

# Yalobusha Review

---

Volume 33 *Volume 33*

Article 5

---

Spring 2021

## In Island Time

Stefan Milne

Follow this and additional works at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/yr>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#), [Nonfiction Commons](#), and the [Poetry Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Milne, Stefan (2021) "In Island Time," *Yalobusha Review*: Vol. 33 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/yr/vol33/iss1/5>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by the English at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Yalobusha Review by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact [egrove@olemiss.edu](mailto:egrove@olemiss.edu).

# IN ISLAND TIME

Stefan Milne

Matt chewed the woody core of a pineapple and talked about the corruption of the body—something about how dendrites die like the branches of old trees. “The body renews itself every seven years,” he said. “I believe with exercise and diet I can get that down to three.” Then he did a handstand and talked about how fasting prunes the ruined dendrites. He used the word *mitochondria*. He used the word *autophagy*. The pineapple core—I ate the flesh—was his evening dessert. For dinner he had half a cabbage, half a chicken. He wouldn’t eat again until the next evening. He’d been bothering me to go spearfishing with him, so we could fend for ourselves, live off the land and sea like the natives, he said.

Now, on the bamboo floor, he plucked about on his palms. His feet teetered but did not fall. Blood rushed to his face, ruddied it. His lips engorged. The veins in his temples thickened.

He said *autophagy* again.

We were in love, I suppose. Not anymore, yet we kept up appearances for others, for ourselves. “You love him,” I’d mouth in the mirror, staring into my own eyes until they abstracted, puddles disassociated from the act of seeing themselves. At first, his hard pale body wooed me and I ran my fingers over its smooth lines like some design breakthrough, a new iPhone or airplane. Now, we rented on Maui and I hated him. My contempt had come on slowly, like a bath you draw hot and find yourself in an hour later, knowing only that the air outside is a measure colder.

We’d been living in Seattle, separately. Then he said: “We both work remote. Why don’t we do the nomad life.” So we tore off in Boeing 737s, in Airbus A320s, sitting behind the engines and watching exhaust tremble in the air. In Oaxaca, in a little smoke-filled building, we ate tlayuda stuffed with cheese and squash blossom. “Auto-immune diseases are less prevalent in the developing world,” he said. “America is too clean.” He hardly washed his hands and ate recklessly: sliced mangos from a street dealer who worked with bare hands, tepid chicken mole from a hotel buffet. He got fast, sour diarrhea. In Brazil, he undertook a carnivore

diet, all pink Himalayan salt and grass-fed beef. After a week, his heart palpitated and he twitched as he slept. Awake, I watched. A flickering left peck. The strange jolt of a limb. All this, he figured, stretched the creatural parameters of the body, the cells' yearning for diversity, as if he were attempting a form of radical microbial inclusion. In Bali, he jogged to a coworking space in the jungle and took selfies at holy sites. In Rayong, in the throes of ketosis, he swooned for coconut milk prices, 30 baht for a liter. I knew few things about Matt, truly, but I knew this: he believed in coconuts.

Now we were in Wailuku indefinitely. Wild chickens wandered outside our house, their nails clicking against the asphalt. It was winter, and heavy clouds often crowned the mountains on either side of the island. But down here, sun ruined cars in a matter of years, the paint peeling away in the blaze, and I felt kindred with them, some transient thing suffering under the sky.

Matt went to bed. Unless he was out with locals, accruing authenticity, he hewed to sun cycles. He'd wake early to code on contract for Facebook, or Lyft, or some startup. I woke later and edited vanity manuscripts. My website said I had an MFA.

Early on, he'd tried to inoculate me with his rigor, his minimalism. His version involved buying increasingly expensive things—believing you should delight in your few possessions—and throwing out their cheaper, more multitude versions. His stance made no sense to me. Nevertheless, back then, I was trying to remake myself in his image. So I purged. Old, wilted underwear. Paperbacks with frayed bindings. Plastic bags I'd stuffed in other plastic bags. A sweater my grandma brought me from Mexico.

"You never wear it."

"My grandma is dead," I said.

"Still," he said, "it's acrylic."

When he went to bed, I sat in the large house and slumped toward indulgence. I had some tequila and smoked at a joint. I ate poke, fruit, macadamia nuts, chocolate until my stomach swelled and ached. I chewed my ratty fingernails, exposing a little more of the raw, fascinating flesh beneath. I watched the trees in our backyard. Did they qualify as a grove? Either way, I mouthed their names like an incantation: Grapefruit, kumquat, papaya, avocado, orange, lemon, lime.

Mornings, picking citrus, I felt like someone in a creation myth. After college, I'd taught English in Prague, then moved to Seattle—my life a study in gradients of gray. The Hawaiian sun suspended me in unreality.

The trees sat so low and offered such abundance that fruit dropped to the grass and rotted. I loved those trees. Tending them, watering, picking up the fallen fruit, even attempting to prune, was my only act of stewardship. The house's family was on a Christian missionary trip to Israel, arguing exhaustively, I assumed, over Christ's divinity. In the bedrooms here, cross-stitched bible verses adorned walls: *Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. One just said: Jesus wept.*

The family was also unconcerned with possessions. When Linda, from next door, handed over a key, she told us not to bother closing windows. I messaged the family to confirm. "Yes," they wrote back, "keeps the place aired out." I often went to the store and, returning home, thrilled that the house might have been robbed—the flat screens unbolted from the walls, the precision Italian espresso machine hauled from the counter. In this future, I was innocent.

Outside, wind hit the trees. A halogen lamp poured light by the house, but in the grove, shadows fell everywhere. I oozed deeper into the couch and, through the sliding door's screen, watched the branches' dark sway. The white plastic doorway framed the scene, leaves at the edges, a pocket of grass in the grove's center, light pooling there. My joint struggled in the ashtray. A thread of smoke rose. A grapefruit sat in my lap like a wish. My hand had to travel. But it did, eventually, rising heavy from the cushion and taking the fat orb. My thumbnail drove into the skin. Oils misted. I pushed further, until I tore away the rind in chunks. When I bit a wedge, the vesicles issued bitter lightning.

I wore only underwear and a pair of designer sunglasses I'd found in a nightstand (I imagined the family's things as my own—blotting water with a tampon, testing a prescription cream on a rash, adding my height-line to a doorjamb, an inch above *Christopher 11/04/19*). Through the glasses, I stared at my bare thighs.

A twig snapped.

When I looked up, someone was in the yard. Small and pudgy and dark, a boy, I thought first, wearing only shorts and a t-shirt and a straw hat, but as he moved through shadows, wrinkles seemed to flicker across his surfaces, and small breasts appeared and vanished, and I reconsidered. Perhaps it was an old woman.

Time slowed. I tried to say hello but it didn't escape me. She—but no, it was a child, a boy or girl—took a grapefruit, then another. The violation gripped me. I could not eat all the fruit. But it was mine to give. Linda next door had no trees and I gladly offered to her.

"Hey," I said.

The body faced me, a grapefruit in each hand. I wondered if I could hear breath. My skin bristled in waves. Then the child left. I peeled myself from the couch and heard the fence gate creak and checked all the windows. I saw nothing but heard a small laugh distantly. I took the sunglasses off and rubbed my eyes, hoping this would retroactively right my vision, clear this history, but I saw the same place.

The door had framed the body precisely, a composition. As if in a gallery, I paid deeper attention to my memory. What were the facts? A human form, the fruit taken. The height I could be confident about. To what degree were the age and gender and race my own projections? To what degree did I create the scene? It seemed, with the body no longer present, a sort of religious experience.

Upstairs, Matt woke when I got in bed. He pawed at my body. We fucked as if deep in the ocean, silent and cool and slow. He finished soon—a virility indicator, he believed.

"There was a person in the backyard," I said. "Stealing fruit."

His voice, sticky with sleep: "So?"

I was silent a long time. The ceiling fan huffed above, its blades a blur. Then: "I'm not sure why it bothered me but it did. Maybe I'll put out a free box."

Matt slept.

"You should come," Matt said, standing there with his duffle bag. He was going spearfishing with locals. We'd already had this conversation, but he brought it up like he didn't recall.

When we started dating, I'd tried to keep up with him, and he still imagined me as a person who did things. He did not understand that my actions during those first

months were a metaphor for my attraction, not a coherent self. In fact, I most resemble a blank space, a passivity. When younger, I tried to obscure this, assembling unambiguous personae—a goth in high school, a hemp-swaddled activist in college. Sometimes, I felt the impulse to help people, perhaps tutor or volunteer at a food bank. But if I did nothing, and generally I did nothing, it faded. Sometimes just the thought was enough. Wasn't I better than some? At least I had capacities.

"I'll just stay here, I think."

"You hardly leave the couch."

"I'm a slug. I've turned into a slug under the sun."

"We're in paradise."

"I'm a banana slug."

He squinted. Before he walked out he said, "Maybe you're just in island time."

He said this often, when I was late or inefficient. *In island time*, instead of *on*. As if the people here were submerged in liquid, or something more viscous, an oil, a gel. It connoted almost another era. We get lost *in* the past, not *on* it. I wondered if, speaking this way, he was leaving me in his own future past. I could admire that.

I found a plastic crate in the garage and sprayed it off. The hose water smelled of warm rubber: the scent tried to take me back somewhere, another life or childhood, an Iowan pastoral in which I'd run through a sprinkler on a sun-stippled suburban lawn, but I wouldn't allow it: I stayed here. I taped a sheet of printer paper to the front of the crate, a single word in blue pen, FREE, and filled the crate with a little of everything—even a spare pineapple we'd bought from Costco. I put it on the front porch and made sure the lamp would come on when the sun fell. I counted the grapefruits on the tree (12). I counted the papayas (9).

That night I watched the grove again and listened for someone rustling in the fruit box. When I woke on the couch in the middle of the night, rain poured from the roof and slapped the patio. I smoked the rest of the joint and went back to sleep.

When I woke again, Matt sat on an exercise ball at his computer. He had earbuds

in. He was trying to optimize some company's employee interface, streamline remote work in Dubai, or perhaps Mumbai. He prickled if you called such work neo-colonial. Eventually, he left the earbuds and went to the bathroom. I went over, picked up one, and slipped its hard white plastic into my ear.

In the tiny speaker, a baritone: "Where once their island diet kept them trim, Hawaii's people now suffer high rates of obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. Today we'll hear from Anthony Booker about the return to an ancestral diet." Theme music. "You're listening to *Biohacking the Islands*. Here's your local word of the week. Humuhumunukunukuapua'a. We'll slow it down. Humu... humu... nu... kunu... kua... pua... a."

I'd met Matt in a ramen restaurant on the Amazon campus. I was downtown, depressed about my dour finances, and went to drown my feelings in broth. A white guy with a ponytail, who over-pronounced shiitake, sold me a lukewarm bowl for \$17 and Sapporo for \$8. "The restaurant is bought out," he said. "But most of them didn't show, so you can stay."

"Hibiki shots!" a ruddy bald man shouted.

"It's too much for a shot," someone said.

"It's uncle Jeff's money," the guy slurred.

"Would you like one?" a voice said. I turned and it was Matt.

"Sure," I said.

He had four lumps of nigiri rice in front of him on a rectangular black plate.

"You just ordered rice?"

"I ate the salmon."

Over the night, I had four Hibikis and some bacon uni shooters on the company tab. In the first months we dated—during which Matt bought us low-carb dinners at every good restaurant in town—his offerings seemed purely generous. But now, standing in an Airbnb for which he paid, I wasn't sure Matt knew generosity. That would speak to an interior life that I do not believe he had. He just proceeded with the expectation that he and the world were in harmony. The world rewarded this

and perpetuated it.

Matt grew up with two parents on Mercer Island, an only child in a three-story house, a child who had braces turn his teeth mathematically straight, who got boneless skinless chicken breast one decade and acai berries the next, who played lacrosse in high school, who could tell by touch that a certain denim was Japanese, who did not hesitate over which was the salad fork and which was the dessert fork. He went to Yale, slid coolly into a position at Microsoft, then switched to Amazon, then, not yet thirty but deciding he needed greater autonomy, turned to contract work.

I could not imagine what he saw in me. I clipped my toenails and let them fly to the floor. I sucked on mango pits and left them on the cutting board until fruit flies swarmed. I was convinced the insides of my body were rotting, like produce you lose in the back of the fridge, and assumed he could smell this.

I set the earbud down. I went outside. I checked my trees: 12 grapefruit, but only 7 papaya. I checked my fruit box. The rain had hit the paper sign, the word FREE now abstract, a blue ink bloom. All the fruit remained.

Matt's group bailed and he needed a spearfishing spotter. I said okay. He'd actually bought a spear gun, a long teak thing with elaborate bands. At the beach, as we left the car, a woman in a wetsuit was coming in. Matt said something to her—he'd talk to anyone—and I walked down through the beach brush.

A Monday afternoon. Just some tourists trying to snorkel. I watched them flop about. I sat on my towel and rubbed myself with sunscreen. Its zinc left chalky streaks. I wanted to become a new person, or hoped I could be in three years, so I embraced the smell, its threads of memory. The lake by our house, goose shit on the hard grass. The boy I'd been enamored of. I did not then understand the many reasons for his lacking interest. He was, for instance, rich. He laughed me off when I asked him to sunscreen the spot on my back. I remember that laugh, full and clear. I remember the feeling of my shoulder straining in the socket as I reached for my own skin.

Eventually Matt carried over his enormous duffle. As I rubbed sunscreen into my stomach, he started pulling on a wetsuit and snorkel. He even had thick gloves, a weighted belt, a knife, a buoy.

“Can you go out on that cropping of rocks and check that I come up every once in a while? There are other divers out, so I think I’ll be fine, but better safe than sorry.”

I nodded and opened a bottle of kombucha. I did not like it but I was being good. He trudged into the surf and slipped on his fins and swam off. I stared at the sea. I know I was supposed to feel pensive—the cerulean water, the perfectly tan sand. I was expected to have an epiphany. The waves sloshed in, and they did calm me, but that seemed a cliché.

My eyes were closed, my skin hot. Matt’s voice called out in pinched glee, but the wind took the words. On my towel, I propped myself onto my elbows. He walked up the beach, grinning terribly, sand sticking to his feet. Impaled on his spear: a large dark fish. He got close enough I could see a little blood. The fish looked prehistoric, covered in tiny neon blue dots, its mouth stupidly agape.

“I got one!”

“Can you take those? It looks like the ones in a doctor’s office tank?”

“They’re invasive. You’re supposed to get them.” He dropped most of his gear in the sand. Then he just stood there, dripping, still holding the spear. “Were you asleep? I didn’t see you when I came up.”

“I must have blended with the rocks.”

I assume he knew I was lying since I often assumed he was lying. But he did not stop smiling. He had too much momentum for that. Any offense was already in his past, and no harm had come of it.

“Well, I’m just happy I got one,” he said. His happiness seemed pure. I liked to be near it. I had a sense, sudden and acute, of why I thought I loved him once.

“Would you take a picture?” he said.

I went searching for my phone, found it half-buried in the sand.

“Mine has a better camera,” he said. He nodded toward his duffle bag. I pulled it out and took a few pictures of him with the dead thing.

A small bite and I stopped. Matt had grilled the fish whole. He peeled the blackened skin and white flesh from the bones with his fingers. He must have spent a grand on gear, but he was indulging some ancestral narrative. “This is how it should be,” he said between bites. “The body goes days without food, just some foraged leaves or fruit. Then the hunt is successful and you feast.”

“Have you not eaten in days?”

“Hardly.”

He poured a third tequila and filled my glass too. I wanted Spam musubi—wanted to open its warm cellophane with anticipation, like the robes of a new lover. I slicked it with kewpie mayo, which moistened the rice and kept the nori from sticking to my mouth.

I took another bite of the avocado, carrot, and orange salad. The macadamias crunched like gravel. He scooped up a second helping. I was convinced he did not taste the things he ate, sucking them past his tongue in nutrient greed. Why was his hunger so repulsive?

“The oranges have sugar,” I said.

“I’m feasting today.”

I nodded.

“I’m going for a walk.”

I circled the block, smoking a joint. I went to the porch and accumulated on a wicker couch, in the halogen light. I looked at the box of free fruit, still full. I could smell its overripeness, the edge of alcohol. I pressed on a mango’s bruise and my finger went in. I wiped the brown goo on the couch cushion. I checked my phone and saw that Matt had posted the fish picture: Success! #islandlife #paradise #huntergatherer

Waking, I heard him through the open window: He was on the toilet, the door ajar, and his shit slapped the water, liquid on liquid. Then the retching. A breeze came and cooled me. I went back to sleep. When I got up that morning, I found him in

bed beneath blankets. I shook him awake.

“What’s wrong with you?”

“I’m dying,” he said. He smelled like vomit and sweat.

At the hospital, they told us he had ciguatera, a form of food poisoning from Roi, an invasive reef fish. “Like a king,” the doctor said. I didn’t know what she meant. She had a unibrow and a blank, piercing stare, like a piece of broken porcelain. She told me this because she was not sure Matt would remember.

“Most people recover in a few weeks. Sometimes they die. But mostly not,” she said. “Sometimes the neurological symptoms are chronic....”

“But mostly not,” I said.

She nodded. Matt groaned. When she rolled her eyes, I loved her. I wanted to pull the scrunchie from her ponytail. I imagined us silently sitting together on a couch.

In the next few days, a deep lethargy and body aches subsumed Matt. As he slept, I sat on his exercise ball and researched his condition. I felt happy for the first time in months, wriggling as I read symptoms lists, case studies. The medical terminology came alive. I’d never had words before for how he really felt. Now they marched down pages and I heard them in the doctor’s frosted monotone: extremity pruritus; paresthesia of mouth, hands, feet; myalgia and cold allodynia; potential hallucinations. Soon, some manifested. He spat out ice water and claimed it was scalding. His fingertips numbed, tingled. He moaned like a hurt dog, as if the sound might alter the course of things, reinstate his contract with the world. He called his parents and complained. Over speakerphone, I heard his mother softly agree: “It’s just not fair, honey.”

The missionaries returned. As we parted—us from the house, and me from Matt—they gave me a tiny bible. It contained only the New Testament and Psalms and Proverbs, a book cleansed of the history in which God appointed kings with glittering wealth and sweeping harems, and brought plagues to the Egyptians, and sanctioned the Israelites to murder cities. “As for the women, the children, the livestock and everything else in the city, you may take these as plunder for yourselves.” No one needlepointed that. I asked the woman, Miriam, about the child in the yard. “The *child*,” I said. “Who comes and takes fruit.” She looked at me

as if I'd dreamed it, projected my guilt on the lawn.

I do not believe that was the case. Sometimes, before they'd returned, as Matt lay upstairs sick, I stared at the yard, hoping. I chewed my fingernails until the cuticles bled. Sometimes the child appeared. I did not rise to chase her. My heart was soothed. I thought to offer food—or help, for surely a child stealing fruit by night needed help—but that wasn't our contract. Who was I to remake the world?

Instead, I tried to comprehend what she meant. I changed my language. It wasn't *theft*. It was *harvest*. The grapefruits were hers as much as mine. I imagined their nutrients flushing through her body. She made her own way in the world. I could not find such fortitude in my own life, but I treasured hers. I believed my silence could save her. I watched her palm a fat fruit, tug it from the tree. The branches shook, then went still. I hoped she would take more, the sunglasses, the flat screens, the espresso machine, the height lines on the doorjamb, the structure itself.

---

STEFAN MILNE is a writer and editor based in Seattle. His work has appeared in *Gargoyle Magazine*, *Flyway: Journal of Writing and Environment*, and elsewhere. He's currently the arts editor at *Seattle Met* magazine.