



The Peong

By Kenneth Zak

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Imagine.
Intoxicant, so rare

Exotic, extraordinaire

Seductress, surreal
Enchantress, revealed.
Imagine.
All this, yet more

Come hither, explore

All dared, all dreamed
Eclipsed emeralds, this sea.

Cameron awoke alone in the hilltop hut. He had planned to write the entire day. He needed to remember why he had come to the island. He closed his eyes and envisioned sable-trimmed petals, interlaced with patches of coppery gold webbing framing brilliant emerald daggers, the markings of the island's rare siproeta stelenes. In full blossom it resembled a Malachite butterfly in flight. A local had told him it blossomed once every ten years, and then only for several days: brief, brilliant, doomed. Until its next bloom it was nothing more than the barest twig.

Cameron had seen the butterfly orchid's blossom once, a few summers before.

He had knelt by the orchid in awe of its wild perfection. Something about

that simple, remote, fleeting spectacle had captivated him. He had never seen another since, even though he had returned to the island several times. But the image he now envisioned wasn't that fragile blossom. He couldn't get her out of his mind. He opened his eyes.

Writing could wait.

He jumped up. His feet planted on the cool dirt floor. He pulled his notebook off the table and glanced at the hectic scribbles from the previous night. There she was, staring back from every slashing word. She even filled the spaces in between.

He yanked on a pair of shorts and stretched his torso into a threadbare T-shirt. He grabbed his scratched sunglasses, slid on sandals and ran from the hut, tracking her footsteps down the path to the seaside village. He recalled her pensive look as she turned away to leave.

His sandals clapped against the dirt. By the time he reached the village he was drenched in sweat. The villagers seemed in a hypnotic lull. The sea lazed against the shore. Beneath that calm he knew the sea floor dropped so quickly that yachts often moored barely a spit from the sand. But there wasn't any vessel in sight.

He rambled past a dozen shanties, rickety houses stacked no more than three deep from the water, all lounging in a permanent recline in the unforgiving sun. A steel-haired woman beating a rug outside her

window shook her head as he passed. He prowled streets nothing more than alleys, streets so narrow they didn't warrant names.

He scoured the small open-air market. Weary tables clustered under spinnaker tarps overflowed with island bounty. Here he slowed. This was where he first saw her just the day before. He caught his breath and picked up a bunch of green bananas, squeezed several mangos and mulled over some guava, wondering if her fingers might have graced these same fruit. He stood in the same spot she had been when he first noticed her, next to a bushel of pomegranates. He wanted to inhabit the space she had filled. What the hell am I doing?

But the island boy had told him the blossom lasted only days.

A bone-skinny, russet-skinned woman offered him a pomegranate. She looked to be one hundred years old, but her eyes tracked him like a hawk.

"No thanks," he said.

She broke into a gummy grin.

"You lookin' all obzokee. Maybe you need it. This one's sweet too bad," she said and sucked at her gums.

"Yesterday, the woman?" he asked.

"Gone like a duppie?" the old woman asked and chuckled.

"Please," he said.

Her grin dropped away and she shook her head back and forth.

"Peong," she said under her breath.

"Where? What's that?" he asked.

She tapped her hand against her chest, pointed the pomegranate at him and smiled. "Your heart peong," she said.

"If you see her, tell her Cameron was here."

She nodded. He ran off to the cantina. He peered through a broke-open shutter. The tables were empty. The stale smell of beer wafted through the window.

Why did people come to Mataka? To disappear, or maybe to forget, he thought. Was that why she was here? He had come to find something, to remember. He had come to finish that short story about the butterfly orchid, to resurrect his voice.

His stomach began to knot. His head felt light. He started to feel sick inside. Man, pull yourself together.

He asked a fat old man who rented rooms by the day. The bald landlord swatted at sparrow-sized mosquitoes while he shook his head. He hadn't seen her.

Cameron jogged past a young boy fishing along the beach. The boy watched him pass, squinting in the sun to reveal a missing front tooth before turning back toward the bay

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to eye his line.

Cameron finally collapsed on a bench. He pushed back the sweaty strands of hair matted against his forehead. The sun had nearly reached its late morning peak. The sleepy village would soon deaden even deeper into siesta. Backtracking to the market, he bought a missile of bread, a palm-full of goat cheese and a cheap bottle of wine, all the while obsessing over how she had vanished without a trace, convinced he had blown it. He doubted sleep.

Stinking from the search, he dropped the plastic sack of food on the sand and waded into the bay. The fishing boy had pulled his line and was sitting in the shade of a drooping palm. Cameron glided between two decrepit fishing boats resting after the morning catch. The skiffs reminded him of Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. With each stroke he stretched further, trying to calm himself into a rhythm, but her face remained right in front of him. He recalled Santiago's battle with the great marlin. He thought of the old man's perseverance. He felt capable of the same. But would he get the chance?

A navy of blue tangs parted beneath him.

It seemed useless. He swam ashore, picked up his sack and hiked back to the hut. The afternoon sun dried him. His sweat soon smelled of brine.

Several miles away a yacht's engine rumbled.





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By the time Cameron reached the hut, an ivory ship had entered the bay. The fishing boy squinted as it slipped back to its mooring. The boy knew its inhabitants. He waded into the water and set down his pole into a small wooden boat.

Back in the hut, Cameron sliced the goat cheese and sprinkled the fleshy insides of a tomato with salt and olive oil. It was the same thing he had eaten for dinner the day before, and the day before that. But this afternoon he ate more from ritual than hunger. He uncorked the bottle of red wine and poured it into a squat tumbler. He emptied the tumbler and poured another. Only after the second glass did the velvet breeze finally soothe him asleep.

And he dreamed.

Swimming down, he descended beyond an underwater cliff into deep recesses. Daylight dimmed into a marine-blue fog. No longer needing to breathe, he was surrounded by underwater creatures. Schools of fish engulfed him. Dolphins danced in and out of sight. They grinned, chattered and enticed him to swim even farther, leading him toward a distant light, where one figure eclipsed that glow.

A mermaid.

A flicker of recognition.

Aluna.

But he couldn't reach her, no matter how hard he tried. She turned away from him and toward the glow before swimming away. He gasped for breath, and the sudden pressure collapsed his lungs. Gulping for air, he began to drown.

He awoke drenched in sweat. His heart pounded. He opened his eyes. And there she was again. Aluna gazed at him from the doorway.

But this was no dream. Backlit by the sun, a halo framed her, yet he could still make out the green of those eyes.

He sat up. She walked into the hut and sat down by his side. He felt an instant pang in his gut. But instead of offering the kiss he craved, she collapsed and buried her face into his chest. Her hair smelled of

gardenia. He hugged her and she began to cry.

"What is it?" he asked.

She didn't answer. Tears laced against his bare chest. The insides of his stomach began to twist. This woman, so filled with life yesterday, now felt so fragile, like she might break apart in his arms and her petals fall to the ground.

She pulled back from his grasp. Her eyes that just yesterday had so unflinchingly locked on him now avoided his own.

It took every ounce of strength to not pull her close for a kiss. But he waited, submitting. He brushed her cheek with the back of his hand to wipe away the tears. He caressed her face and stroked the ridge of her ear, and then around to the nape of her neck where his fingers combed through her auburn hair.

The two sat there in silence, in almost every way still strangers to one another except for yesterday's inexplicable, primal connection. Aluna placed her hands upon Cameron's shoulders and pressed him back down onto the cot. He slid over to one side and she slipped off her sandals. She lay down next to him, still without a word spoken. She kissed his bare chest and nestled her head upon him. Her hair felt like silk. He wrapped one arm around her waist. His fingertips sought out those dimples in her lower back. She clutched one hand and pulled it up to her chest. Her body again seemed perfectly encased in his.

Tucked away from the afternoon swelter, with the sultry breeze slipping across them, he watched her eyelids surrender for the first time. Only then did sleep return for him.

And this time, he slept without dreaming.

Cameron awoke to the scent of gardenia and the sensation of clutching her. Neither had stirred. Both his panicked nightmare sweat and her tears were long dried. He checked to be sure she was in his arms and watched her chest rise and fall. Each sleeping breath coincided with his.

He watched her awaken to find him. She smiled, closed her eyes again and

nestled deeper into him. Then she sighed as her eyes reopened.

Still cradled in his arms, she spoke in a hush.

"Promise me something," she said.

He finally placed her accent as Portuguese, but her diction was perfect.

"Anything," he said.

He propped himself on one elbow.

She lifted her head and stared into his eyes.

"I mean it," she said.

He met her gaze without blinking.

"So do I."

"Never speak my name."

"What?" he asked.

"Do not speak my name, to anyone, ever."

He flashed to his frantic search that morning. Had her name already passed his lips?

"But why?" he asked.

They had shared so few words and already she was taking one from him, and one so precious. A myriad of reasons shot to mind, none of them good.

"Just promise me," she said.

She sounded as if her life depended on it. Cameron had a sick feeling that maybe it did.

"If there is some sort of problem, let me—"

"Please," she said and cut him off.

He felt helpless. He wanted to protect her, but from what, he didn't even know. Her request seemed so trivial to the resolve he felt. Take away all his words. Burn his notebooks. He would fall mute.

"As you wish," he whispered.

And hidden away from the world in

that mountaintop shanty on a remote island, with the two of them wrapped only in one another, they sealed a lover's pact.

She sat up and slipped her feet into her sandals.

"Don't follow me. Don't try to find me," she said.

The knots in his gut tightened. He could not bear to lose her again, even for an instant.

"But I'll be back."

She leaned into him. He felt her even before their lips met, like the electricity foreshadowing a thunderstorm. He cupped the back of her head with his hand and she kissed him.

"This is real," she said.

She sounded somewhat bewildered, almost as if she were trying to explain it to herself.

"I know," Cameron said, "I know."

And she left.

Aluna peered back toward the island in the late afternoon sun. The gray fishing boat had only two wooden slats for seats. She perched on the front bench while the dark boy with jet-black hair and a missing tooth sat on the rear bench facing her. With calm, even strokes, he guided them toward the yacht.

As the boy steadied the small skiff, she climbed up the rope ladder and stepped onto the deck of the yacht. She looked down at him and nodded, then walked toward the main cabin door and peeked in. Inside the cabin, five men huddled over a nautical map spread across a table.

A dark, tattooed man looked up and nudged another, who turned to her and said, "We can talk at dinner."

Aluna turned from the room, but before she left she heard the same man announce to the others, "Okay then, we'll give it one more week."

She left them studying their maps. A smile crossed her lips.

Another week.