem is the nets out on the open ocean that cause most of the damage? So I don't utter a word about conservation. Though they rely on the resources of the sea, nothing is wasted. Nothing at all.

10 January 2008

Beyond the Boundaries

Beyond the boundaries of cultures lies truth, regardless who holds the keys. We are all indigenous people of our planet — the indigenous people that came from life itself, without having chosen our place of birth. We cannot live in the past, not yet, unless we invent a time machine. The reality of living moment by moment is real, with a choice of actions that leads into the future.

Simple facts are often ignored simply because they are simple. Crowded in an information age, the memes collide, and the systems implemented by the "media," including educational systems, tell us what to think, not how to think. We need to learn how to learn. Authorities on knowledge have been created by compliance with a system. The man thinking outside the box is an oddity. Outside the box, inside a bigger box? Can we live beyond boxes?

The librarian needs to classify his books in categories. The computer is the ultimate organizing machine. My fingers now are typing the words. Each letter, individually, forming words, forming sentences, ideas, transmitting to the outside — even if only to the outside of myself. Does what I have to "say" right

now have any value to anyone else? The question is as important as the answer. The question is the start of thinking. The answers themselves need to be questioned.

We have, biologically, been given tools. Blurred and atrophied. Lenses coated with too many filters. The work to clean the lenses is difficult. The view is not always what we wish to see. Once the lenses are cleaner, the mirror shows who we are. The hard part is the honesty to accept what one sees — and only from there can any change occur, if change is willed.

Diversity includes the diversity of viewpoints. Fanatic ethics, fanatic values, fanaticism itself — any “ism,” taken as the one road, leads to nowhereville, a dead end. The idea of an ideal is only valid for oneself. The idea of many ideals is what makes the world we live in.

16 January 2008

The Reef Is Dead

The reef is dead, and although it almost feels like a mantra at this stage, it is what is happening right now. Resilience is possible after one impact, but the reef — and everything else — is under the machine guns of a world out of balance.

This morning, with Tannang, we went to set two eel traps. (They call them houses — built to attract and call in the eel. The eels are eaten, but transformed into finer energies, with respect.) So we set out into the water to find two big “stones” to place the houses by.

Horror. The reef is gone. The earthquake, ahead of the tsunami, dislodged huge boulders, and the wave simply tumbled everything upside down. The fish, apart from a few parrotfish, are gone. Less than one percent of the reef shows any sign of life — a couple of sea stars, a few feather stars, but the coral is gone, with no sign yet of recruitment.

For two weeks now the rain hasn't stopped. Three hours of sun, two days ago. Winds come in gusts, followed by heavy rain, followed by gray skies.

And yet, we intentionally pulled our resources together to create a play, and to raise the energy of the community of Mbabanga. We needed it the most. They are celebrating life — surviving a tsunami. We are struggling to keep our own souls alive.

Climate change is real. Everything is shifting. The realization of the pain and harm and stupid abuse inflicted on our biosphere becomes a heavy burden. None the less, only the removal of doomed mantras is any real solution to a growing malaise in the human psyche.

We have always had enemies — they simply change form. Now a technological, magical monster is in desperate need of taming. We let that beast loose, and it is running too fast to even pretend we can catch it, or run after it — out of our control. And yet we need to put this monster at our service, and not be at the service of the monster.

Easier said than done. Starting now, step by step, with as much consciousness in our actions as we can manage — without hate, nor fate — with courage, and with faith.

Solomon Islands, January 2008

Information gets passed on in meaningful conversations. Conversation — together.

Sitting on the edge of the water, learning about fishing techniques and the problems the local culture faces. Each place, a new set of circumstances.

Here, many waves have acted on the decline of the diversity and productivity of the local reefs.

In 2000, a bleaching event occurred, brought on by abnormally warm temperatures. Many of the hard corals died.

Then an unstable government, and the ethnic clashes that followed, collapsed the economy. Many could only turn to the sea for cash or subsistence, putting huge pressure on the reef fish of the area. "Everyone was out on a canoe fishing!" And since there was no money for fuel, few could fish out in the open sea for pelagic species.

Then fishing businesses installed fish attraction devices offshore — anchored to the bottom in thousands of meters of depth, nets hung under the water. Small fish seek shelter, bigger fish congregate, and once enough stock has gathered, the net boat comes and scoops the lot. Everything gets taken. The effect is that fish that once cruised close to the islands now stay offshore — too far for local canoes, reachable only by outboard engine. The Gilbertese community, expert fishermen, now fish far offshore. But it's a gamble, and costly in fuel — it takes one to two hours to reach the grounds, hoping the net boat hasn't already cleaned the place out. I asked if it was easier now that you knew where the fish were. "No — we used to follow the birds, and knew the migration patterns for the different seasons. The big fish are very hard to find now. It's a struggle." "But there and then, we get lucky."

In 2007, the biggest damage to the reef was a massive earthquake, which not only broke apart much of the reef but raised the island of Ranonga four meters out of the sea, exposing and killing entire reef systems. A tsunami followed, from the effect of the earthquake.

Snorkeling and diving in different areas, the observations are sad, tragic. Places I once named Nirvana Passage now seem like a desert. The reef top collapsed; huge boulders, shaken loose by the earthquake, rolled down the slopes like rolling stones, destroying the hard coral. Silted by the giant wave, the reef is in a sorry state.

Survival obliges, once again, that the nearby reef gets fished harder than usual.

A fisherman from Titiana comes to sell us lobster. When I refuse to buy the small ones, he comes back only with decent sizes. He

paddles two to three hours, fishes for who knows how long. His village was wiped out in the tsunami — more than twenty people died. Because the community had never heard of earthquakes and tsunamis, when the sea receded before the wave, they went out to look. The big wave took them.

But signs of recovery are on the way, with new hard-coral recruits. It will take a long time.

I went out to check the rafter — one of the anchored fish-aggregating rafts — and fish with Tannang and Kiribas, two elders of the Mbabanga Gilbertese community. We left in the middle of the night, without compass or GPS, navigating by the stars first, then, as dawn broke, by distant landmarks, to find the “rafter.” Dolphins came to escort us, and Tannang told me the Gilbertese legend of the dolphins — that they are men who went into the sea.

The net boat had reached four of the eight rafters we could reach. We trolled and caught small yellowfin tuna, and used jigging techniques to reach the deeper fish. Hard work, but one by one we pulled in about ten fish. Then Kiribas decided it was time to try trolling again — no particular sign, apart from possible bad weather on the way. And we started to catch. I tried a lure that never brought in a single fish. Kiribas and Tannang used two rusty hooks with half-beaten plastic squid, and the fish bit. Tannang handed me his line, winking: “Kastom Gilbertese magic.” The fish kept biting. We caught forty fish before heading back. Kiribas drove conservatively, to save fuel. We tried trolling for kingfish on the way in. No luck.

As we reach the village, the kids greet us and start helping clean the fish. I cut one open and eat it raw, sitting in the warm water of the lagoon. “You keep all the fish — put it in your freezer.” The stomach will be eaten; the insides used as bait for smaller fish. I rush the fish back to the freezer, my face a tight mask from too much sun.

Tannang is also a specialist in moray-eel fishing — he builds elaborate eel houses that he sets on the reef at night. I went with him to watch. It takes him half an hour of scouting before he

decides where to drop the house. Meanwhile, I can't help feeling sad at the state of the reef — almost nonexistent. Few fish, hard coral cover under one percent, in an area that was beautiful only a few years ago. The next day, two eels are trapped in the house.

They know the state of the reef better than anyone, because they depend on it — and because they know they are partly responsible for overharvesting species like sea cucumber, for instance.

Nothing is wasted. If the catch isn't sold at market, the fish are salted and dried in the sun, for the bad weather to come. And it takes very bad weather indeed to keep them off the sea.

On the few dives I made, I spotted two white-tip sharks. I used to see many patrolling the reef. Gone. Very few barracuda.

Another technique is night fishing — easier, because the fish are sleeping. But as a result, the parrotfish population is sparse, and the bumphead parrotfish schools are long gone. In deeper water, a few big fish remain, and the smart ones now recognize the lures. Even the fusiliers are few in number.

But around our hull, small bait balls are forming, seeking shelter. Every evening now, and early morning, a few bonito and tuna are hunting. Rainbow runners show up occasionally.

A conservation note: small generators are more efficient than kerosene lamps. Engine fuel efficiency, at optimal speed versus distance covered, is best at half throttle.

We are learning as much as we are teaching. An incredible wealth of knowledge lives inside the bodies that interact daily with the local environment.

The arrogance of part of the environmental movement is that it thinks it holds the answers. There are solutions to problems, but to act as the "guru" is heresy, and downright fraudulent in its claims. Most of the time it's preaching to the choir — a feel-good factor, patting oneself on the shoulder. Few truly make it "out there," and I suppose that makes us somehow lucky.

Unfortunately, organizations live at the mercy of funding strategies, and the strategies that work win out over the truth of a given situation. Certain words become better hooks than others, including the classic name-dropping. Exaggeration of achievement. So the expert grant-writer makes the cash — tough luck for the one dropping out into the field for extended periods of time.

It's a shame, because a great deal could be achieved if sincerity and truth prevailed. At least, if not a delusion.

Grants go to travel and to keeping students of the academic system busy, while local communities could use that financial help to be truly effective. The new god of pseudoscience sucks up the money, works on a diploma basis, spreading like a virus even to the remote corners of the planet. A septic tank installed in a crowded village hit by an earthquake will do more good for the reef than another paper on the third larval stage of some species, by some PhD or other. Not that furthering knowledge is useless — but a bit of proportionality would help.

A man with five years of experience in a certain field gets passed over by a fresh diploma with no experience. He can't do the job, but that's the way it is. So rural communities struggle to send their kids to school, only to find them back in the village, having to learn to be farmers and fishermen after all. The basic salary is around 350 Solomon dollars for two weeks — about fifty US dollars. Even an Australian company pays seven US dollars a day. Meanwhile, the education system is still trying to breed a caste of specialists for the world's "development," but nothing here is really developing. You learn to read, but there's no library, no books around. A photographer decides to make a coffee-table book, but no local will ever get to read how their own lives and land are being presented.

Everyone is getting hooked on movies — the hardest addictive drug around. I go through phases too. Unfortunately, it kills the initiative to sing, dance, and compose anything.

Our young crew, unfortunately, doesn't have the drive to learn from the local community, and go instead to "the resort" or

“Fatboys Bar,” even when, in a rare conversation after a performance, someone says they want to learn a dance. No one follows up. And it’s not for lack of speaking about it — though I’ve stopped. As the saying goes, you can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink. And then again, my own drive to learn should allow me the tolerance to accept the non-seeker as he is. Many of the Western-educated come with preset minds, well trained by nuclear families, educational systems, media, and advertisement brainwashing — a lot of information, of “bites,” without the structure to integrate an idea of a total system, and an alarming disconnect between mind and body.

Examples abound. Fresh fish of the highest quality was caught, but most wanted to eat the processed cheese we were trying to save for the voyage. We still have yams from PNG. Eggs for breakfast. I know that by necessity a human is very capable of adapting, but our Western culture — Anglo-American, mainly, right now — is breeding a bunch of spoiled brats. It’s not their fault. Society and cultural conditioning are possibly impossible to break without one’s own will as the activator.

None the less, some do break through, at least in brief moments — and others shield themselves with an arrogance that doesn’t let anything new in.

Meanwhile, a million stars — some dead, some not — are shining bright, all the same. Do you ever know if a star is already dead?

So — what to do?

PART TWO

Simbo, 27–30 January 2008

On the 2nd of April 2007, an earthquake shook the western province of the Solomon Islands, raising a giant wave — a tsunami — that swept through the region. Simbo took the wave

full on, destroying entire coastal villages. Simbo sank two meters; Ranonga, the island opposite, rose about five.

— *Eddie, his parents Stanley and Lina, Ovaline, and Mason all return here from Book One, six years on.*

Monday, 27 January 2008

With Stanley, Eddie's father, we prepare his boat — loading fuel, bolting the engine in place. With Lina, Eddie's mother, we run to the store for a few days' supplies. Simion, the family's second-born, is now a teacher in training, forty-seven students in his classroom.

The sea is rough — the shift in the islands' geology has created new currents and wave patterns. We carefully maneuver between building swells, dark clouds in the distance. I ride the whole way to Simbo — a local seamanship training in itself. The swell and current are strong, but they tell their own story of the shifts that occurred.

At the entrance to the passage that leads into the sheltered lagoon of Nusa Simbo, a pod of spinner dolphins rides our bow, escorting us all the way to the shallows. Lina sings a traditional song to the dolphins while everyone bangs on the hull. The dolphins stay with us.

At the entrance, Stanley tells his story of the tsunami: "I was in the boat, and this huge wave came in. It lifted me up, onto a tree. I held on as the wave kept crashing on the shore. My boat broke in half, the engine flooded. I stayed in that tree. I am lucky to be alive. The bridge broke. The whole island shook."

As we near the bridge, we hear the news: John Tione died Sunday evening. He was the caretaker of the Eomba dance, the one we carried with us around the Pacific. Tomorrow, the body will be buried.

— *John Tione taught the dance at the melody stone above Batu Simbo; see Book One's "Batu Simbo, Taboo Site" and "Stern Conversations."*

Before reaching shore, we cut the engine and drift in the lagoon. An eagle has just caught a fish, hanging from its claws — it circles, riding the hot air spiraling upward. The birds are singing, the trees rattle in the wind.

Greeted by Ovaline and a horde of kids, we climb the steep limestone-and-tree-root path up to the house. Lina begins to prepare it, and we wait for Clifford to arrive. Stanley Jr. has just left by canoe to paddle to Ranonga; the sea looked rough. He'll return the next day with a load of betel nut, to sell — he went straight to the source, cut out the middleman, using nothing but his own sweat.

Clifford arrives with Tonga, his wife — a beautiful woman, shy to speak, but a real presence.

Staying quiet, listening, sitting down, often in the dim light of kerosene lamps, clears the mind, lets real thoughts surface.

Everyone is asking me: where is Eddie? I don't know. I think, Australia. I thought coming here would give me clues, but no one has heard from him, and none of the emails I sent received a reply.

That night, Lina trades tobacco for megapode eggs, and the flavor hits me — there are places you can call home, and this is one. My mother would cook for me the same way Lina prepares my favorite food.

No generator noise, no aggressive lighting — everything soothes the senses. No stereo blasting. Next door, a young composer refines his tune, catchy island-style beats blending into the night. It fits.

Tuesday, 28 January 2008

Lina's brother comes for a chat — nicknamed Chuck Norris, famous for having "stolen" a wife. Wife number two is none other than the sister of wife number one, who was a bit of a wild one herself. He disappeared into the bush for three months with wife number two, while the first husband searched for

him, trying to kill him. He acts it out for us, a hilarious re-enactment, pretending to fish while sending signals. He's a keen diver, knows the bush like no one else, and sets traps for coconut crabs.

THE MOURNING

Family members arrive, supported by brothers and sisters, to see the body, dressed and lying in a coffin. Crying and crying — tears pouring onto the coffin. As each family member absorbs the loss, the pain floods the room. John Tione had thirteen children, and more than sixty grandchildren.

The priests arrive; all the children, except one daughter living on Isabel, sit around the coffin. After a few words and a song, the lid is brought in, amid a loud, simultaneous chorus of crying and sobbing. As the hammer strikes the nails, one by one, I find myself crying too — overcome, not only by John Tione's death, but by the sorrow and hardship the earthquake and tsunami inflicted on these communities, and beyond that, by the pain of a world full of misery and hardship in so many places. Not a "sad" moment — a moment of realization, a moment of contemplation of death, and of life.

The coffin is dressed; the sons carry it out of the house. In a procession led by a choir of young children, three hundred people march through Nusa Simbo to the church. After the sermon and songs, the procession moves on to the burial ground in the forest, not far from the Eomba stone, where John passed on the song almost eight years ago.

There will be a feast in four days, when the spirit leaves the grave.

Wednesday, 29 January 2008

Around Simbo

Riruru village, wiped out. Tapurai, and the new settlement. A trail has been carved, muddy, difficult to land a boat on. The

forest has been cleared to plant cassava and sweet potato — a lesson in eco-technics of necessity. Houses are beginning to go up, but building material is in short supply. To rebuild a thatched roof is one thing; to rebuild an entire village is another. There is no money, and the relief of a few tarpaulins doesn't go very far.

Kiana's village. The dolphin stone. The dolphin run. More of Lina's home cooking.

Thursday, 30 January 2008

The feast for John Tione. The megapode house. Peter Ben. Mason and the new church. Shark totem.

— *The journal breaks off here; these last five subjects were never written up.*

PART THREE

Mbabanga Again, February 2008

14 February 2008

3:30 — darkness still prevails. Stars peek through the clouds. The sea is calm. With Zac, we load the boat that Stanley, Eddie's father, has left for us to use while we're in the Solomons — sixty liters of fuel, a crate of fishing gear, a flashlight, water. I'm running my own homemade seamanship program. Tonight we're going fishing.

We pick up Kiribas and Tannang in Mbabanga. Kiribas takes the helm — he knows the waters, navigating once again by the stars. We plan to reach the "rafter" by daybreak. Yesterday I went to the fish market in Gizo, to see the day's catch — big yellowfin, no rainbow runners. I take a few shots of the women selling fish. Kiribas's daughter and Tannang's eldest daughter are among them.

So, in pitch black, we cruise at twenty knots toward the fishing grounds. At daybreak we reach the rafter, and the lines go in. We catch instantly — small yellowfin. For the next hour we pull in forty yellowfin and a rainbow runner, though the big ones have moved on; all the tuna are “small.”

My movements are more fluid and precise now, maximizing efficiency — the know-how of entering the moving center, feeling and sensitivity in the line. Kiribas knows exactly how to place the boat, at the right speed, to catch.

We enter waypoints into the GPS, to plot later on a chart — calculating bearings and distances.

We move on to the next rafter. A mahi-mahi takes the lure, but the line is thin. A good fight, four jumps, and I pull the big fish in.

Mbabanga doesn't run on a chief system, but a council of elders.

— *Remembered from the visit; not written down in the journal itself.*

18 February 2008

Today I met the king of all the eel fish in the sea. I didn't know it was him until the moment I saw him, sitting on the beach of a small island, preparing the eel houses. He builds them beautifully, with precision and exact technique. First he paddles out on his canoe to spear the bait fish for the houses. If he sees an eel, he feeds her. He must keep secret the knots that tie the bait into the house — the eel comes at night, stands before the house, studies the knots, and decides whether or not to go in. Whatever is caught in the night is cleaned by his daughter and smoked over a wood fire.

The king of the eels calls them to the houses. He needs them — this time, to buy a generator for his family. The eels in the sea don't mind. They know the king needs them, and though they will die, they know they would die one day regardless.

But the king must be careful to respect the spirit of the eels. If he doesn't, they can send a great ray to cut the rope of the eel house loose, and destroy it. Once, long ago, a man refused to respect the spirit. As he dove down to check the trap, the eel wouldn't go in — instead, a mighty eel stayed outside and came up to meet him. It bit him in the throat and wrapped itself around his neck. The man died.

When he was a boy, he didn't want to know about dancing — unfortunate, since his father was a dance master. So every time there was a dance practice, he went out fishing in his canoe instead. His father noticed his son's lack of interest.

One day he asked him to carry down a coconut while he cut and collected toddy. The father took a young coconut, cut it open, and poured in three drops of a special coconut oil, speaking words to call the spirit of dance inside. Then he took the two topmost leaves of a very young coconut tree — the ones that shiver in the wind — and stirred the coconut water with them. He told his son the drink would draw all the girls' eyes to him — it would make his sweat smell sweet, and no one would be able to resist him. So the eager boy drank the magic water.

Next time, the maneapa was full of people practicing the dances. The young "king" decided to go fishing instead, and paddled his canoe toward the reef. He'd caught a couple of fish when he heard the box beating. Suddenly his body felt strange, and he had to turn the canoe around and paddle fast toward the sound. His body shook with every voice, every beat of the box.

Reaching shore, he stashed his catch somewhere safe from the dogs, and entered the maneapa. His father smiled. He sat beside him, not understanding what was happening to him. And he started to dance. He knew he'd been tricked. But the spirit was too strong, and his father had to prepare another, gentler drink to tone it down.

I also met a princess — even though there are no princesses or kings in the village. She was beautiful, one of the "king's" daughters, respectful of tradition but with an independent mind of her own — a gifted dancer who could drive a man crazy. She

lives in the city, and though she plays at finding village life difficult, she secretly loves it. Her older sister, married with five children, is a dance teacher among other things. In the kitchen, the eels she cleaned are smoking over the fire. The fish have just come back. Ruang, the oldest sister, is cooking them for dinner.

Meanwhile, a fundraiser for the church is underway — sticks and coconuts, throw the stick to knock the coconuts over. Most of the village joins in, Pacific music lifting the mood.

Coconut: the king of tropical island trees. A quick meditation on its uses — young nuts for drinking, old ones for coconut milk, the flesh for eating, oil for cooking and the body, flour, toddy, molasses. The leaves become mats, baskets, roofs; the wood, planks and poles. The discarded shells become firewood, charcoal, drinking cups, bailers for canoes, containers. Food for pigs and chickens, dried as copra, an economic resource.

Now the time is ripe for a new dance.

REFLECTIONS

Two undated pieces, written apart from the day-to-day journal, kept here together as reflections.

The Dancers Are Facing Each Other

The dancers are facing each other, each holding their power, projecting out.

The arena plays out the spirits.

The dancer is the actor. Precision of movement, coordination with the music, visualization of the words and their inner meaning, transforming energy into spirited manifestation. There can be no reactions. Consciousness, or death.

The Loss of Community Spirit

The young with the young, the old hidden away. So few get together — no time, no time.

Paranoia of the natural world. Trails with wheelchair access.

Let the kids play. And if they get hurt, well. And if they die? Well.

As man has sought immortality since the first conception of time, so he loses his ability to live. Watching a DVD is safer than going fishing on the open sea. So we devise life jackets and flares, and, and, and — in case. But at what cost?

Proportionality is not considered.

We live in a pampered world, refusing and hiding death. You can't photograph and document the true horrors of war — surgical, clean images, movies making heroes out of murderers.

A man in his office orders the bomb. The robot-trained marine drops it. Children die; toxic waste and fumes deform the generations to come.

I kill your brother, your sister, your son, your daughter. But I've had enough — we're running out of money, and the holidays are coming up. Can we make peace, please? By the way, make sure the contracts are signed for delivery of the black gold. What? You don't agree? Fine — I'll make another trillion-dollar loan to who-knows-who, and kick your backside. I'll kill your wife and grandchildren too, and make sure your land is fucked for a long time to come. What? You still don't agree? You must be out of your minds.

On another note — don't worry about your bullet supply, my brother-in-law owns the company, he can hook you up. But you're wasting your time. My older brother runs the remote-control tanks, planes, and robots. We're training our children to operate them. You should see my friend's son — a real genius at the console. We design the games, and he comes up with the best strategies. Ruthless little guy. He still thinks he's only playing.

Can you get me a couple of artifacts from the museum? We're going to bomb it anyway, and I need a souvenir. Or — I forgot — I'm trying to get my brother's nephew into the printing business. We struck a deal with a logging company; they screwed a few backward ex-cannibals, and I get cheap wood. The Koran still has the same number of pages, so I can give you the same deal as before, even with ink prices rising. We still have the old blueprint, so — meanwhile, we're revising the Bible all the time. Nobody reads it, but the 2008 edition has added commentary. God is on our side. God bless America, Britain, and Australia. Anyone speaking English might get admitted, with a special permit issued by one of our newly created offices. We keep a few colored people around, to avoid getting harassed — not that we care, but it's a drag, especially when your son wants to take you for a ride in his new BMW. I know it's a German car, but they're so much better. Still, the club is mainly for white English speakers.

I'm working on a prototype harpoon head, ahead of the latest Japanese technology, and a tracking device to spot whales a thousand miles away. I've got some idealistic kid who thinks he's helping science. I can't use it on our own soil, but the japs have the votes now, thanks to the remodeling of the voting methods by insignificant nations like Tuvalu, enough to start whaling again. We're running out of fish anyway.

We're scooping up the last fish with rafts and FADs — fish attraction devices. But we're losing so much money just to keep a few cans on the supermarket shelf. We've already bought plenty of scientists, trained in our special schools, working on the latest statistics. What would people think if suddenly they couldn't get their tuna mayo? My daughter's favorite quick lunch, after tennis.

We bought a ranch, solar panels and all — self-sufficient. Trained good guard dogs. Keep a few soldiers, but the dogs are so much more reliable, and cheaper. I suggest you do the same. You should be able to make a hefty profit from the relief-aid money, extorted from the goodwill of the naive part of our population. Don't worry, we collect tax on it too.

Oh, and did I tell you — we got Brad Pitt for our latest propaganda film, the rescue of a two-year-old kidnapped by Muslim extremists.

You sure you don't want to sign? Could be so much easier. Then again, I'm making a killing on this one — I'm buying a Pacific island. Not that I'm planning to go there, but my son's started diving, and it might make a nice honeymoon present, once he realizes he'd look better without those call girls around. He can always hide a few there.

Anyway — need to go, time is money, and I've just had Charlie fly me in some barbecue ribs. Six-hour flight. That's classified, by the way — we're testing a new plane. High fuel consumption, but what the heck — a man's got to do what he's got to do, right?

See you, Mohamed. Have a nice day.

A Note on the Years Between

Six years separate Book One from Book Two, and Simbo carries all of them. The bridge to Nusa Simbo, standing when the Ey Omba was danced in 2002, was down when the author returned in 2008, and the island itself sat two meters lower in the water — the after-effects of the earthquake and tsunami of 2 April 2007, arriving nine months before that return.

The costs are counted, if only in passing, against a lighter kind of loss: Eddie is gone to Australia and unreachable by the time Book Two opens, John Tione is buried within its first pages, and the melody stone above Batu Simbo, where the dance was first taught, becomes a place this book asks the reader to remember rather than revisit. What survives both halves is smaller and steadier — Lina's cooking, Ovaline's welcome, Mason's caution around the old sites, a family that keeps showing up.

Neither half was written with the other in mind. They are put together here because Simbo, and the people who make it a place rather than a stop on a chart, asked to be read as one story rather than two.

Glossary

Anti

Gods.

Anti ma aomata

Semi-deified ancestor.

Aomata

Man.

Batu Simbo

“The head of Simbo” — the fortress rock climbed in Book One.

Bêche-de-mer

Sea cucumber; a recurring concern at Simbo’s community meeting in Book One.

Boti

Clan.

Ey Omba / Eomba

The custom dance revived in Book One and taught by John Tione at the melody stone; spelled “Ey Omba” in Book One’s 2002 text and “Eomba” in Book Two’s 2008 journal, as each was originally written.

Gizo

The Western Province’s provincial capital, on the mainland near both Simbo and Mbabanga.

Kastom

Melanesian Pidgin for custom or tradition; used across the Solomon Islands for traditional practice and law.

Kawai

Path, or road.

Lake Ove

The crater lake on Simbo, near the taboo sites visited in Book One.

Maneapa

The Gilbertese community’s open meeting house, Mbabanga.

Nusa Simbo

Simbo’s main village.

Tomoko

A traditional Solomon Islands war canoe.