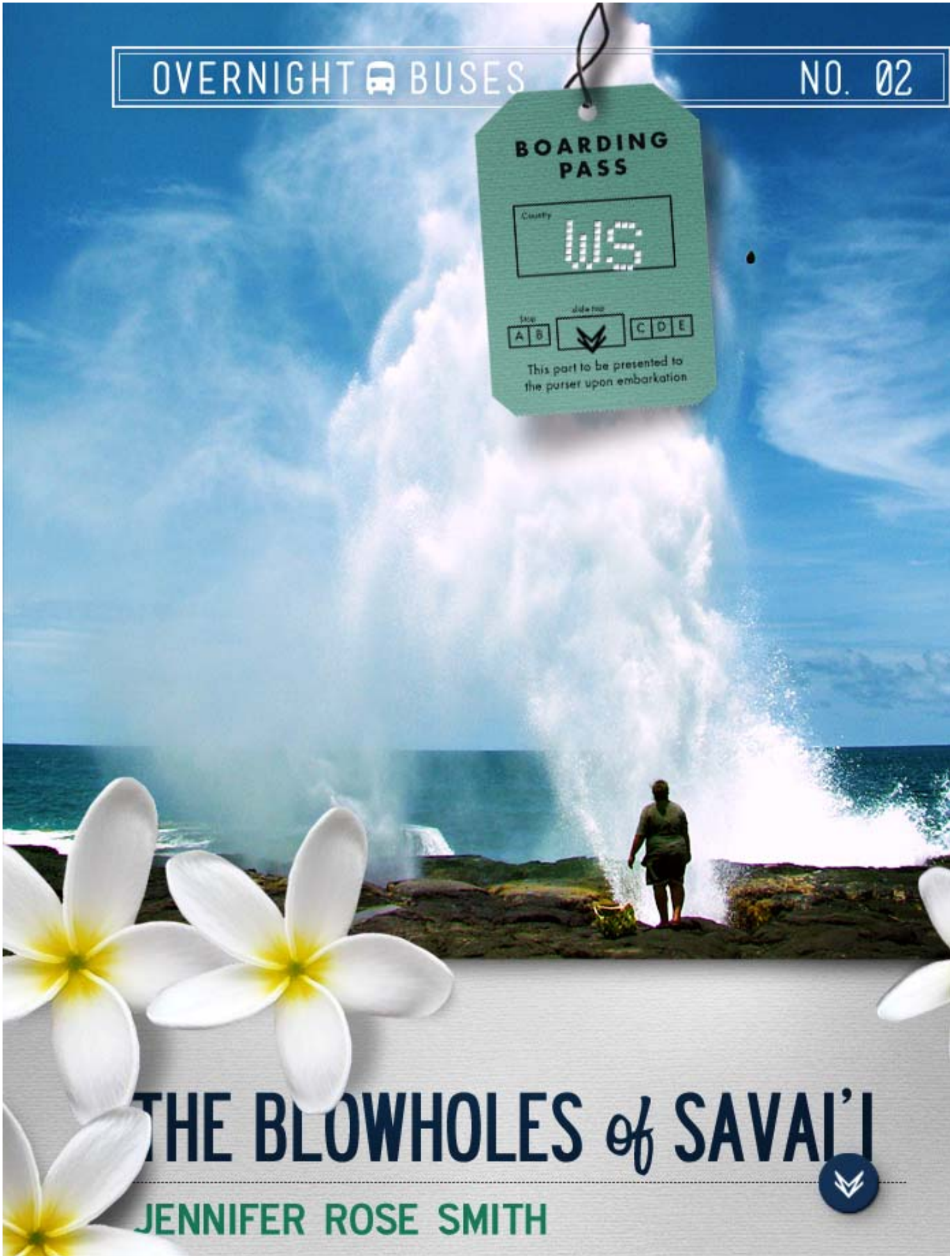
OVERNIGHT BUSES
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THE BLOWHOLES of SAVAI'I
JENNIFER ROSE SMITH

We stopped our bikes on the red dirt crossing of two unmarked roads. That there was no sign did not surprise us. We hadn't seen a sign all week. At that quiet, dusty intersection were several smiling children and a group of whip-thin dogs, nipping at our feet and wheels. Pinned under my front tire was a small, foil bag, inscrutably labelled *Chicken Balls*.

For five days we'd been riding our bicycles around Savai'i, the larger and wilder of Western Samoa's two main islands. We'd been on a tropical schedule, rising before dawn brought the South Pacific's drilling sun above the horizon and ensuring that by 11 am we were propped against the open wood frame of a *fale* hut, sipping from a coconut and eating fruit off one of the island's many communal trees.

On that day, though, we hadn't planned so well. By the time I ran over the chicken balls it was 3pm and the afternoon heat distorted the road into a shimmering, curving river that disappeared into haze 50 meters away.

Outside of the island's single main settlement, Savai'i does not have restaurants or stores, and I'd relished its remoteness until just that moment, when our water had been long since drunk and our stomachs growled with hunger.

Normally we would just pull off the road and ask someone to find us a coconut, offer them a few coins to climb up a tree, cut it down, and slice off the top so we could drink the pure juice inside. Since early morning, though, we had pedaled through desolate stretches of logged land and deserted cacao plantations. We saw dozens of coconut trees, but previous experiences with climbing them had left us bleeding, and opening coconuts without a machete is no small feat.

The one bus that circled the island each day had passed hours ago, while we waved and hooted in response to the passengers who hung

out of every window, brandishing cloths and shouting " *bye-bye! bye-bye!*". That English phrase had greeted us all week, and stumped us. Of all the words that vacationing Australians might have left behind, it seemed a strange choice. What about *Hello*? Each time we rode into a group of *fale*, a welcoming committee of children gathered, chasing us down the street. We tried out the Samoan words that we'd memorized, greeting them with "*Malo*", or "*Talofa Lava*". The kids were just as intent as we on practicing their foreign language skills, and they replied in unison: "*bye-bye!*".

Exhausted by the heat, and the long day of riding, we needed to drink, and eat. We also needed a place to spend the night, and in Samoa that means a *fale*, an open sided platform that is raised off the sand and covered with a thatch roof. We had been told that there were *fale* down this road, by the island's remote and spectacular blowholes, lava tubes that funnel the pounding Pacific surf into powerful geysers.

Using our phrasebook Samoan, we asked the kids at the crossroads about the *fale*, the blowholes. Delighted, they shouted " *bye-bye!*" and hid behind a nearby tree.

Peeking out and cracking jokes, they were having a great time, but I was worried. If this road took us down to a deserted beach or another cacao plantation, there would be no water, no way of retrieving or opening coconuts, and no food. If there were homes, well, we could ask for coconuts, but I hated to burden the Samoans' legendary hospitality by asking for dinner and a place to sleep in a family *fale*. Still, continuing on the main road was no guarantee, so we crossed our fingers, said "*bye-bye!*" to the children, and pedaled away down the red dirt.

Cycling in Savai'i had taken a bit of faith, some patience, and a great deal of waiting. With no real map and no road signs, we followed directions that we half understood, using scrawled drawings whose landmarks were bends in the road or unusually large mango trees. When we reached our destinations, sometimes just a beach with a deserted *fale*, we waited. It's a small island. Eventually, the reasoning goes, someone is bound to notice that you're there.

Notwithstanding the scorching temperatures and packs of feral dogs, it was that faith, along with the constant waiting that became the hardest part. Before arriving in the South Pacific we'd been touring the US in our 16 year old Mercury Tracer which we stuffed with enough camping gear for an unsupported arctic crossing. We'd watched heat lightning at midnight in the badlands of South Dakota, and dodged tornadoes in Nebraska, taking shelter in a farmhouse that was miles from nowhere. We'd slept in ditches under Western stars, but always with that Tracer nearby, always full of food and water.

This was different. With no stores and few preserved foods, we didn't have the luxury of filling our panniers with provisions for a week. As far as water, well, at the rate we were drinking, we'd need to carry 3 gallons a day. And so we waited, and we tried to believe that this lush land and its gracious inhabitants would somehow take care of us. It

had turned out to be true, so far.

As we continued down the path, the cleared corridor of the main road gave way to the thick, tropical forest that covers most of the island. The trees' broad leaves were intensely green, glistening and damp in the humid air. Jade colored bushes were bursting with brilliant flowers, impossibly sunset-hued whorls of pink and yellow that attracted butterflies the size of my palm. The drone of insects and birds that had followed us all day became deafening as we bumped down the narrowing road.

After half a mile, the dirt dissolved into sand. A few *fale* were scattered on the beach, which ended in sharp, black lava rocks that receded steeply to the pulsing ocean. We stopped on the sand, leaning our bikes against the razor-scaled trunk of a coconut tree. " *Is this the right place?*" D. asked, sounding doubtful. I was wondering the same thing.

Suddenly we heard a resounding boom, a noise like a kettledrum, or coupling railroad cars. Turning toward the sea-cliffs, we watched in astonishment as a thin column of water shot up from the rocks, climbed 40 feet above our heads, and subsided as quickly as it came. We had found the blowholes.

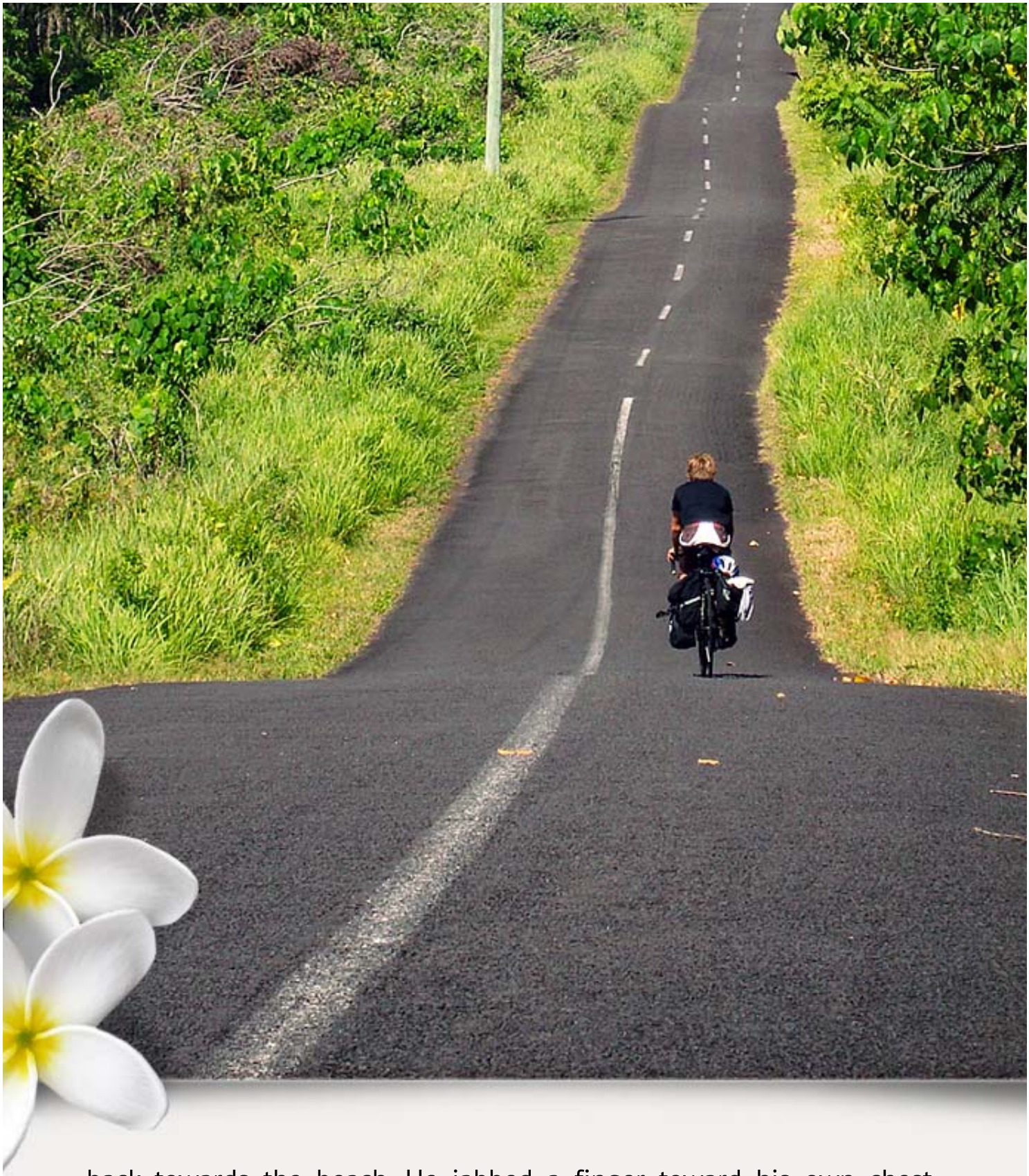
As we stared at the black cliffs, an old man approached from behind the *fale* wearing a faded sarong and carrying a machete.

"*Talofa lava*", I said, "Hello".

He nodded, smiling broadly and returned the greeting, saying, "*Talofa*".

"*Fale*?" I asked, pointing towards the cluster of platforms.

He nodded again, also pointing. He spoke some more words in Samoan, then noticing our confusion, held two fingers pointing downwards like legs, walked them in the direction of the road, then



back towards the beach. He jabbed a finger toward his own chest. Turning it towards us, he gestured towards the shade of the *fale*.

Of course. He wanted us to wait. That's how it works. While *fale* are collective, usually there is a person who is responsible for arranging

food and bedding for guests and taking payments, which are given to the local chief to distribute. He was probably leaving to look for that person. Still, we were terribly thirsty, and things happen slowly in Samoa. We could be here for hours before anyone came back. I held up an empty water bottle, and smiled. He beamed back at us, held up a finger and walked away towards a row of coconut trees. After a few steps he turned back, and seeing us still standing, motioned emphatically towards the *fale*.

We crossed the hot sand and settled onto the rough-cut boards of the platform. From our comfortable perch we watched as the man climbed the tree with apparent ease, his machete tucked into the knotted waist of his *sarong*. At the top of the slender trunk he whisked out the blade and quickly dispatched a dozen smooth, green coconuts to the sand 20 feet below. Gathering a pile of them in his arms he returned to our spot in the shade. Working delicately with the long

machete, he sliced through the tough husks, cutting off the top of each nut then replacing it, creating a little cap. When he'd finished, he piled them in a neat pyramid, and with a wave he crossed the sand, bypassing the packed dirt road that we'd arrived on and disappeared into a tiny opening in the trees.

With backs propped against the *fale*, we tilted a couple of coconuts to our lips and breathed a sigh of relief. The Pacific put on quite a show. At intervals, every thirty seconds, or several minutes apart, the ocean swell gave a great *BOOM!*, and a pillar of water rose from the rocks, lingered for a moment as gravity caught up, and subsided away into foam.

After we'd emptied a few coconuts, we scrambled over the rocks for a closer look. Just while I stepped over a jagged hole, the ocean roared again and I stumbled out of the way as a jet of water emerged from below, drenching me and rising far, far above my head. Stunned and off balance, I looked around, peering more closely at the formations I had been walking on. They were a complex honeycomb of lava that had long ago frothed and bubbled upon reaching the cool ocean. Some holes were bigger than others, and all were dripping salt water. It was impossible to tell where the next wave would emerge.

D. looked at me, delighted. Let the games begin.

We skittered over the rocky cliff edge, whooping and giddy. We watched the patterns to find the biggest jets which rose 50 feet above us, dwarfing the rest of the landscape. Positioning ourselves beside them, we braced against each other with hands entwined, fighting to stay upright when the falling water broke on our heads. When one knocked us down onto the sharp rocks, we heard a booming laugh from behind us, and we turned to see an enormous woman dressed in a faded red t-shirt and knotted *sarong*, still chuckling, and beaming at us.

"*Talofa lava!*" she shouted in greeting.

"*Talofa!*" we replied, sheepish at being caught romping with the blowholes.

She walked towards us, grabbing an armload of empty coconuts as she walked by the *fale*. She gestured for us to follow then walked almost to the edge of the cliffs, and stopped by an enormous hole. Handing us each a coconut she held a finger to her ear, and pointed into the hole.

Together, we waited. With each booming wave, one of the blowholes exploded, but we continued to perch over the edge of the hole, clutching our coconuts, still waiting.

A wave collided with the cliff below, and between our feet we heard a sudden rushing, a rising pitch like the sound of a glass being filled, quickly. Our companion raised a coconut above her head and held it aloft for a moment before pitching it into the hole. A second later, it came shooting out like a cannonball, sailing high into the air above our heads. The coconut arced across the sky, and lingered for a moment before hurtling back down, directly at the spot where we stood. Shrieking with laughter, we scattered from the hole, hands above our heads, glancing over our shoulders as we ran from the path of the tropical missile. It hit the rocks a few feet from D. and exploded upon impact, spreading tender white coconut meat across the jet colored rocks.

She looked as us slyly, and spoke a few words in Samoan. I can't be sure, but I'd bet a pile of coconuts that she was saying "*wasn't that great?*" And it was. We clustered around the hole once again, and this time I had my coconut at the ready.

Our game stretched into dusk, and as we waited for waves, our friend would sing out rhythmic, chanting phrases in Samoan, then shout out the only English words we'd hear her utter. On that jagged edge of ocean, they sounded to me both mysterious and poetic.

"Come on, little big wave," she cried, shaking a coconut above the hole. "Come on, little big wave!"

The sunset summoned every bit of color that vivid island could muster. Clouds smeared pink and orange across the sky. The blowholes were illuminated, and the slender columns took on the unearthly red of the jungle-dwelling parrot finch, or the deep yellow of the tiny bananas that grew beside the road. A long line of shattered coconut husks floated away towards the flat horizon.

The three of us sat quietly together on the edge of the *fale*, sipping from the last of our coconuts. As the sunset colors were swallowed by the spreading night, we watched a column of people emerge from the track in the forest. They had come from the nearby village, carrying bedrolls, mosquito nets, and a dinner that they'd prepared for us. They'd brought along one of the community's English speakers, who explained that our coconut-throwing friend would spend the night with us here, that we were welcome, that they were pleased to have us with them. When the small group turned to leave, it was pitch black outside.

We ate our meal by candlelight, inside the fine mesh of the mosquito net that we hung from the thatch roof. Starchy chunks of sweet Taro root were baked in fresh coconut cream, along with a tender fish, cooked whole with chunks of green banana. It was wonderful, and the candle lit up the fine netting, giving the darkened landscape an enchanted, otherworldly feel.

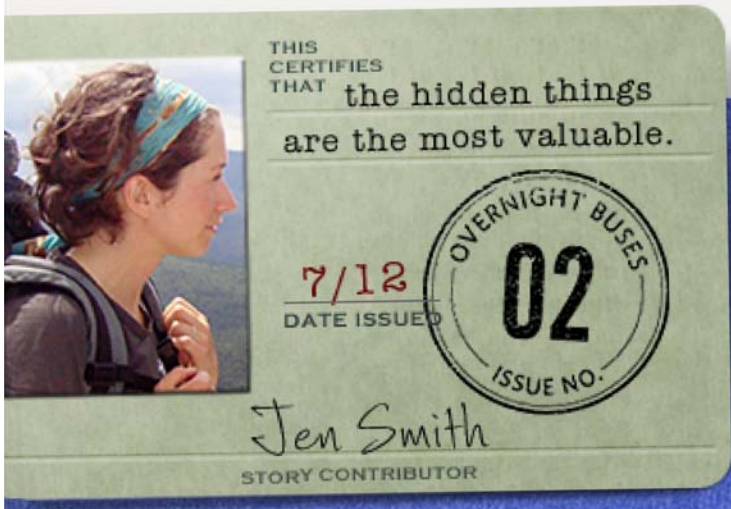
When the meal was finished, we washed with the pitcher of water they'd brought, then quickly fell asleep, stretched on the thin cotton

bedding that our hosts had laid across the wooden slats of the *fale*.

The stars shone through the net, and glinted off the rocks. I slept well, but wove in and out of consciousness, waking to the booming of surf and blowholes, and the sound of singing coming from the small fire that our companion had built on the sand. She remained there all night, chanting quietly in a resonant voice that carried over the rhythmic waves.

When we woke to a bright sky and calm ocean, she was gone. There was a small pile of opened coconuts on the edge of our *fale*, and a loaf of bread wrapped in a shiny banana leaf. We sat for a while, waiting for waves, but none came, nor did our friend return. Emptying the last of the coconuts into our water bottles, we packed our bicycles, and wheeled them up the packed sandy road, followed it until the sand became red dirt, and pedaled away to the East.

If you'd like to know how to visit the blowholes of Savai'i, I don't know if I could draw you a map; it's been years since I watched the sun set from a wooden *fale*. If you find them, though, be sure to wait and see what happens. And have some faith.



ONB Contributors

Jennifer Rose Smith is a writer and baker in Burlington, Vermont. Her work on food and travel has appeared in many regional publications, and can be found in the upcoming 2012 edition of *Best Women's Travel Writing*. During New England's cold months she writes, travels, taps maple trees for syrup, and plots adventures.

In the summertime she is up to her elbows in flour and butter, whipping up globally-inspired pastries to sell at her farmers' market stand, *The Nomadic Oven*. She has recurring fantasies about saving friends and family from shark attacks, bank robbers, and other misfortunes, and likes to think this has prepared her for almost anything. You can read her blog at thenomadicoven.com, or reach her at jenniferrosesmith@gmail.com.