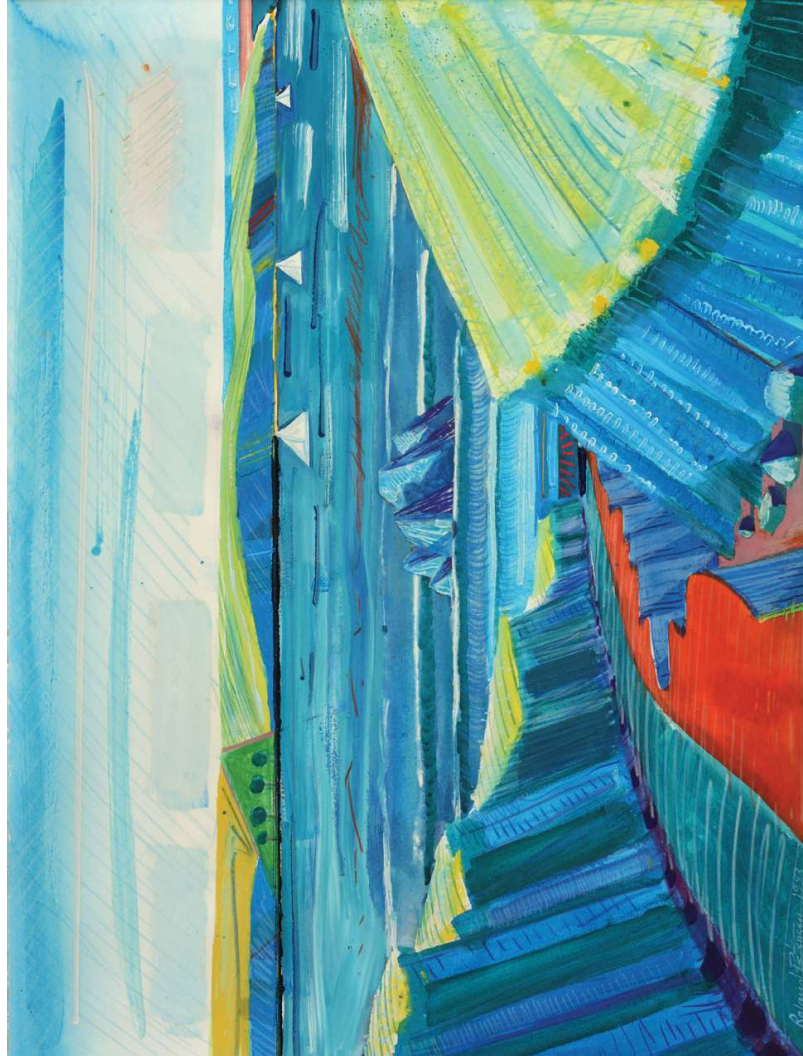


ROLAND PETERSEN

Path to Dillon Beach, 1983
Oil on canvas, 22 x 30 in



COURTESY THE STUDIO SHOP GALLERY

BEN MASAOKA

Saint Slender

Slender was not a slender woman but was large and fleshy and she seldom bothered with clothes. She preferred to be naked and hairy in the places people naturally are, her legs, under her arms, the inverted triangle below her belly button. Water thought she was beautiful in her natural state, as well as exotically intriguing. Puerto Rican, she claimed at times, at other times it was Filipina, or Native American, or even Black Irish, and at other times she admitted to being a mixture of them all. But there was one thing for sure: somewhere along the long trail of past unions was at least one white person, because her eyes were the palest blue and seemed forever trying to orient themselves, as though lost among the rest of her parts and suspicious of the body they found themselves in.

And now she sprawled gloriously naked on the broken sofa in the living room of the old, falling-apart house. Water did not think it strange, after six months of seeing her naked every day and never caring about it before, that now he cared very much and was compelled to stare and follow her around like a mopey pet. Fire, the other young man who lived there, thought it both strange and disturbing. But it wasn't so to Water, caught up as he was in a sudden, lugubrious desire that had come over him in only the past week. The new emotion he felt for Slender was uncontrollable and agitating. He resented how self-satisfied she appeared, lounging on the sofa like someone from a painting. Possessed of a regal idea but refusing to share what it was, keeping it to herself like a cat. Slender hailed from New York City, a place where concrete had worm holes in her feet, traffic and blaring horns had bewildered her, and tall buildings had cast shadows that crept into her soul. She once said she had no interest in growing stronger from adversity, she was strong enough already, and decided to escape madness for what she had heard someone say on the radio was a simple life in the islands. She gazed back at Water from the sofa with displeasure, letting her thick black hair hang across her face as though making up for her lack of clothing. She was disdainful of how he felt, and she had already let him know. But feelings were feelings. It was torture for Water, especially this afternoon, because he knew the full moon that night would draw her forth from the house to a midnight rendezvous in the valley. The nature of the rendezvous was a mystery, but he strongly suspected it was to meet another man.

Before arriving here, on the so-called farm located in a small valley on the Kaneohe side of the island, Water had been living at a house in Honolulu where freaks came and stayed for as long as they wished—days, weeks, months—passing joints and half gallons of wine and changing partners so often they sometimes had to draw back and ask if they had already been together. The owner of the house was Tara, a pale, aging, spectral figure, who wrapped her gray frizzy hair like a tower in a long scarf and appeared every now and then to float through the rooms on a cloud of patchouli oil and gaze upon the young people with a melancholy smile. A hippy girl drew him a map to what she said was a beautiful place with beautiful people. At that time Water still went by the name of Walter, his mainland name, the one given by his parents and that he disliked because it was so establishment and dull. Was there an artist, or a rock star, or even a folk singer, anywhere in the world named Walter?

The map led him through a vacant residential neighborhood of plowed red earth and all brand-new houses in the finishing touches of construction. Beside every mailbox was a realtor's sign. Black asphalt streets, sidewalks, and cul-de-sacs, concrete and triumphant, covered it all. The only plants were those the landscapers had brought in. Then he left the new construction behind and asphalt streets became dirt roads, and houses turned into taro fields, and in several miles he came upon the small green valley that appeared to him as the beating heart of untouched nature. At the end of the road was a run-down house with rotted wood siding that was covered with a rusty tin roof. A large yellow smiling sun was painted on the door.

Slender had been living on the farm for several years and Fire for half as long. They were giving the outhouse built along the stream a new coat of purple paint when Walter appeared. He showed them the map, at which they nodded and requested no further information. That except for a few blotches of purple paint Slender was in the middle alarmed Walter not at all. He had already learned that nudity in communes and hippy houses was not only a pleasure of different kinds to different people, but also a way of testing men. He barely glanced at her and passed the test. But he did take a moment to appreciate the valley and saw how beautiful it was indeed.

It was 1967, and nature in this singular valley was

preserved, no houses, no winding streets, no cut-de-sacs, nothing like he had passed through on the way, only taro fields where a water buffalo with stullen eyes roamed, and green mountains, laced every morning with silvery strings of waterfalls from nightly rains, looming in shrouded mists, and wild banana patches that could be found behind the hills. Winston the pig farmer was the lone semblance of civilization in the immediate locale, although housing tracts were steadily taking over small valleys on either side. For reasons unknown, the valley they lived in was ignored, as though hidden from the Great Developer in the sky, as they sarcastically referred to it. The force behind the rape of the land, the steady influx of outsiders from the mainland of which they pretended not to be a part. That they lived in a pristine setting, out of touch with reality due to a steady diet of drugs, only further alarmed them to the madness of population growth that crept upon them to the north and to the south, of land, raw, green, and beautiful, bulldozed and ripped to pieces, killed, to make way for ugly houses, streets, and station wagons with screaming kids in the back seat driven by unhappy, angry moms who, Slender said, no longer understood what their too-loud or too-silent children wanted, or their alcoholic, cheating husbands, or even themselves. Green barrel, orange barrel, candy tabs, mystic eyes, and the better-known top-shelf brands. And naturally, pakalolo. Pakalolo upon awakening, pakalolo to help them consider the myriad possibilities of what they could do since there was nothing they had to do, and pakalolo later to help them recall the industry they had imagined early in the day but forgot about. There were other helpers as well, especially mushrooms that, after a rain, beckoned to them from cow pastures, where they crawled on hands and knees to nibble on mushroom caps that sprouted in clumps from cow pies, biting them off at the source because they yearned for something, anything, untouched by human hands. They spent days grazing through the tall grass on all fours like a small herd of cows, naked all three of them, the balls of Water and Fire swinging to and fro as they meandered cow-like to the next patch of shrooms, and Slender the most cowlike of all because her large udders dragged in the weeds. They got so high they would moo and moo. Afterward they laughed at how Slender's breasts were stained green.

But that first evening when he arrived, they decided to

change his name from Walter to Water, because Fire was redheaded and energetic, and Walter seemed his opposite, dark haired and thoughtful. Slender went to the stream and brought back a handful of water. She dribbled some on his head and they chanted, "Walter to Water, Walter to Water, Water, Water," and it was done. And because Slender had just visited Winston the pig farmer for moonshine that day, they decided to get drunk and celebrate the name change, drinking from half-coconutshell cups that Slender had decorated with carvings of fish and trees. Water commented on how smooth the moonshine was and he wondered aloud how much Winston charged for the jar. Slender looked a little shy, but Fire explained: "Slender and Winston have an understanding." Winston was a thin Englishman who came to the island soon after the end of the Second World War, in which he had been a soldier. The years of sunshine had not tanned Winston, but only baked his pale skin into the unhealthy color of old raw meat. He wore round, wire-rimmed glasses and had a little shack nearby where he kept his pigs. Slender would visit him in her nakedness and in return he would give her a quart jar of his brew. That's all it was. He didn't touch her or do anything gross, nor did he speak to her in a swampy, insinuating way. Slender said that today they had talked about the weather, his pigs, and the construction going on all around everywhere but this valley, and about so many people moving here from the mainland the fresh water tables were going brackish. Winston believed, he told her, that it would take the entire human race dying off and in a million years or so everything would right itself again. Then he gave her a jar of moonshine. And that was it, nothing more.

They drank and refilled their cups. Slender went outside to the bushes and Fire lowered his voice and spoke to Water in the tone people use when telling a secret. He said there were only two rules on the farm. The first rule was that neither he nor Water could ever go to a certain grove of fruit trees in a corner of the valley, a place where every kind of fruit grew in the lush, overhanging trees. They could go anywhere but there. It was Slender's rule, and she had been living here the longest. The other rule, and Fire's voice dropped down and got even softer, was that Slender went there by herself every full-moon night, and they must never follow her. Fire drew himself back and

looked at Water with round, guileless eyes. Water said he understood and would comply, but asked why. What was in that place and what did Slender do there?

Fire had a theory. He thought she met someone for romantic moments. Because she returned in the early mornings after full-moon nights, muddy and smelling of plants and earth, but also of sex. Normally, Slender had zero interest in sex. Fire had tried to engage her at one time or another, but no go. And Fire accepted the inherent wisdom of this: they could sleep together like a couple of kittens and nothing ever happened to complicate things. But why can't we go there at other times? Water wondered. Because, Fire thought, maybe her and whoever it was she was seeing had made a little hut and wanted to keep it to themselves. Water asked if it might be Winston the pig farmer she was meeting. But Fire didn't think so, because Winston always smelled of pig slop and pig shit and she never did. But he could take a bath before meeting her. Yeah, Fire said. He just wasn't sure. But since she was the one who dealt with the landlord—Fire didn't even know his name—and put on clothes once a month to go into town and personally deliver the rent to whomever, that meant that she was the leader and they had to do what she said.

"If you stay with us, you have to follow the rules."

Water said that he would.

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Nearly six months went by, and one night, while smoking pakalolo and drinking Winston's moonshine, they became hungry and there wasn't anything around to eat, so they began reminiscing about food. With great detail they recalled Twinkies, Hostess CupCakes, Hostess Fruit Pies, and other delicacies from 7-Elevens in the past. In the middle of their laughter and fond memories, fried chicken was mentioned, and here they paused and fell silent. All three were longtime vegetarians and the thought of eating meat made them uncomfortable. They tried to move on to other treats such as Jell-O casseroles, Frito sandwiches, and bean dip, but fried chicken tugged at them and they reluctantly began to fantasize, as when traveling in a foreign country with the most wonderful cuisine you suddenly find yourself craving a hamburger. They were unable to stop thinking about how good a piece of fried chicken would be.

They kept a few birds themselves; but Slender said those chickens were friends and off-limits. However, Winston had chickens, and she would ask him about it the next day.

She returned with a chicken that she'd paid the Englishman three dollars for. At first Winston refused the money; but Slender insisted, and he, being a gentleman, acquiesced but threw an extra quart of moonshine into the deal. Once they had the chicken, they weren't sure how to kill it. None of them had ever slaughtered a chicken. Fire suggested they ask Winston to do it; but Slender told them about children she heard of in New York City who didn't know where meat came from. They thought the packaged meat came from the meat factory. The meat factory! Slender was adamant that if they were going to eat this chicken, they had to be willing to kill it themselves. Water, being the most recent addition to the farm, wanted to prove his worth. "I'll do it," he said.

The three of them took the chicken to a stump and Slender drew a line with a crayon. It was something she'd read about, and the chicken was hypnotized by that line when they put its beak there. Water raised the hatchet, but he was unable to go through with it. The bird came to its senses and ran away, and Fire had to go after it and catch it, and they tried a second time. Water raised the hatchet, whispered an apology to the bird, and brought it down. The head flew off and the bird ran jerkily away, horrifying the three, but it soon expired in the bushes. They plunged it into a pot of boiling water, as Winston had instructed, and took turns plucking it. Slender reverently gathered some of the wet feathers for decorations and rituals she later performed with stones and a candle on a ridge overlooking Kanoohe Bay.

As Fire and Water debated what came next, Slender followed a pig trail into the hills to gather additional food for the feast. She returned barefoot and naked, carrying in a gunnysack what she had foraged. She pulled a chair up close to the table and flopped her breasts on top. She was short in stature and the table was just the right height for them to rest upon.

Water brought the chicken, dusted with flour and fried. Fire followed with baked roots and a wooden bowl of boiled leaves that Slender had gathered.

They used their hands. Water gazed at the drumstick

he held aloft. "I killed it," he said, "and I will eat it," speaking more to himself than anyone, it seemed.

Fire, chewing, looked over to him and laughed softly. "That is so."

Water closed his eyes and took a bite. He chewed slowly, nodding to himself. He finished it and reached for another piece.

The fried chicken was greasy and good. Slender ate, fat dripping off the chicken onto her breasts. She massaged the chicken fat into them. "God provides," she said.

* * *

The three of them slept together without any needs that Fire or Water couldn't take care of each on their own so as not to bother Slender. And Slender went on her once-a-month excursion that became to Water as ordinary as the rising of the moon. But killing and eating that chicken had awakened something in Water. All he wanted was to eat more and more meat. Slender said it had been a useful experience, but she was going back to vegetables, and Fire had looked conflicted until Slender assured him that something like this was a personal choice and she would not judge. In that case, Fire said he was with Water regarding the meat. They asked Slender to see Winston about another chicken, and moonshine, too. But Slender said no, she did not want Winston to think she was trying to take advantage of their arrangement by returning so soon. If they wanted another chicken that badly they would need to go by themselves and pay for it, as well as for the moonshine. Fire, who by now considered Water his best friend, offered to walk with him to Winston's piggery, which was not far away. They found the tall Englishman wearing rubber boots and sloshing around the mud and pig shit. There was a smoky fire going under a cauldron with something rank boiling inside. Pigs snorted and rutted in the mud with their thick snouts to find rotting vegetables, shifting as they ate. All the odors were sharp in the nose and very strong. Winston shook their hands and wiped his wire-rimmed glasses with a handkerchief he drew from his pants pocket. He said his sow was about to throw a litter of piglets and wondered if they would like to come and see them when she did. Water didn't answer, but instead told him what they wanted and handed him some crumpled bills, unsure if it was enough. Winston returned in

a moment holding a terrified chicken upside down by its legs and a quart jar of the clear liquid.

Water had gotten over any squeamishness about killing chickens, whacking this one's head off like there was nothing to it. Plunging the headless thing into a large pot of boiling water and plucking it, scattering the wet feathers all around. And so it was that Water and Fire had their second chicken in three days. But Water, even more so than Fire, had a desire for meat that was insatiable. He returned alone for more chickens, until Winston had to say he didn't have any further to spare, needing them for eggs. But a friend of his, a hunter, had given him part of a boar that was too much for just himself, and Water could have some ribs and a leg if he liked. The Englishman had learned true generosity from the local people, who had historically given away everything to their own detriment, and Water took the meat with hardly a thank you. When Slender asked how much he'd paid and he told her he'd paid nothing, she scolded him and sent him back to Winston the next day with a basket of mangoes, avocados, breadfruit, and a five-dollar bill.

The meat satisfied Water for a may be a week, and then he was ready for more. It was like an addiction. But that's how he was, he knew, when something got in his head like this he couldn't let it go, until he either attained it and was satisfied or it blew up in his face, ruined beyond redemption. He could count the number of times he had done this by the many different jobs he'd been fired from, the many relationships he'd worn out, and the many places he'd relocated to, away from what he'd destroyed. And now it was on him again, driving him, demanding he do something stupid. He knew where Slender kept the rent money, and he stole some of it and bought a suckling piglet from Winston, just a week or so old, and had Winston kill and dress it for him because Water didn't know how. He brought it back and he and Fire roasted it over coals. As he ate, Water tore into it so savagely that his two friends looked at each other in alarm. Soon afterward Slender discovered the money was missing. She wasn't angry, but sad and despondent at what Water had done. She explained to Water how to make it right, and the next day he went to see Winston, who laughed and gave back all the money, and Water spent the next three days doing whatever chores Winston needed done with the pigs. During that time he

smelled like a pigpen and had to sleep in the corner of the bedroom away from Slender and Fire.

Perhaps it is true that eating meat can change a person's comportment, because Water changed, not in an aggressive way, as in having violent tendencies; but as in becoming obsessively enamored of Slender. He followed her everywhere like a sad-eyed dog. One night he tried to cuddle up to Slender with an erection and she had to tell him sternly to stay the fuck away. Or she would cut off his balls. This was not to be taken lightly, because Slender had once told Fire and Water how she had stabbed a man who'd accosted her on the subway and tried to follow her to the apartment where she lived. Slabbed him right in the stomach and walked away without looking back as he lay moaning under a street lamp on the New York City sidewalk. She left him lying there like it was nothing. "Like fucking nothing," she'd said.

Poor Water, all he could do was get up every night and go outside to masturbate into the little stream that ran alongside the house, turning halfway around to stare longingly into the bedroom window, hoping to catch a glimpse of Slender. Both Slender and Fire told him that he was disgusting and that he better wash his hands.

Every movement of hers, every gesture, was filled with beauty to Water, and this in turn filled him with more longing and desire. He couldn't keep his eyes off Slender, staring like he wanted to eat her all up.

* * *

Now, as she lay upon the couch, Water gazed at her and couldn't stop thinking about what was later to come. Her journey to the secret place, the mysterious stranger. The thought of her making love under the moonlight with another man made his stomach hurt like a child's. She rested on the sofa, conserving energy. He'd seen her waking from small naps to smile as though remembering a pleasant dream. When it got darker, she would leave the house to spend the rest of the night in the valley. The thought of it filled Water with rage.

It was late when she called them to sit on the floor around a small banana leaf laden with fern leaves, plumeria flowers, sleeping grass, pieces of fruit, and a pile of mushrooms. It was the same ritual they performed every month. "Eat," she said, and they consumed the mushrooms.

Slender lit a candle and they joined hands. “We need the magic of the moment,” they repeated after her, and Water distractedly contemplated the earthy taste. Then Slender chanted and half sang in the language Fire told him was the Hawaiian language that Slender had learned from who knows where. Water fixed his sad eyes on Slender. He was full of wretched thoughts. It was truly love, but of the horrible variety. Finally, Slender rose and silently embraced them, holding Water a bit longer as if to reassure him, and stepped out the screen door into the night.

In just a few minutes Water rose to his feet and announced to Fire what he’d been planning all week; it issued from his mouth with a force that would accept no denial. He would follow Slender and find out whom she was meeting. He couldn’t stand it and had to know. His words were like hard stones, the same ones he had thrown before in his life for better or for worse. He stared intensely at Fire. “I’ll come with you,” Fire said.

The moon was gigantic, heavy, it frightened Water in its close proximity. It had a mournful face that might have been a warning. They saw Slender not far ahead, descending into the valley beneath the pale light. “We know where she’s going. Let’s hang back,” Fire cautioned. As they waited, the mushrooms they had eaten stretched minutes into hours and made them lose track of themselves. They hurried down the trail quickly, afraid she was already gone. But her naked, moonlit figure was gliding through the tall grass in the shimmering night.

As he gazed upon the valley spread before him and the dark mountains enclosing it, Water sensed the moonlit landscape was more than a pale imitation of the day. It had become a different time, one untouched by men. “Ten thousand years,” he whispered to Fire, who gazed back with round, wide eyes. Flowers opened and closed before them. Bats and giant moths flew through the air. Plants swayed in unison with other plants though all was still and without the hint of a breeze. “Put this against your cheek,” Fire said, and he handed him a stone. He did and found the stone held the warmth of the day. “It’s warm,” he said, dreamily. “It’s conscious,” Fire said, just as dreamily. “Lie in the grass like this and smell the dirt,” Fire said.

Ahead, Slender had reached the forbidden grove and there she paused and seemed to wait. They watched from behind a few small trees as she trailed her fingers across

the tops of the tall grasses that undulated softly against her legs. She bent down and gathered flowers and wove them into her hair. Seeing this, Water sobbed quietly as though a hand had wrung something from his heart.

It must have been midnight when a figure appeared to stride through the grass to Slender. In the light from the moon they could see he was an unnaturally large man, naked and dark-skinned. Standing next to Slender he seemed a giant. No words were exchanged. She followed him toward the grove. Water tried to stand, but Fire pulled him back, saying, “Don’t look how big he is. He’ll fuck you up.”

But Water shook away and stepped into the open. “Slender,” he called out.

Both figures turned. Slender raised her arms as if to push them back. The man went into the shadows and disappeared.

Slender hurried after him into the dark grove. Water and Fire waited in the moonlight. They heard Slender calling a name. Then a long period of silence.

* * *

In less than a week, the survey flags began to appear. With Slender gone there was nothing keeping Water and Fire from going anywhere they wished in the valley, and they saw the flags along the way. They tore them out and laid them in the bushes, but it didn’t matter. The flags were soon replaced and they left the new flags untouched, afraid of being caught and beaten by survey workers, who now roamed the valley in their orange vests. They found the forbidden grove and it was dying. Fruit lay on the ground, rotting with a sickly-sweet stench, and the trees were withered and bare. It was silent but for the whining of mosquitoes and swarming of fruit flies. There wasn’t a hut or anything like one. Although they did find a bed-like pile of dry fern leaves that Water rubbed between his fingers and sniffed.

The bulldozers came, rattling and roaring and smoking across the land, and in what seemed a short time the valley was like all the other valleys, filled with housing tracts, asphalt streets, and cul-de-sacs. Water and Fire thought their farm would be spared because the building was going on farther below in the valley. But one day they found a note taped to their door from the landlord. A notice that he was kicking them out to demolish the old place and build several new houses to sell.

Slender left that morning after the full-moon night when they had disobeyed and followed her. Oh, how they wished she was still sleeping, wrapped in her bedsheets, muddy and smelling of different smells! But she was dressed in her going-to-down-to-pay-rent clothes: a Jimi Hendrix T-shirt, jeans, slippers, and slung over her shoulders was a small rucksack of her things. She walked away without a goodbye, not one word to either Water or Fire, though Water trailed behind saying her name over and over pitifully. Until she stopped and scratched something on a piece of paper, thrust it at Water, and hurried away. She may have had a tear in her eye, Water said. He showed the note to Fire. She had written *Landlord* and a telephone number.

They sat around, listlessly, on the day she left, then decided to visit Winston for moonshine. They told him Slender was gone. He sighed deeply, contemplating his misfortune. Then he shrugged in the universal gesture of acceptance and the spirit of carrying on. “Two-dollar quart, you ugly buggers.” They didn’t tell him about the giant dark man. It was too weird. Winston would have accused them of being high, and they had been, so there didn’t seem to be a point in trying to argue it had really happened.

On the day they left the farm for good they came upon a crew of workers in orange vests lugging away at bushes and setting up surveying equipment. Water and Fire passed a white pickup truck where a man consulted a large sheet of paper spread across the hood. Water stopped for a moment to see what it was. The man told him it was a map. It had wavy lines and numbers but nothing on it that Water could recognize.

It was about three miles to the Kam Highway, where they planned to hitchhike into town and stay at the house in Honolulu that Water knew about. “Everyone gets stoned and has sex,” he told Fire. Fire liked the idea. “Right on,” he said.

They walked past taro fields where long rows of water glistened in the afternoon light and dark-green, pointed leaves grew from the mud. They passed the water buffalo, who stared at them as if it knew what they had done.

On the same day, at his pippen, Winston thought about Slender. He would miss her. She had been a good listener, not like those other two. The other two only wanted to get what they came for and leave without bothering to be

neighborly, not even a little bit, always in a hurry to go on about their own selfish business. Idiots. Soon everything, the whole world, would go that way. He’d seen the men in their orange vests roaming around.

He found a pail of strawberry guavas crawling with maggots and dumped them into the mud. His pigs swarmed upon the rotten fruit, grunting and pushing to have it first. Someday, sooner rather than later, Winston thought, the entire world will be paved over, all the valleys and plains, wetlands and dry lands, all things of beauty to be used and discarded when the life inside had been wrung away. He unscrewed the lid from a jar and took a sip. Someday the only relationship people will have with nature will be in dying, he thought. It’s all that will be left.

Winston had received notice himself that morning. Like Slender, he would just walk away. Let the pigs loose into the hills, where they might have a chance. He took off his glasses and cleaned the lenses with a handkerchief from his pocket, making a list in his mind of everything he needed to do. Then he put the glasses back on and began to gather his things.

Ben Masaoka was born and raised in Los Angeles, California, a third-generation Japanese American now living in Seattle, Washington. Married, he has three children and an old black cat named Kuroneko. A newly retired teacher, Masaoka is working on a novel. He has published in the *Chicago Quarterly Review*.