

# CutBank

---

Volume 1  
Issue 33 *CutBank* 33

Article 19

---

Spring 1990

## Islands

Craig Miles Miller

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

---

### Recommended Citation

Miller, Craig Miles (1990) "Islands," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 33 , Article 19.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss33/19>

This Prose is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in CutBank by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@mso.umt.edu](mailto:scholarworks@mso.umt.edu).

# Islands

## ONE

At midnight the woman who lived above him would dance. Lying in bed, he could hear her steps and he could hear her sing also. The songs were always soft, the dances too, her voice so delicate and her dancing so slow above him on the wood floor that it often made him think of spider webs or dream of cats that had lived in his neighborhood when he was a child in Wailuku, Hawaii.

It was always midnight when she began, at midnight after he returned from his night job, after he was settled and had eaten and had had a cup of tea or a glass of juice or maybe a beer. Then he would be in bed, not asleep, when her sounds would begin, start, and he was never angry about them, about her. And later, if he had not fallen asleep with her dancing and singing, he could hear her pour a bath, the water hushed-splashing, so wet and hot he imagined. And he also imagined her in the tub, a deep porcelain white tub, imagined a long young woman with red hair stretched in steaming water. And if he was still not asleep by then, he would think of the details of her long body, and though he has never met her or even seen her, he would think of her and those thoughts would arouse him and he would then stretch enjoyably like an animal stretches in sunlight after a nap. And then he could always sleep.

He only knew her name from the apartment mailbox, and not even her full name at that. A.B. Snow. That was all. A. B., her initials and her last name, Snow. And he thought of the word snow often, maybe because he was from Hawaii and there was no snow except over on the big island, on Mauna Kea's peak, and he thought of it usually while she sang or danced but also sometimes at work, thinking of it as he unloaded trucks at the warehouse outside of town, outside of Carson City.

He had come to Carson City because it was not Hawaii, had come to Nevada because it was long and dry. Even though there were mountains and snow in the winter, more important to him was that it grasped the wide desert. That was a good enough reason. That was enough.

When he first came, arrived without knowing anyone and never having been on the mainland before, he thought about becoming a cowboy of some sort or a professional gambler. But he realized, of course, that those were unrealistic thoughts and so he ended up in

Carson City, ended up working at a distribution warehouse out towards Dayton, out on Highway 50 where he knew that the blacktop kept stretching, continued on and out into the blank and beautiful Nevada desert.

Tonight he had worked hard, evenly, till the end of his shift. And when he got into his car to go home he just sat, sat and contemplated the highway and its eastern length. But eventually he started the car and drove home and he fell asleep by A.B. Snow's second song and he did not get to hear her pour water for a bath.

The next day he rose early, early because he liked the mornings. He used to work the graveyard shift and could never wake up till the afternoon, but now he could get up early while birds still sang and traffic started. He liked to be up with the morning paper and up to drink coffee when it tasted best and to have the new sunlight and no rain. Never any soft, clean rain here in Nevada. Just once in a while there was a torrent, which didn't even look like rain but more like a wet wall of grey, and it filled all the culverts and gulches and rushed along the streets of the city, stalling cars and trucks, or flash-flooded down the desert of the country, killing livestock and people. It wasn't really rain, just destruction. That was how it was.

And in the morning, thinking about rain made him think about home, about Hawaii, and it appeared there in his head as he drank his coffee and watched the street from his dusty window. It was there, the ruffled blue and of course the green, all of it, down to the black volcanic soil of his island. He saw it, dreamt of it, dreamt of walking along the coast where a fine mist sits forever in the air, along the rocks, and the lush slopes are behind him, all of that green and more green as he turns away from the coast and into the forest. In his mind he walks a slender path through banana-leaved bushes and makes his way to a house, a big house where in back there is a pool, a blue-bottomed swimming pool set in flat immaculate concrete as white as the sun. He is there alone, standing near the deep end, he disrobes there, surrounded by clean concrete and green he stands naked in front of the pool, the deep side, ready to dive... And then he quit. He thought of something else, of land and asphalt, so that all he saw now was the simple traffic of Carson City, Nevada out his window.

His mother called him on the telephone around noon. His mother now lived in Honolulu, close to his sister who worked as a model for travel posters, postcards, TV commercials and promotions. He didn't know what else his sister did.

"So, what you got going this weekend?" his mother asked after a while.

"I don't have any plans."

"I think it would do you some good to have some company... Maybe you should see a girl... Why, there's a friend of your sister's, this girl, she just moved to Toehoe. Or is it Tahoe? Anyway, she moved way out there and maybe she wants to meet you. Hmmm?"

He didn't say anything, he just imagined his mother's face at the receiver, waiting for him to speak. He saw her, saw her big orange lips moving like two thick slices of breadfruit, just waiting to flap and tell him about this woman.

"It would do you plenty good to meet this woman," his mother said. "You hear me? If you don't hear me, maybe you should come back home."

"I suppose I could... Saturday. Maybe Saturday."

"Good," she said, sounding happy, sounding close by even though she was out on the island. And he thought of her lips again, he remembered them, remembered when she used to kiss him with those lips.

"Aloha?"

"I'm here..."

"Okay, here's her name and number. I think she'd come to Carson City to see you..."

When he went to get his mail, her name was there: A.B. Snow. It was there on the little box for apartment 5, the box newer than the wall it was affixed to, newer than the wooden stairs and wooden floor that she walked on. And he forgot about his mail and thought about her singing, her steps, thought about bath water sloshing, and he looked out the apartment hallway window where it was another good dry hopeless day.

## *TWO*

On Saturday she drove on down with the mountains behind her, drove down Highway 50 with all the green signs giving her the mileage to Carson City. She felt good to be getting out of Tahoe even though she hadn't lived there but two months. She shared a small condo with another woman - a blackjack dealer - a condo that was perched up on a heavy hill away from the lake, close to California. And she worked as a showgirl now, at Harrah's.

Harrah's was the best casino around, she knew that, but just the same it wasn't the kind of work, of career, that she had ever really envisioned herself doing.

In Hawaii she had seen photographs of him. Lana - his sister - had told her about him and she hoped that he was as nice as she said. She already knew that he was handsome, that he was Hawaiian. She's from Hawaii herself - Honolulu - but she's Japanese-Hawaiian. Just the same, she had worked as a model, she had been a dancer for nightclubs and hotel luaus, just like Lana. The tourists never knew the difference, never knew that she was Japanese. The native Hawaiians did, but that was okay, they were the same, they all went home to their four walls, just like her, home to their TVs and microwave dinners, they all hated the taste of poi.

She had wanted to be an actress - in the theatre - so she had left to pursue a degree in Drama at the University of Minnesota. That was why she had come to the mainland. Minnesota was why. But the program wasn't that good, or maybe she wasn't that good, and she really couldn't take Minnesota any longer, so she called her old agent and he sent her to Tahoe. And she thought that it would be like the stage, sort of, that it would be fun to be dancing again. But Tahoe was different. The dancing wasn't fun. She had thought that maybe it was a step, a step to Vegas or to Los Angeles, but she wasn't sure now. The people she worked for were kind of bad, kind of slimy, and if they were that way here what would they be like in Vegas or in L.A.?

She didn't know why she was in Tahoe, exactly.

Sometimes she would wake up at night, in the middle of the night in the darkness of her condo, and she couldn't remember where she was. She would draw a blank in her memory and she couldn't think of where she was or how she had gotten there - she knew who she was and did not panic - but she could not come up with the connections to her present life.

She slipped through the bald foothills, curving into shadows from the west, the highway holding pools of black and blue and all the big trees were behind her and Carson City was seventeen miles and she knew that the long dry-bed desert waited out beyond the city. She also knew that he was waiting for her, that even though they hadn't met it somehow seemed like they had. Maybe it was her imagination or maybe just her hopes, but it seemed like they had, it felt that way.

She had talked to Lana on the phone, told her about her doubts and frustrations and it was Lana who had suggested that she and her brother get together. And all in all it wouldn't be bad to have a

friend at least, even if it didn't work out on another level at least he could be her friend, someone who lived a normal life, had a normal job. But then maybe it would be more than just friendship. And she wondered what they would talk about tonight, she wondered if she would tell him about being on stage at Harrah's, about the floor show where she was as naked as anything with glitter glued on her small breasts, about how she played Polynesians or Chinese maidens and danced to music that pretended to be Asian, primitive.

And then she wondered why she hadn't stayed in school, why she came to Tahoe, came to dance naked in Nevada, how she came to consider a career in Hollywood. She wondered how that had happened.

In the outskirts of Carson City, along the strip, the streetlights suddenly flicked on and the solid signs of fastfood places and gas stations and stores were all lit with flat plastic reds, blues and yellows. She stopped at a red light and began to think of home, of Hawaii.

She thought of Honolulu, of the streets, her street, she dreamt of the beach away from Diamond Head, away from the hotels and towers and tourists. While waiting in the car she saw herself there, at home, on the porch of a house, she sits looking out to summer seas with blue rain clouds coming in and in, slowly advancing, trailing their blue veils. She sits and then stands and walks forward to meet them, meet the light blue swaths of rain and dark blue clouds over the calm and azure sea, she knows they are coming to scatter rainbows, to place chunks of prism light in the hills behind the city, colors so strong and bright she sees them as real and as solid as the city itself, and she walks down an alley past two dogs and a child and across a street to the beach and she lifts her skirt to enter the water, the soft waved water, to greet the clouds... and then she didn't. The light turned green and someone honked and she drove on, between the bone-colored buildings of Carson City.

### *THREE*

She had to park along the street, about a block away, and walk to his apartment and he was asleep in the soft chair as her heels clicked on the pale sidewalk. He had fallen asleep while waiting for her and he was evening-dreaming about A.B. Snow, dreaming of her in that bathtub. He couldn't see her face in the dream - as

he had never seen her in real life - but she had long red hair and ripe breasts and slender all-white legs, he could see her in the tub from above as if he were an unseen angel on her bathroom ceiling, and he watched her as she slipped underwater, her head and hair and face all underwater in that big Nevada tub, he saw her there until the doorbell rang and his eyes opened.

"Come in, come in," he said and rubbed his eyes and felt a little embarrassed.

"Thank you."

"Do you... Would you like a glass of wine or a beer or something before we go out?"

"Okay, sure, some wine."

And she sat down into the chair that he had been sleeping in, dreaming in, and he went to close the door where she had entered. But before he closed it he looked down the hall, through the window, and saw that the stars were coming out in the desert sky.

After dinner and drinks downtown, they returned to his apartment and she felt good about the evening, about his shyness and his quiet questions. She felt good about him. They both drank red wine now, red wine that he poured into tumblers because he owned no wine glasses, and he had the lights on in the bathroom only, low lights so that it was almost orange in the livingroom, almost that color, where they sat together.

During dinner she had told him that she was thinking about going back to school. She did not say where or in what study and she didn't even know if that was true or not, about school. And now she asked him about his plans.

"I'm going to take the Civil Service exam," he said. "I can get a job with the State Government, I guess. They have an Affirmative Action program and need to hire minorities. That's what they told me, that they could use me. I guess I'm a minority."

And they both laughed a little and then were quiet.

"Don't you ever get homesick?" she asked. "Don't you miss the islands? Miss the water?"

He sat for a while in the orange darkness, with her next to him, thinking of home. He thought of home and of being alone in a place like Carson City, Nevada.

"I miss it," he answered. "But I had to leave, to get away. You know how it is, but I miss it."

And then she thought of Minnesota, of how it had been in St. Paul, how it had been on campus. She thought of blue winters wedged in faded light, of the flat landscapes and bare trees and

blocky buildings all caught in evening winter light.

"Don't you?" he wanted to know.

"Yes, I do," she said and she did. She missed Hawaii. Now that she had been away she could see that there was something fantastic, something about it that was with her, with her ever since she first left Honolulu, left over the expanse of Pacific.

"You know, the woman who lives above me dances," he told her.

They were both sitting quietly together, both of them thinking of home, of Hawaii, and then he said it. He wasn't sure why he told her - maybe because she was a dancer - but he wanted to tell her.

"I can hear her every night... I don't know if she's practicing or just does it... It's kind of nice to hear, living alone and all."

#### *FOUR*

"Listen," he says.

They are both on their backs, on top of the covers on the island of his bed in the bedroom with the lights off. And she smiles as the soft whisper sounds come from above, as she listens to wood-creaking rhythm. And he is there too, listening as he always listens, as if the sounds are drawn by gravity, down from the ceiling, down into his very skin. And then she feels touched as she hears the singing of A.B. Snow. They both smile. A.B. Snow sings low and feminine, hushed, so like a lullabye and neither of them know the lyrics. They are a little drunk but not embarrassed as they listen.

"And now she'll take a bath."

So they listen to the water, to the pouring and collecting of water above them and they are still on their backs in the blue blackness and water still spills as his hand goes out to her and she goes out to him.

They make love, he has her little olive body under him and under him, the quiet squeaking and her low sounds of pleasure, their paper voices like clear water in a tidal pool. And they send those sounds up, for A.B. Snow to hear, above, for her to regard in any way she pleases.

*Craig Miles Miller*