

Bird of Paradise

Phyllis Barber

A DRUM WAS BEATING that night as my family and I entered the elementary school gymnasium. Animal skins were stretched across a portion of hollowed-out tree, two flat brown hands pounding on their surface. Instantly I felt my pulse and the drum beating together. I ran to the stage, pulled myself up on my toes, peered over the edge.

The drummer's feet were bare. White flowers were laced around his ankle. His knees were bare, too, and a cloth hung between his legs. When I saw his padded breasts quivering as he drummed, I averted my eyes to the bold black strokes on the cloth which hung from below his navel. How could he ever run or jump or move quickly, I wondered, in such a small square of material?

It reminded me of a few weeks before when my friend Theresa and I dared each other not to wear underpants to school. At recess, we challenged each other to somersault over the tricky bar under the slide. We both did lightning somersaults, but after the first rush of anxiety and after looking around the playground and realizing no one had noticed, I tried it again, more slowly.

"Julia." My father retrieved me from these wanderings with his big hand wrapping around mine. "It's time for the show to start."

PHYLLIS BARBER is the author of *The School of Love* (University of Utah Press), a collection of short stories; *And the Desert Shall Blossom* (University of Utah Press), a forthcoming novel; and *Legs: The Story of a Giraffe* (McElderry/Macmillan), a forthcoming children's book. She is a founder of the annual Park City Writers at Work Conference, a faculty member of the Vermont College MFA in Writing Program in Montpelier, Vermont, and currently lives with her husband and three sons in Summit County, Colorado.

"Bird or Paradise" is an excerpt from *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir*, which recently won an Associated Writing Programs award and will be published by the University of Georgia Press.

"When will Sonny, Popo, and Liliuokalanimoa come out?"

"Very soon. Just be patient."

They had turned sideways when they first entered our house with straw hats, orange cloth bags stenciled with palm fronds and geckos, arms as big as the elm tree in our front yard. They were bigger than the front door.

"Aloha," they had said.

Ed and I stared up at them, amazed at the amount of flesh squeezed into the woman's muu-muu and the men's flowered shirts.

"Aloha," they said again. "We say aloha, you say aloha."

"Aloha," we answered in small whispers.

"I am Liliuokalanimoa," the woman said. "This is Popo, and this is Sonny." She bent over my younger brother, Ed, and kissed his cheek. Then she lifted me into her arms. "Fine lady," she said. She squeezed my biceps with her large fingers and rolled them like bits of leftover dough. "Chicken bones. Liliuokalanimoa feed you some pork."

I smelled her freshly washed hair, loose black loops caught up by two abalone combs. Large mother, the round earth, the scent of ocean near her ears. She squeezed the whole of me, and I felt the mountain of her as I curved around her, my brown shoes hanging mid-air.

"Aloha," my mother said, coming out of the kitchen with a flour sack dishtowel. I had embroidered the girl on the towel who washed pots and pans. Red and blue thread for her plaid dress, an unnatural flesh-colored thread on her arms and legs. My mother wiped her hands and stretched one to Liliuokalanimoa.

"Aloha, Mrs. Moore." Liliuokalanimoa's corpulent fingers tangled with my mother's narrow ones. "Call me Lily. This is Sonny and Popo."

Mother shook their hands and pointed to her arm where a watch would have been if she owned one. "Rehearsal. What time?"

"Seven o'clock. Sharp." Sonny laughed like he'd swallowed the sun and punched Popo in the arm.

"It's 6:00 now," Mother said. "We'd better have supper right away."

"Right away," Popo mimicked.

"Make yourself at home."

"Right away," Popo said.

They sank into the chairs and sofas, spilling over the sides, melting the cushions. "Little princess," said Liliuokalanimoa. I was still in her arms. "You stay with me."

I felt like a bird in a nest as she took my hands into hers and rubbed them together like fine sandpaper. She bent and wiggled each of the toes poking out of my sandals, talking to them individually, giving each a Hawaiian name—*Hawaiki. Kamehameha. Kahumanu.*

Lifting both my arms, she sang, "Fly, pretty bird. High over the ocean, fly." We soared above waves leaping back and forth on the disappearing shore. She was a broad-winged seabird calling into the wind. I tasted salt on my lips.

"Lovely bird." She put her arms around my rib cage and sheltered my thinness in her soft arms.

"Julia, take the boys to your room," my mother called from the kitchen, drenched in steam from the open kettle of noodles. "Liliuokalanimoa will sleep on the fold-out in your dad's office, but have her put her things in your room for now."

I slid from Liliuokalanimoa's lap and lifted her orange cloth bag from the floor. "Follow me," I said.

The great hunks of Polynesia lumbered down the hallway and into my room and immediately tested the mattress on my older sister Ellen's and my bed. They bounced like curious children as the empty space in our bedroom filled with Sonny, Popo, and Liliuokalanimoa, their belongings, and their laughter. These were the people we'd heard about for months in church flyers, sacrament meeting announcements, and telephone calls asking us to provide room and board. For three dollars per family, church members and townspeople could see flaming torches, leaping bodies, and grass skirts. *A New Cultural Experience*, the poster on the church's bulletin board announced.

"Tall grass," Popo giggled as he rubbed the top of Ed's crew cut hair. "Means very important man. Takes many brains to grow such tall grass."

Ed tossed his reserve aside and climbed onto the bed. I followed suit. We tickled and dodged, dived into pillows, pushed Sonny and Popo off the bed, and then dared the forbidden—jumping on the mattress. As we flew, our hair flapping like wings, Liliuokalanimoa made seabird sounds. And the seawind lifted us higher until we feared Mother might discover our crime.

So we gave up our jumping and nestled into Liliuokalanimoa's sides. She showed us how to make swimming fishes and ocean waves with our hands. "Talking hands," she said. "Tell stories to many people. One time, wind blow like mighty warrior. Coconuts fly like round birds. Trees bend to ground. Fishes swim to village to warn people. The bravest fish walks up and breathes fire onto man's foot, but no one listens."

"A fish breathed fire?" I asked, large-eyed.

"When fish breathes fire," Liliuokalanimoa continued, "everybody runs to hide. They know big trouble is coming." She formed fists in the air, dropped them from high to low, turned them into walking fish, then into many people running. Her hands shifted like silky water.

I tried to make my own walking fish, but my fingers were awkward next to Liliuokalanimoa's.

"Dinner's almost ready," Mother called from the kitchen. "Julia. Your turn to set the table."

As I counted plates, utensils, and napkins, the oven started to smoke, the acrid smell of a burn on the elements. Mother opened the oven door, and large fits of smoke burst like a volcano into the kitchen.

"Oh no," she cried, waving the smoke away with her hands. She lifted the scratched metal pan of bubbling cheese with the two matching potholders I'd made in my Primary class called Larks. Larks, Bluebirds, and Seagulls for nine, ten, and eleven-year-old girls. "Greet the day with a song," was our motto. "Serve gladly. Worship Heavenly Father, and make others happy." I'd cross-stitched it in primary colors on a brown linen sampler.

"Oh, thank goodness!" Mother sighed with relief. "The casserole's okay. Don't forget the salt and pepper, Julia."

After everyone was seated around our table, Mother presented her famous Pot of Gold casserole—wide noodles, hamburger, cheese, canned corn, canned pimentos, bits of green pepper. And her homemade rolls with homemade apricot jam. And a bounteous tossed green salad. Liliuokalanimoa and Popo took small servings of the casserole, but Sonny shoveled half of what was left onto his plate. My mother looked at my father with carefully screened horror.

"Sonny," she said.

Sonny looked up eagerly.

"I see you like food," she stuttered.

"Very good luau," he said as he poured his second glass of milk and speared the salad leaves out of the serving bowl as if they were fish. He embraced every bite with true love. "You are beautiful mother of food. A pearl woman."

Slowly my mother's mouth closed and her face softened. After all, she had her domestic pride. Biting back a smile, she blushed, said thank-you very much, and hurried from the table to look at the clock.

"You're going to be late if you don't leave right this minute," she pretended to scold.

"No problem," Sonny said. "Hawaiian time is no time at all." He sat back in the chair, tipped it back against the wall, which was forbidden in our household, and rubbed his massive stomach. "Pearl woman makes beautiful dessert, I think."

Ice cream and Aunt Ethyl's homemade brownies had been the originally planned menu, but just in case, Mother had gone to our storage closet for jars of canned peaches and apricots. She had resources and bottles of pride.

After three servings of ice cream and one Mason jar of peaches, Sonny leaned back again and patted his stomach like a best friend. "Beautiful lady, Mrs. Moore. Beautiful cook. You make Sonny happy. You like gifts, Mrs. Moore?"

My mother's elegant face softened into a young girl's shyness. I loved this girl who sometimes slipped from my exacting mother: vulnerable, holding out bare fingers to be touched, letting oyster shell colors escape from her fortress.

"A gift? For me?"

"Yes, beautiful mother."

Abruptly Sonny picked himself up. "Lily. Popo. Let's go."

At 7:45 they left for the 7:00 rehearsal, no worry, no rush. Popo trailed after Sonny with slow shuffling feet, and Liliuokalanimoa blew me a kiss before she lifted her bulk out of the kitchen and into the evening.

"Aloha," she said.

Luuu, hula, coconut, lei, aloha. Ed, Ellen, and I repeated the new words to each other as we settled down for the night on the living room floor. We didn't mind the floor, especially when there was so much magic in those big bodies we awaited. We talked about the waves and the fire-breathing fish. We talked stories with our fingers and wrists.

"Do you remember *Bird of Paradise*?" I asked Ellen. "The movie where they sacrificed the chief's beautiful daughter?"

"Yes," she said sleepily.

"I remember," I said. A languid breeze nudged the grass walls of the hut I could see in the dark while exotic striped insects tiptoed past. "Don't you sometimes think you were a princess like that?"

"A princess," said Ellen out of the depths of her pillow, "but not a human sacrifice."

"A human sacrifice," I said. "What's that?"

"When somebody dies for somebody else."

"But what happens to the somebody else after the other somebody dies? Do things get better?"

"They're supposed to. Go to sleep, Julia. I'm tired."

As I waited for sleep to come, I felt Liliuokalanimoa brushing my hair with her abalone combs and weaving stems of hibiscus in the strands. Wrapped in bright orange cotton woven with purple geckos, I heard drums calling me to the fire. And a torchbearer led us, me and Liliuokalanimoa, and we walked barefoot into the night and to the fire, our pulses captured by the drum beat, our bodies prisoners to the unceasing rhythm. Slow, steady, stalking feet of rhythm walked through my blood, strode into my arms and my legs and my body. Firelit eyes

glowed in the dark, watching, waiting for Liliuokalanimoa and Princess Julia in her coral-hued flowers.

Liliuokalanimoa took my hand and said the gods smiled on me. Her hand, my safety, my comfort, absorbed my fear as I faced all the anger the earth had even known in the volcano's fury. And I stood straight and tall as Sonny and Popo led me to the lip of the fiery furnace. I told my people to stop crying, that I'd save them. And then I leapt off the edge into the next morning where I woke, happy to discover Liliuokalanimoa in the next room; no one had asked me to sacrifice anything for anybody, I was lying next to Ed and Ellen on army blankets on the floor, I could hear my mother and father talking quietly in the bathroom, it was morning and a new day, and the volcano was quiet now, the sun in the sky.

Sonny ate eight eggs for breakfast, sunny side up. Popo ate six, Liliuokalanimoa four. Mother made a triple batch of cinnamon rolls, and Sonny finished off a panful before they cooled down.

Though Mother smiled and played the gracious hostess, I could see her impatience growing. Her household budget had limits.

"I'm glad I don't have to provide for them all the time," I heard her mutter to my father when she cleared the table. "They remind me of threshers. This is adding up."

Before I left for school, Liliuokalanimoa squeezed my arms again. "Little princess," she said. "You eat more. There are gods in the animals and in the mangoes. The gods come inside you when you eat their gifts."

"Liliuokalanimoa?" I asked. "Did you ever watch a chief's daughter jump into a volcano?"

"That's an old old story, Julia. Old old old."

"Did you ever think you might jump into the flames?"

"Every girl wonders."

"What's a human sacrifice?"

"Don't worry, small girl." She wrapped her arms around me as if I were a delicate gift of gold. She stroked my neck and rocked me like a new baby. I closed my eyes, secure in her arms, and stopped wondering about anything. I didn't want to walk out the door or go to school or run on the playground, slide down slides, swing, or even turn somersaults over the tricky bars. I wanted to stay in this ocean of arms, with Liliuokalanimoa petting my cheek with one finger.

The Boulder City Elementary School gym had been imposingly gray in the dusk when we parked our car across the street, excitement riding high in my throat. *An Evening in Polynesia*. Torches were twisted into the front lawn. Ellen, Ed, Mom, and Dad, and I had walked up the sidewalk past the flames, up the steps, into the crisp-looking hall,

into the gymnasium where I'd sung in the shepherd's choir at Christmastime and where our fifth grade class had sung "I'm Happy When I'm Hiking" at last month's PTA meeting. Nurses checked our hearing in this room; we'd rubbed our fingers into inkpads for a state-wide fingerprinting project here and had been given our paper cup dose of Dr. Salk's miracle vaccine by smiling nurses.

But tonight, the gymnasium wasn't the gymnasium anymore. It was dark and filled with the beating of a steady drum. After my father retrieved me from the edge of the stage, we found a place on the second row. As I sat on the metal folding chair, I heard whispering grass skirts swishing while the entertainers walked back and forth behind the burnt orange curtain. The painted-on-butcher-paper palm trees someone had hung on the gymnasium walls seemed to sway in the dark. The walls moved away from me and folded into the night; a volcano burned in the distance, way off in the direction of B Hill.

The curtains opened, and more drums joined in. Suddenly Sonny, dressed in a loin cloth, a torch in hand, leaped out of the wings, yelling like a fierce warrior. A line of men followed behind, Popo included, chugging across the stage with widely spaced flat feet, stabbing the air with their spears and grunting words I'd never heard, words that weren't really words, but power. Sonny looked fierce and proud, not the laughing, giggling Sonny who bounced on our bed. I scooted closer to my father for protection.

As the drummers' hands heated up, leaning more heavily into the stretched skin heads, warriors flew across the stage like winged beasts. The torch cast pulsing shadows on their gleaming bodies. The stage itself began to pulse. The gymnasium was the inside of a drum, and my heart was beating wildly. The women suddenly appeared, shaking their hips violently. Liliuokalanimoa wore a grass skirt, a cloth tight around her breasts, and a bold colored wreath of flowers—white-tongued stamens thrusting out of waxy reds, purple cups to hold rain-water, and orange-petaled birds tipped with royal blues. She seemed a stranger to me, too, but then the mood changed and she softened from an angry mountain to a floating seabird.

Ukeleles and guitars tempered the drum beat; the women's hands talked to us gently. Their hips swayed like a slow tide. Orchids in crowns, orchids fastened over ears, long black hair trailing over shoulders, falling over breasts, long torsos bending slightly at the waist, except that Liliuokalanimoa's torso was not so long as it was round and full and bounteous, a ring of flesh pouring out over the top of her grass skirt.

"They should have covered themselves more," my mother whispered to my father, looking anxiously at me and Ed, the youngest

ones, to see how we were reacting to these bodies so sumptuously displayed.

“Don’t worry about it,” my father whispered back. “That’s how they do things in Hawaii.”

“How do you know?” she said crossly, as if she’d heard this kind of response from him before, as if he made up answers to suit his convenience. “You like it, admit it.” She nudged him with her elbow and folded her arms with semi-disgust.

“Let’s everybody enjoy themselves,” he said, taking my hand in his.

“Aloha,” the performers shouted. When no one answered them back, they said it again. A few feeble voices answered.

“When we say aloha, you say *A-lo-ha!*”

“A-lo-ha!” the audience finally shouted back.

A parade of sizes and shapes, a chorus of ukeleles, a steel guitar, someone blowing a conch shell, an adoring couple singing “The Hawaiian Wedding Song” into a microphone. And then the drums heated up again, and a sliver of a girl from Tahiti appeared on the stage, vibrating her hips like they were a machine plugged into something. Hips couldn’t go that fast, and then suddenly the whole stage was alive, everybody motoring around with some part of their body oscillating like crazy—their arms, their hips, their legs, their heads. Perspiration. The whole stage erupting like a volcano, the bodies delirious in its flames until they collapsed in a heap on the floor. I felt a sharp cramp in my hand.

I’d been holding my breath and squeezing my father’s knuckles, working hard as I sat on my chair in the second row, caught by the tidal wave that swept over the edge of the stage and down onto the floor of the gymnasium of Boulder City Elementary School, swamping all of us sitting there. I released my father’s sweating hand. He loosened his necktie. I felt wet everywhere. Islands. Oceans. Tides surprising me, catching me unaware.

“Aloha!” the performers shouted. “Aloha!” the audience roared back, a large ocean wave heaving back and forth from the stage to the audience. After five minutes of wild cheering, the audience finally gave up and began drifting away. Sonny leaped off the stage and searched through the dark until he found my mother, who was still sitting on her folding chair. “Pearl woman. Stand up. A gift from me.”

“What?” she said, her metal folding chair creaking as she shifted weight onto her feet and laughed nervously.

He slipped a lei of orchids over her head. Then he leaned close and put his arms around her shoulders. “Lovely mother. Queen of women.”

His eyes were deep brown, and his black eyelashes were curled by nature. His chest was wet, wide, bare brown, and strong, with the wet scent of deep sand. And he held my mother as he kissed her on the cheek.

I'll never forget that picture of her, caught in his arms, authority erased from her face, surprised before she could protest. Pleasure. Forgetful of her role as our mother, one on one with Sonny, bare in front of us. A man and a woman, not my mother and Sonny. She closed her eyes when he kissed her and seemed to take a deep breath before she remembered us standing there watching. Then she laughed to dismiss him. "Oh, Sonny. You character! What am I going to do with you?"

"Beautiful lady." He touched her lips with his finger, his eyes burning black. "Shhh."

"Great show," my father said, reaching for Sonny's hand to shake it. Sonny took a last look into my mother's eyes, broke the embrace, shook hands, grinned, and began to giggle again, the Sonny we knew from the day he arrived and bounced on our bed.

I cried for three days when they left. I couldn't stop.

The morning after the show, Liliuokalanimoa held me in her lap again. She squeezed and hugged me, and I squeezed and hugged her back.

"It's time for school, Julia," my mother said. "You're almost late."

"I don't care," I said.

"But you have to care about school. That's the only way you'll ever learn anything."

"I don't want school." I pressed against Liliuokalanimoa's breasts and wrapped a loose strand of her hair in my fingers. "I'm Hawaiian."

"Come on, Julia." Mother pulled me out of Lily's arms, dragged my limp body across the floor, sat me on the piano bench, put my shoes on my feet, and bent over to tie them. "Liliuokalanimoa, Sonny, and Popo have to go now. You don't want to make them sad."

"I'm going with them."

"But your teachers will miss you."

"I don't care. I go by Hawaiian time."

"What about me? I'd miss you. How would I get along without my little pianist? My happy girl who loves her Father in Heaven? I'll walk to school with you. Okay?"

"No."

Liliuokalanimoa walked over to the piano bench and knocked on my forehead with her knuckles. "You'll have a coconut head if you don't go to school. Empty when the milk dries up. Big sea turtle roll you out to sea."

"You want me to stay?" I asked, surprised.

"You belong here in this soil with your mama and papa. Someday you can come to me, but your roots dry up if you go away now."

I looked at my feet, my long toes in my sandals, and imagined them crisp and brittle and blowing away.

"Good-bye, beautiful princess. When big volcano blows on my island, I call for you. You save my people. Aloha."

I dipped my chin to my chest to hide its quivering. "Aloha," I answered in a feeble voice.

"Good-bye, daughter of Pearl Woman." Sonny bent over my mother who still knelt, and over me who sat on the piano bench with legs dangling. He kissed both of our foreheads.

My mother looked at the floor. "I'll walk Julia to school, so I'll say good-bye now."

"Car takes us away in five minutes. Fast away." Sonny's eyes were large shining mirrors.

"Listen for my call at night when everything's quiet," Liliuokalanimoa whispered in my ear. "Don't forget. You can come to me." She made the sound of the bird flying over the waves one last time.

And Mother and I went off to school, my heart an ancient sea turtle, heavy, slow, a shell of loneliness inside my ribs. Some bare brown feet had walked inside me, wiggled their toes, and left a design.

Mother held my hand tightly. "I'll miss them, too," she said, and we didn't say anything else for three blocks, though I heard her swallow a whisper of "Aloha" while we waited for a car to pass on Wyoming Street.