

BORA; BORA-BORA

In the myths the islands are pieces of Taaroa's shell. The lone only one, of all things, made a shell, sat in it. Then he broke the shell, which fell into islands. Taaroa called out, there was no answer.

But geologists say the islands rose. The earth heaves, and took its time to build mounds 30,000 ft. from the ocean floor. How it must have boiled!

Rats, birds - no snakes or monkeys. Only what stowed away.

At the reef edge the current is in; a rude shelf growth, above which roils in a foot of water. Then a big wave, flooding the snorkel, salt water that I have to swallow before I can think to blow the air tube clear. Behind the live reef, there is debris of coral, bleached shells piling up, hermit crabs at home. And when it quiets down, a moray eel glares out of his crevice.

The old man from Delaware is just finishing eight months here. He's been coming since the war: We called it Bobcat Island. One time when I was back, the rats ate the biscuits right off the next bed, using me as a stepping stone: I caught fifteen of the fat buggers.

Crabs scuttling sideways into their holes. Or, on a muddy flat, lined up still, a salute of one red claw up, waiting for our bicycles to pass.

Taught me all the shades between dark blue and green. Taught dappled turquoise, and yellow sand underwater.

How long are you here? Are you long here? Depends what you call long. Thirteen years, the German woman says.

In the forests, rusting 7" guns. Only a few, oldtimers, know the way. The paths are overgrown: We once had a 5" water pipe over the hill to Faanui, but they didn't like it, they took it down.

Around another bend - ahead, the high ridge reaches for shore. Following it down, we see a crook, a clearing in lush green, in the soft and unpassable. Looking up to the mountain, quiet

out to sea, stands a scholar's hut in a Sung scroll. We cycle by, and don't see any road leading up to it.

The brightest colors are the Tridacna clams studding the dull coral, stuck, flashing succulent lips of algae, the symbiotic colorer, perfect, nervous lip-ice of blue, fuchsia, spotted beige with a wavy green edge.

Coconut trees bent into the wind. Piles of coconuts. Signs saying tabu. The dried husks sell for fuel at 35 cents a pound.

Grapefruit sweet with the taste of lime.

The perfect cheese omelette. The chef says do you like it? Yes. I ask, was it with local cheese. Oh no, Gruyère from France, but the secret, do you want to know it, is crème fraîche in the omelette. It comes from Tahiti once a week.

Picasso fish, Rhinecanthus aculeatus, defend, snapping, their coral chapels. They can bite the spines off a sea urchin one by one, then turn the animal over, then eat it.

Steering by the island, in the distance, thin clouds hug the reef line, waiting for darkness' cooling permission to cross; rush in, rain.

Rain passes.

We had to hang up our socks, or the little buggers would take them into their holes. Then you'd find them a few days later, chewed up, that crab smell.

When the wind dies, the lagoon's changes on turquoise reach out, mirroring, to the reef edge, a white fringing quiet.

But when the waves and wind rise in the dark, the crash reaches back for us. It is unseen, damped, easily mistaken for thunder. For what light blinks out there?