Kim Eichlin

Where the Hell is Ebeye?

The day I met Hope, she was burying her third child.

We were gathered in a two-room plywood shack that was home to twenty-four people. They slept in shifts. The child, Matthew, was laid out on a white cloth on the floor, fragrant with flowers. In the coral yard outside, Hope's brothers were getting drunk.

Matthew was just past his first birthday — naming day — when he developed diarrhea. Hope was out playing bingo. In less than thirty-six hours he was dead of dehydration.

Four men carried the child's coffin to the graveyard on ocean-side. Sun-bleached gravestones, one tight against the next, cut white silhouettes against the grey shacks and Pacific sky. Small children crowded curiously over the box, fanning flies from the tiny still face with scraps of white cloth. Matthew's grandmother, a bent old woman missing her right big toe, leaned against a headstone. Her granddaughter brought her a pair of plastic thongs to wear for the ceremony. Women drifted into the coral graveyard.

The men leaned on a fence outside the death circle. One of them wore a green baseball hat that said: *Where the hell is Ebeye*. A pastor stepped forward. In seven days time they would gather again when the cat rose out of the ocean to take the child into the sea.

The pastor prayed.

Ebeye is on the Kwajalein lagoon in the Marshall Islands between Hawaii and Japan. Military people call the lagoon the "catcher's mitt of the Pacific." It bristles with the most sophisticated radar tracking equipment in the world. The tracking system is called KREM: Kieran Re-entry Measurement Site and is located on the island of Roi Namur at the north end of the atoll. KREM tracks MX missiles launched from Vandenburg, California.

In earlier travels, I had sailed in the Marshalls and heard the traditional stories of the outer islands. I heard too about testing the first hydrogen bombs at Bikini. Back at home again, I began to read about Kwajalein and Ebeye. I read that the people were living a kind of living death on this lagoon. They called Ebeye the "Calcutta of the Pacific." I didn't believe it. So I went to see.

When you arrive on Kwajalein they line you up against a wall and a military man barks out the rules of the island. Drooling dogs sniff your bags. You try to find your balance in the exotic, disorienting heat of the equator. Even your toes are hot. On Kwajalein, a small group of American military personnel supervises 3,000 civilian workers — top technicians, scientists and maintenance staff and their families. The base has been developed by the United States since World War II to fulfil a dream best expressed by Senator Barry Goldwater: "We want to be able to drop a nuke into the men's room at the Kremlin." The week before I arrived, one of the missiles from California hit Kwajalein's own electrical generator. The official army statement: "The missile was right on target."

Across the lagoon, twenty minutes away, is Ebeye — 78 acres in size, home to 10,000 people. Some people have been moved to Ebeye from other islands around the lagoon for security purposes. Many have moved there from the outer islands to try to get work. Here the days are as long as the nights. Ebeye is one of the few places in the world you can see the Southern Cross and the Big Dipper in the sky at the same time. At noon children nap in any narrow band of shade, under any scrap of cardboard or corrugated metal. There are no trees. There is no space. Yet people continue to come and the birth rate is 1.5 per day. About 9% of Ebeye's population gets on the barge each day to commute over to the base at Kwajalein where they work as labourers and maids.

There are Americans who have lived on Kwajalein lagoon for twenty years and never set foot on Ebeye. Those who go to Ebeye — mostly young men — go there to drink and find women, to forget a loneliness that stings worse than salt. That's how Hope got pregnant.

They nailed the coffin shut dark over the sweet hibiscus flowers and the child's face too innocent to bury. Tears rolled down Hope's cheeks as she stared into the unforgiving coral.

The child's father had never seen the boy. He was a Filipino worker stationed on Kwajalein. Some strange intuition had made him send a message to Hope that very morning — his first in a year. He wanted to see her. He wanted to see his son.

After the funeral Hope walked down to the barge. "What am I going to say to him? I'll say I buried the child this morning... What if he blames me? ...but one thing sure, I won't get pregnant again this time..."

The dissonance of mourning twisted her smile, "But if I do, well that happens, that's life too mum."

We stood together looking across the lagoon to Kwajalein. The flat coral skyline was broken by white satellite dishes and sleek high-tech towers. They cut the endless Pacific blues of sea and sky with the same salt-white gleam as the white gravestones on the other side of Ebeye.

ALMOST HEAVEN: KWAJALEIN

When I arrived on the lagoon I spent the first few days on the American base before going to stay on Ebeye. A tour of an American military testing facility is a study in public relations. Double talk here is the *lingua franca*, necessary or not.

Kwajalein is a community designed to be a middle American utopia. Walden III. There are no private cares -- everyone rides bicycles or takes a shuttle service. People play tennis, softball, golf. On weekends, they sail, swim, sun. The higher per capita density of scuba divers in the world is on Kwajalein. Healthy young people live out their adolescence in this invented island paradise. There is almost no crime. The television diet is CNN and the movies are Hollywood. People wear t-shirts that say: *Kwajalein: Almost Heaven.*

But utopias are built on dreams of conformity. They hide whatever threatens their perfection.

A few years ago Kwajalein was suffering morale problems. Ebeye workers were striking. Greenpeace got on the island and strung up anti-nuclear signs. A group of Marshallese landowners staged "sail-ins" to draw attention to their concerns over land payments and living conditions on Ebeye. Maids were forbidden on the island. A new colonel was brought in to straighten things out.

Everyone says that life is better under Colonel Chapman. Marshallese domestics are back on the base. The curfew for Marshallese on Kwajalein has been eased and Marshallese are allowed once again into the snack bar. One hundred Marshallese a day can visit Kwajalein. They line up for passes. Friday is the best day to go because that's lawn sale day. Marshallese aren't allowed into the department store but they can go to lawn sales.

During my visit, I was assigned a public relations officer and permitted access to the base. I sat in the Yokwe Club. I sat in the outdoor bachelor's club. I listened. The two biggest problems: isolation and boredom. I met a young man from Texas who had arrived eighteen months ago. He was so lonely you could feel it in his breath.

"It's good to talk to someone new. Out here there's hardly any women and after you talk to the guys a while you know just about what they're gonna say. What do I do? Watch videos, work out in the weight room.

"No I've never been to Ebeye. It gets pretty wild over there I heard. A lot of drinking, people fighting over women. One guy who lives there got beat up pretty good with a two-by-four I heard. Guess I don't need that. Those people are just lazy. Why don't they clean the place up."

I visited the protestant captain and learned that it was his first time in the Pacific too. The young man ushered me into his small office littered with books and papers. He described his mission in a mid-western drawl.

"I was hired principally because I can do counselling," he said. "The problems I deal with... marriage counselling, isolation... a lot of the young men here are away from home for the first time.

"As far as the Marshallese go, well, we want to *share* with them, we have a policy of *cultural exchange*." He lingered over the new words issued direct from Colonel Chapman.

"What can the Marshallese share?"

There was a long pause in the room. The clock ticked. He blushed in the cold blast of air-conditioning.

"Well... they can share their singing."

"When you go to Ebeye do you participate in their services?"

"I don't go to Ebeye. I'm hired by Global... that's the contractor that takes care of all the day-to-day concerns of the island... our restaurants, supplies, the department store, recreation, the church. My responsibility is to the people here... that's what I was hired for."

The young man shifted in his seat. Man of god. Hired by Global.

The chaplain's attitude was consistent with each culture's different notion of story-telling — oral and written. The Americans feel there is no reason to be curious about the Marshallese people or language or history because the Marshallese themselves have never recorded their history. It is the classic tale of technological cultures consuming non-technological cultures. Americans would say casually, "They're losing their culture" as if it were a small coin dropped into the ocean. They always perceived the Marshallese as most satisfactory when they appeared to share the aspirations and manners of middle-class Americans.

Most Americans on Kwajalein are afraid to visit Ebeye. They make frequent comparisons to Tijuana. Their idea of cultural exchange is to observe quaint customs and sell handicrafts in the airport store. They see Ebeye as an unsolvable problem which has little to do with them. They blame the Marshallese for lacking in initiative and for being dirty. They prefer cliched and comfortable notions of poverty learned from their ghettos back home. They are afraid to step across the lagoon to see their own leased island from another point of view.

ACROSS THE LAGOON

People on Ebeye call one end of the island Rocktown and the other end The Dump. You can walk from Rocktown to The Dump in about 15 minutes. Tucked into the shadows of shanty housing are pinball machines. Through doorways blue kung-fu videos flicker on tv screens. Budweiser consumption is high, but there is no social drinking. You drink to get drunk. You drink to forget.

Young people hang around the corners of the rows of houses, all day, all night. Over 50 percent of the population is under 15 years old and there is no public highschool. **Teen suicide is the highest in the world.**

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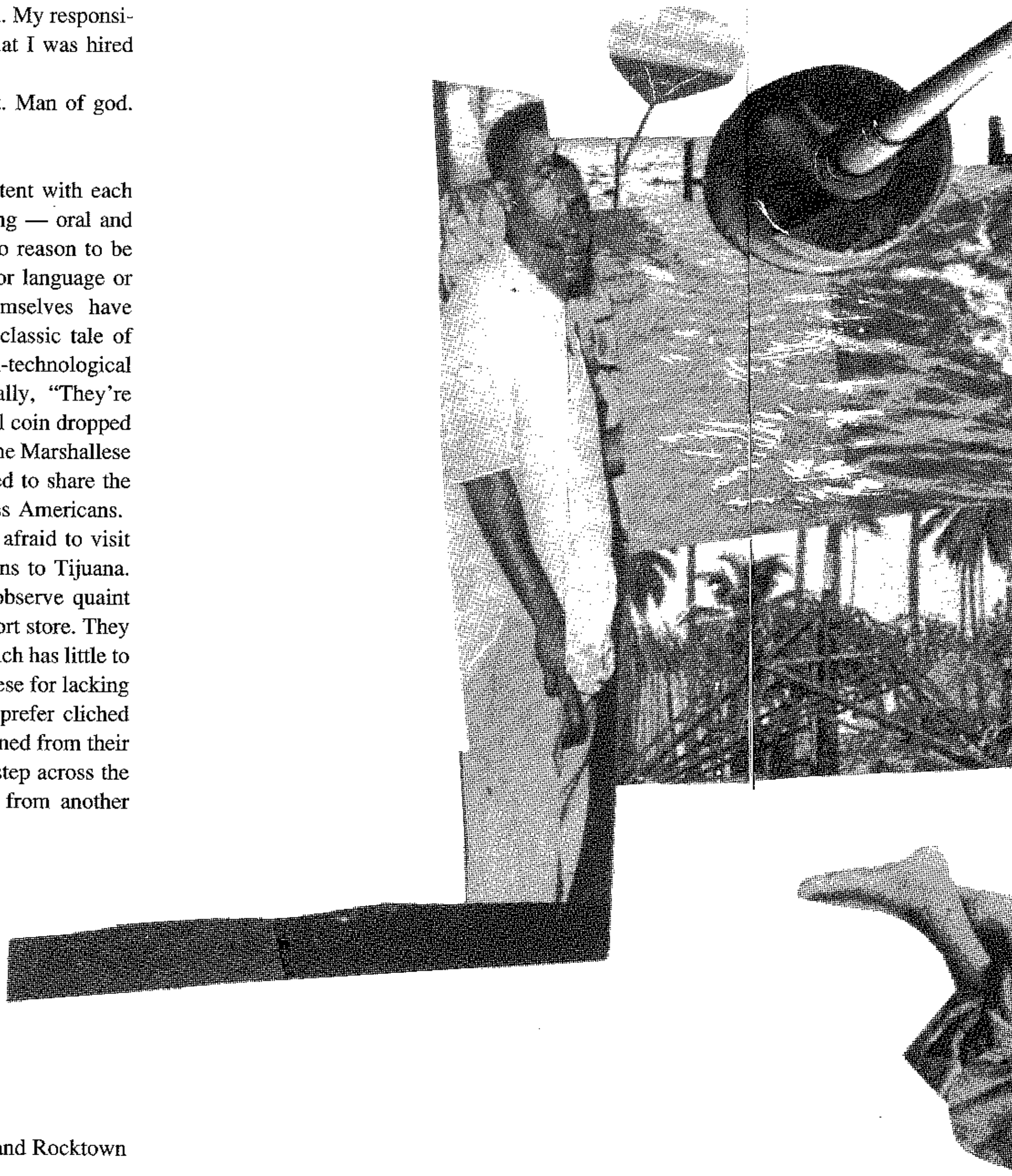

Boys and young men join gangs: The Octopus, The Sharks, The Leskan (Spear-mouths), and The OKK. OKK stands for Olim (no money), Konta (begging), Kicko (hustling girls).

Dribo Dribo is the Ebeye probation officer. He studied social work at Washington State. Giant cockroaches skitter across the concrete walls and floor of his office in the police station. He wants to talk. Softly. Slowly.

"What are the charges? Assault and battery. Burglary. Vandalism. They want money to go to the restaurant. They have no way to get money.

"The girls have groups too — Jinlij (T-shirts) and Jeite (runaways). One of my cases was a 14-year-old girl who ran away and started living with a boy. Her grandmother called me to find the girl but she didn't want to take her back. She told me her grandfather raped her. In your country I would tell authorities and we'd charge the old man, but I couldn't do it here. I talked to her parents. I got them to take her back. I told the old man to find some way to tell his wife the girl wasn't coming back. I couldn't break the old lady's heart."

Everyone knows everyone on a small island. People are related to each other. Dribo Dribo's training in Washington doesn't work here. He says, "I have to work between the law and the traditional way."

Dribo Dribo shares with every other Marshallese a political matrix which is bound to the centuries old law of the *irooj* — the traditional leader. The irooj divides up of goods and responsibilities in the community. His word is law. But the new written law of the Marshalls, the 1986 constitution formed under a Compact of Free Association with the United States, contradicts tradition. The new written law was created by American lawyers. It is based on the American traditions of the nuclear family, individual liberties, competition and free enterprise.

To spend time on Ebeye is to acquire a fluency in contradiction — the body uncomfortably trying to scratch its own bones. Dribo Dribo, raised in Marshall custom, trained in American ways, looks uncomfortably over his shoulder at the long shadow of the irooj.

POOREST OF THE POOR

Outsiders often see Ebeye as a nightmare romance of the tropics, a Heart of Darkness, a place in which any outrage can be tolerated and a place no one would choose to live. But to believe this is to miss Ebeye.

Plenty of people have *chosen* Ebeye as home. There is Ben Barry, a black American from Texas. He chose Ebeye twenty years ago. He escaped marriage and kids and a living death in a factory in southern Texas. He was hooked on heroin in the Korean war. He kicked it and became a sailor. He worked a stint on the

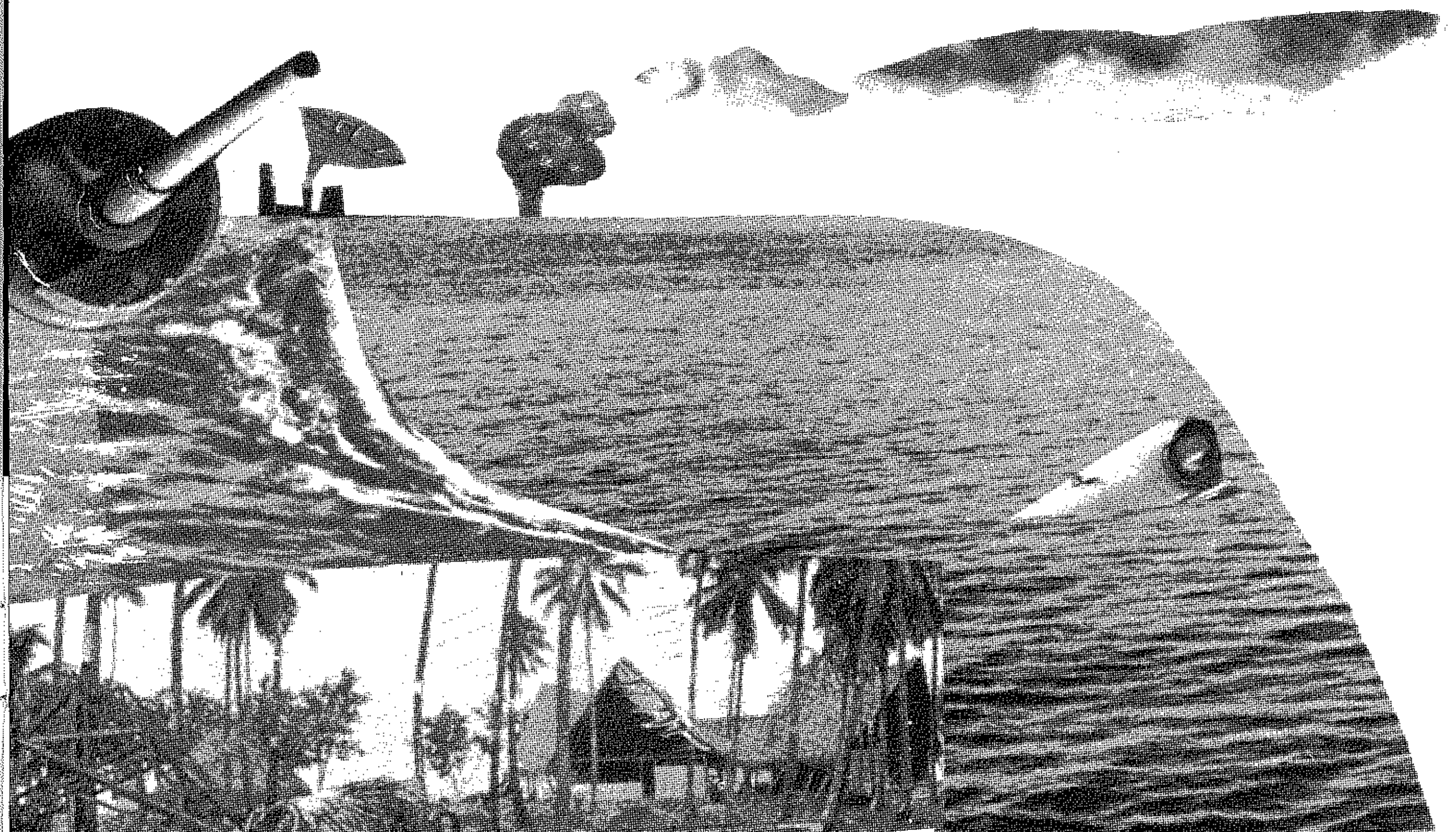

illustration by Gail Gelner

Kwajalein base then moved to Ebeye. Today he deals pokai in the back of Mike's place. The Kabuas take care of him. His story is still punctuated with trying to comprehend the incomprehensible — the racism he suffered at home. "How come I stay here on Ebeye?" says Ben, "I been a lot of places and this is the first place on earth ever took me just the way I am."

There is Father Hacker. Father Hacker is a Jesuit from Buffalo, New York. He was a World War II prisoner in a Japanese camp. After that he came to the Marshalls. He's built two churches and two different congregations — one on Majuro, one on Ebeye. He preaches in Marshallese each Sunday to a crowded church. He worked closely with the Marshallese Bible translation project. He has a boys' marching band and he runs a small school. When I asked him if he thought the Ebeye children were growing up in two worlds he spluttered impatiently, "Of course they don't live in two worlds, they make it one world."

There is Bobby, the Filipino who will sell you anything. Bobby is one of those outsiders who imagines Ebeye as a kind of colonial opportunity to be tapped. Bobby commutes to his job on Kwajalein each day but on Ebeye he also runs a *jeepnee*, a garishly painted Filipino bus. He was importing power boats from Denver while I was there and opening a restaurant and toying with the idea of a water taxi service to and from Kwajalein. Bobby was on the make. Ebeye was the place he chose to make it.

Ebeye has its liminal groups too. A few Vietnam vets who scratch out a living and hang around bars with the mile long stare. Marshallese from the outer islands who come and live off their relatives and ride around and around in taxis. The people who live in The Shelter.

The Shelter is a large echoing concrete building that used to be a recreation area for the public school. There was a fire in 1982 that swept over The Dump end of the island and threatened to raze the whole place. People ran out of their shacks and watched as the flames leapt from one house to another in seconds. Only the ocean itself could stop the flames. Small buckets flew from hand to hand. A few men started ploughing down the tiny rooms of birth and life and death with construction tractors. In this way they stopped the fire.

Half The Dump got destroyed in that fire. Some people never rebuilt. Maybe the sight of the fire burned away their desire. They huddled in corners and stayed in The Shelter. They marked out space with large mats. They ran a long cord in through the door and plugged in their televisions. They played bingo. Children began again to be born. Infant mortality here is the highest on Ebeye. The kids who survive are neither from The Dump nor Rock-Town. They are from The Shelter. They are malnourished. They don't go to school. On Ebeye, **they are the poorest of the poor.**

SCHOOL DAYS

There is one small private high school on Ebeye — run by the Seventh Day Adventist Church. Facilities, teachers, space are all inadequate.

The principal's wife told me this story. One day a boy came to her and asked to be admitted. They were overcrowded and she couldn't allow him in. Each year they turn away students. When the boy went home his father beat him. That night the boy hung himself.

TELL ME A STORY

There is a precise point at which the Americans on Kwajalein and the Marshallese on Ebeye fail to connect. It is in their sense of story-telling. For Americans, raised on television serials and Aristotle, each story must have a beginning, middle and end. But for the Marshallese, raised on oral narrative, stories are constantly shifting and adapting, told, retold, modified, only the most sacred details remain fixed. The law of the ocean is eternal and moving. If the Marshallese people don't believe that the effects of nuclear testing will never end, it is because their sense of history has taught them to believe that time has no terminal point. Western myth tells of holocausts and revelations that play out the end. But Marshallese myth depicts history as a continuum of human stories, of gods and tides and wave patterns forever interconnected. And the ongoing, unanticipated effects of western nuclear weapons on Marshallese bodies and culture substantiate *their* view of history. There is no end.

Marshallese people talk, incomprehensibly to the Americans, of a time when the Americans will leave their lagoon. The Germans have come and gone. The Japanese have come and gone. Why not the Americans?

The Americans, on the other hand, know that a conclusion must be reached — the denouement played out. Fixed as Americans are on the narrative of the melting pot, they do not understand that assimilation is not even considered by most Ebeyans. Nor do many Americans understand that their presence in the lagoon is still at the deepest level construed by Ebeyans as a temporary condition, a political option shaped by continuing compensation payments and leases for the land and lagoon.

The latest twist in the plot is to assimilate a limited number of Marshallese children into the American school system on Kwajalein.

In 1987, five Marshallese children were chosen to use the educational facilities of Kwajalein. They leave Ebeye on the morning barge with their teacher, Atota, and spend half a day in the kindergarten and half a day in the nursery school. Next year they will go on to first grade and a new group of five will enter the system. If the program continues there will be seventy-five Ebeye children in the American school system on Kwajalein by the time the first group reaches twelfth grade. But when they go home to Ebeye each night, they return to an island with no public highschool, where most of the population has nothing to do but wait.

Kathy is the nursery school teacher on Kwajalein. She is an enthusiastic observer of the children's progress.

"It's a great opportunity for them. Of course there are cultural differences at first. You saw this morning with our reading books. They had trouble identifying the pictures of the elevator, of the banjo. But they'll adapt.

"What improvements would I like to see? Well, there is one thing. I'd like to forbid them absolutely to speak Marshallese on the island. When they have a problem they always go to Atota, the teacher's aide, and speak Marshallese. We don't know what's going on, they don't learn how to *cope*."

The American melting pot. Get them young. Forget their language. Like most people on Kwajalein, Kathy has never taken the free twenty-minute barge to the island across the lagoon. She has never been to Ebeye.

UGLY RIBALLE-GO BACK TO KWAJALEIN

Riballe means "clothes-wearer" and is used for whites. It survives from early mission days. I met one young Marshallese man who was mistaken for a *riballe*. His name was Qew.

Qew was visiting the island as a translator for a documentary film maker. He had been away studying in California for five years. He dressed and talked like a Californian. Lots of people didn't recognize him as Marshallese when he was with Americans. One day we walked by a group of shouting children and he laughed.

"Know what they just said to me — they said, 'Ugly *riballe*, go back to Kwajalein!'"

Qew was worried about what to do when he finished school. As we sat eating sashimi in his uncle's restaurant, he paused and looked around the room — six small tables and Pacific pop music rattling out of the speakers held by a nail to the wall. "All I know is I'd like to come back but I don't know what I could do here now. My friends all drink too much. Americans are the stupidest and the smartest. They've brought the best and worst. Now, what can we do with it?"

The most peaceful time of day on Ebeye is twilight. Small children hush their crying. The long struggle of each day to get to evening is finally over. The fears of the night have not yet set in.

I liked to go down to the wharf at twilight. Men and boys fished each night. They shared bait and lines and gazed out on the waters. They watched the evening barge come in. Workers came home carrying coolers of ice. Small boys ran around the wharf and little girls tipped their chins forward and twirled their braids in a circle around the heads. Handstands were the latest fad among the children. They clustered in small groups flipping upside down.

The West has created a myth of the idyllic Pacific paradise. The West loves *Robinson Crusoe*. It buys Gaugain's paintings of thick women with flowers in their hair. It produces *South Pacific* for Broadway and takes the middle classes to Pacific Club Meds. It is ironic that the West has never met the people of the Pacific.

When I left Ebeye, Qew saw me off at the barge. I stood on deck looking back at the island until it disappeared into the dusk of the blue lagoon. The island where I'd heard a thousand stories jumbled together like shanty housing. The island where I'd seen a thousand faces waiting. The barge bumped against the dock and I felt the dull thud of Kwajalein. I felt the dull thud of turning away and already I was half-way home.

Kim Eichlin is a researcher at CBC News in Toronto.

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