

MICHAEL PULELOA
MAN UNDERWATER

In the morning rain Henry Kaikilani stood on the Kawela shoreline and looked beyond Moloka'i and the wide, quiet of the Kalohi channel—to Lāna'i and the sliver that was Kaho'olawe, and then the place of his own ancestors, Maui. An orange brilliance spread out above the mountainside at Pu'u Kukui; it pushed away cloudbanks, opening up the sky.

Inside Kānoa Fishpond and over the mudflats, finger-sized mullet rippled in the murky shallow water around him until the dorsal fin of a pāpio cut through the surface and carved through the school. He stepped slowly toward the distant reef as streams of sunrays on the surface of the water inside the fishpond spilled toward him from Maui. He walked like a man with conviction, his back to his home, his eyes toward the reef and then into the Kalohi Channel. He had made up his mind to pull out the giant he'e from its winter home and finally bring it ashore, even if it killed him. The ocean was, he now believed, at least an honorable place to die.

Against all odds, his doctor once said, Henry had outlived his wife and the friends he had made as a child growing up in Kawela. Those who still knew him said the ocean kept his body and mind younger than what they really were. His friends also said that inside his old wiry frame rested a spirit so connected to the sea he could breathe in and out like the giant pulses in the shifting tides on the Kawela shoreline.

The children of Kawela, who spent afternoons looking for sand crabs and shrimp and baby mullet, or rummaging across the sandbars at low tide, believed Old Man Henry would remain a fixture of the shoreline after they were gone. He was a man who so embodied the shoreline that the children suspected he was simply a permanent part of it, a piece of its living history. And now, more than ever before, since they knew his wife had died and he was all that was left in his own home, the children were convinced he would become part of the place where the Kawela shoreline met the sea. *Perhaps a stone*, they thought.

The children had come to call him Papa Henry and they knew he had seen the giant octopus, the he'e, many times. "I've watched it glide in," he told them, "from the blue depths of the Kalohi Channel. The end of each summer for two years, I've seen the he'e spread its arms against the current and surge forward nearly fifteen feet. He crawls across the seafloor until fastened to coral and braced against the current. He's big, like a man underwater."

Although he was a skilled fisherman, Henry still felt anxious the first time the he'e approached, when it eased itself up from beyond the opaque depths of the ocean and onto the reef. Each of its arms could have easily wrapped around Henry's legs and his waist, his torso, his throat. They could have easily wrapped around Henry's body and anchored him underwater. The he'e had pulled itself onto the ledge of the green reef, sprawled itself over a massive coral head, and turned to face Henry, its body shape-shifting like a piece of the sea and the earth, the pigment under its translucent skin pulsing in brown and red waves.

While thinking of the he'e, Henry let his feet sink inches into the muddy shallows as he made his way past the school of mullet and toward the stone remnants that marked the deepest part of the pond. The fish swarmed behind him until he turned around and waved his spear over the surface and the school broke apart and disappeared into the calm brown water. He rested his gear—a mask and snorkel, fins, a three-pronged spear, and a stainless-steel tee—upon the stones of the fishpond before stopping to quietly pray for safe passage in and out of the ocean.

He was almost seventy, but because he dove the reef outside Kawela, the people who lived on the shoreline assumed he was younger, sometimes by more than ten to fifteen years. "No man near seventy," they said, "could hold his breath underwater for three minutes. No man near seventy," they said, "could see beyond the distant reef from the shoreline."

But the children knew otherwise. They followed the old man in the afternoon, begging for stories of the things he'd seen on the reef. Fishes. Turtles. Sharks. Whales. They followed him on the shoreline until he'd finally turn around and tell them the story of the he'e, which he knew was all they wanted to hear.

In the early afternoons, he sat them on the sand at the shoreline and then stretched out his arms while describing the fluidity with which the octopus moved toward him underwater. "Intense speed and silent strength," he told them. "He builds his stone home each winter under a massive coral head. Then he waits for prey . . ." And this was the moment the children loved the most since it was then that he'd wrap one of them in his own arms, pull one of them close, and imitate the sound of the he'e's beak breaking shell or bone by popping out the top row of teeth in his mouth. The children were delighted when he did this—finally letting them into a part of his secret life, and to them, a still somewhat unrecognizable world. When Henry placed the child in his arms back on the ground, he exposed the top row of dentures on his tongue and the children would cringe and laugh and then turn and run down the shoreline toward their homes.

When he was well beyond the broken wall of the fishpond, Henry cleaned out the lens of his mask using a mixture of naupaka and spit before wiping away the hair from his face with seawater. He pulled on the mask and slipped the snorkel inside the rubber strap near his ear. Slowly, he leaned forward into the water with his fins in one hand and his spear and the steel tee in the other until his head was immersed and the only sounds were his breath moving back and forth through the snorkel and the cool water rushing into his ears and over his back.

He pushed off with his feet, sliding across the surface of the water, just a few feet from the sandy bottom and he drifted slowly until the depth of the water reached chest-high. He then dropped his spear and the tee and put on his fins. He scanned the space around him for specific coral formations and stones he had set at the beginning of the winter season, then began to follow them out to a depth where he knew the water visibility would be perfectly clear.

He didn't see much beyond fifteen feet, but he knew exactly where he was heading, even imagined the island now behind him and the way its shallow southern valleys might appear to widen, and then almost shut as he shifted directions, making his way toward the reef and then over its ledge toward the open sea. He felt the water temperature change from warm to cold and then back to warm again, as he swam through small currents toward the reef. Soon, small schools of weke and manini and kole began to appear—the weke skirting across the seafloor in search of tiny crustaceans, the manini and kole in cloud-like formations falling over coral with their tails toward the sky as they pecked at limu and sometimes each other like birds underwater.

The he'e, Henry knew, was waiting for him. And he knew to settle on a plan before he reached the reef, then its ledge, then the he'e. He had given up on the idea of luring it out from the hole with a cowy or fresh bait—weke or manini or kole. He was going to use his spear and tee. That was right.

The reef and the ocean outside Kawela were sanctuary. And when there, he somehow felt at peace, even amid the loss of his wife and the fact he was old and alone, and the world outside Moloka'i was changing at a pace he didn't much care for. In the ocean, he forgot about things on the shoreline that did little good for a man his age—that in his small part of Kawela, he was only one of a handful of people left who had lived there all their lives, that outsiders now complained about how and where he chose to fish. Not long after the death of his wife, he began to question the meaning of his existence and his usefulness to anything related to Kawela. He had gone too far. He didn't like that.

In the ocean, Henry felt in control and complete. There was a world for him just outside the Kānoa Fishpond where almost daily he would watch the he'e he now imagined devour lobsters and crabs and fully grown fish, and, as he swam past

more of the stone mounds he had built at the beginning of the winter season, he kept his focus beyond the tiny underwater particles shifting in the current and forgot all the troubles on the shoreline.

Winter in Kawela meant rains and storms. There were days when mud ran down the southern shoreline and no one left home. Days when howling, heavy winds from the east drove ripping white caps across the blue depths of the Kalohi Channel toward O'ahu.

And then there were days after the rain and the storms, when the weather completely turned, when the last of the winds and currents sent the murky water beyond the shoreline and the reef, leaving Kawela almost in silence and its air with an eerie chill. This was when the surface of the ocean was completely motionless and when, if he pleased, Henry Kaikilani would spend entire mornings presiding over the distant reef outside Kawela. Days when the ocean was a mirror to heaven, he thought.

He knew the ridges and crevices and the caves of this reef as one might know the rooms of a house well enough to walk through in darkness. He liked to think he knew the fish on this reef by their generation. He marked time by the ever-changing size of their schools.

Some of the children in Kawela found Old Man Henry's stories even more intriguing than the things they were learning in school. They'd hurry off the bus in the afternoon and make their way to the shoreline without saying a word to their parents or even changing out of their school clothes. They searched for him on the shoreline, and if they didn't see him, they wandered down the beach with their eyes fixed toward the ocean and out at the reef. At first, Old Man Henry said little to them, even when they prompted him with questions. And because he said nothing except for what he might teach them of the shoreline, to them, he seemed like someone from a different world, an old man without a connection to anything except for the ocean outside Kawela. But the children understood Old Man Henry this way: He taught them about the ocean since it brought life to him.

It took nearly ten minutes before Henry swam out far enough to reach the small waves breaking over the inside of the reef. He felt a surge of water move across his back and over his calves, then slip toward his feet. He held the spear in one hand and the steel tee in the other, keeping them both close to his body and from dragging over the coral and sand until he passed the breaking waves. Beyond the shallow inside section of the reef, where the depth fell enough so he could no longer stand and raise his head above the surface of the water, he paused to take a clear and panoramic view of the way the reef sloped away from him and the ocean water became an opaque blue. He hovered just beneath the surface of the water with his back to the shoreline as he watched a pair of blue and yellow uhu

beneath him join a school of skittish palani, then a two-foot kala gliding near one of the cracks of the reef.

The he'e he sought was the largest he had ever seen in the water off Kawela. He steadied himself beneath the surface of the water just beyond the reef and made a vigilant inspection of the coral formations and two underwater stone structures on the ocean floor beneath him. He had stacked these stones himself into pyramid-like piles with rocks large enough so they withstood the shifting currents of the winter months, so that together they marked two points that when aligned led him in the direction of the massive coral head where the he'e had made his home in winter. When he was over the first stone structure, he became more aware of his breath. He listened to the hollow sound of air slowly move in and out of his snorkel and he was instantly reminded of two things: the first, that he was the only person in the water for miles; and the second, that in his life, he had only remembered holding one he'e that came close to the size of the one now somewhere in the labyrinth of seascape beneath him.

Henry remembered he was standing on a wooden crate one afternoon in the yard of his small childhood home. He had his arms raised in front of him with both his hands slipped into the gill slit and the mantle of a he'e. Although he held its head above his own, he couldn't keep its tentacles from sweeping across the grass.

His father was there, and there were others from Kawela who had come to see the he'e, as he held it up and tried to get the last few inches of its arms off of the ground. He was still wet and cold from the dive, but also excited since seeing his father wrestle the he'e out from its hole and the open water before flipping it into the cooler on their flat-bottom boat. It was probably adrenaline that had saved him when, after his father pulled up the anchor and the outboard engine began sputtering along toward the shore, the he'e, with Henry sitting on the cooler, snapped open the cooler and began to slip itself around his legs, attach itself to the floor of the boat, then sprawl toward the gunnel. It had taken all of his father's help to keep the he'e from completely crawling out of the boat with Henry in its grasp. His father grabbed the ends of four of the arms and ripped them upward toward the sky while Henry pulled the arms stuck on his own legs away from his body. They stood there for an instant when he was finally free, the octopus squirming and spread out between them before his father pulled the head to his mouth and bit into an area near its eyes.

The struggle had left Henry with circular marks the size of coins around his thighs and arms, even as he held up the dead animal on the wooden crate in his yard over an hour later. It was an overcast day, just after a storm had passed, and every minute or so, he heard someone gasp at its size or the dull thuds of small

swells as they crashed upon the shoreline. He was wet and cold and getting tired. He knew he could've died that day, that even though his father had speared and wrestled the he'e into the cooler, that without his father there, the he'e would've simply pulled him overboard and dragged him into its underwater home; the images of that possibility seared themselves into his consciousness, and he was suddenly standing there on the wooden crate in exhilaration.

Henry had grown up the youngest of four boys, so he was always trying to prove himself. They were a tight-knit group, a real brotherhood, but if there was one of them who took most to their father, it was Henry, so it seemed natural that Henry was the one Dad took to the ocean to teach about life underwater. And by the time his older brothers had graduated from high school and were moving away, Henry was already the fisherman in the family. He could lay net, throw net, bottom fish, and troll, all before graduating from high school.

He was also proud of the fact that he delivered fish to some of the elders in Kawela. It was something he had done with his dad when he was younger, but something he did now just on his own. The uncles and aunts were always happy whenever they saw him, but he made it a point to learn which fish they wanted most, then to try, as best he could, to deliver those fish to them. Some wanted fish they could fry, like *āhōhole* or *manini* or *kole*; some liked to bake *uhu* or small *mahimahi*; others mentioned *poke* or *sashimi*, so he'd bring *enueue* or *ulua*. In the elders' faces he saw true *aloha*, and he kept this with him, even if he didn't always know it, long after they were gone.

After high school, he stayed on *Moloka'i*. There was more than enough for him on the island, and in some sense, he felt committed there, a *kuleana*, the right to enjoy life in a place where he had grown up witnessing so many wonders in the natural world, and the responsibility to help maintain that lifestyle for those who would search for it in the future. Even though his parents and some of the aunts and uncles in Kawela still disagreed with his decision, he had in fact made the right choice if only because he had continued, during this time, to perpetuate the wisdom and customs he found in Kawela as a child.

Henry had mixed feelings about his father's death. After his mother had died, Henry was certain that a part of his father had died, too. He found his father a completely different man. At first, his father stopped making trips into town and spent most of his time on the shoreline or in the yard. He then began spending days in the house, watching television, getting up only to eat or to use the bathroom or to return to his bed. Henry tried to get him back on the flat bottom and into the ocean or at least back to the shore. Once, Henry didn't bring home fish for his father for a week. But his dad didn't seem to notice or to mind. He kept so quiet he left a void in their small home. And in the end, Henry thought, he died of a broken heart.

At the cemetery, after his brothers and all the uncles and aunts from Kawela had paid their final respects, Henry dropped a picture of himself onto the coffin. It was a black-and-white his father had taken of him in the yard, holding up the he'e, on the day he almost died in the ocean.

It was still morning, but there was already enough underwater current just off the reef's ledge so Henry had to paddle constantly with his fins to stay in one place. From the stone mounds beneath him, he slowly made his way toward the massive coral head where he expected to find the he'e. He was looking in the distance for a round formation he had come to describe to the children as a giant head of purple cabbage, something with a deep-ocean color and almost perfectly round except for its flattened, greenish top. He knew it reached over four feet off the ocean floor but was also a piece of the underwater landscape that might go completely unnoticed if he weren't specifically looking for it, and if he didn't approach it from the direction of his stone guides. He knew the reef well, probably better than anyone else in the world, but he still took time, even if he didn't really need it, to get an initial bearing during this transition to life underwater.

While he was sure he would come across the coral head if he stayed on the line he had set with his stones, he also felt as though he was seeing the things before him for the first time. The sunrays were just beginning to reach the ocean floor, and the light piercing through the clear water split a school of ta'ape and to'au. Their yellow and red bodies burst outward the way water does when spilled on concrete, and then just as quickly, they re-converged into a swarming ball as if in a complex orbital dance. The school of ta'ape and to'au moved up and down in the water column like this until the fish broke apart and Henry was finally left with a clear view of the greenish round top of coral beneath them.

He took time to circle the area and to assess the rich seafloor before making his first dive. Between the green and blue coral formations, he looked for stones that seemed out of place, overturned stones. Whitish or gray. They would look like algae had been growing up around them. He kept his spear and the steel tee in his right hand and he used his left to gently pull himself through the water. When he saw upturned stones circling the base of the coral head, he drew in a little closer, to ten or twelve feet, and then he began to look through the spaces between the stones for the he'e itself. He tried to move as little and as calmly as possible, using the current for propulsion and his arms and the blades of his fins to steer himself into position.

Normally, when he came across a he'e's hole on the shallow sections of the reef, he would swim right up and begin moving away the stones with the tip of

his spear until he saw the thin tips of arms. He would tickle the legs with his spear and lure the animal out a little before thrusting the spear and then maybe the tee into the thicker flesh near its head. If it fought, he would work around the hole with the spear and the tee until he saw its body and was able to secure it in his hands. He liked to pull the octopus from its hole with one hand and with his other, pierce the tee through the gill slit and out the mantle. Then he would surface with his arms at his side, his spear in one hand and the tee with the he'e in the other. But Henry knew that with a larger he'e, like the one now beneath him, he would need to make more than one dive. He would begin the same way, teasing it from its hole with his spear until it wrapped its arms along the shaft and exposed the meatier flesh of its body. He would strike first with the spear, then the tee, trying to pin it down so that he could calmly resurface for air. If he were lucky, the he'e would struggle with the spear and the tee until he was down again, and he could use his second dive to wrestle it from the hole. This would be ideal.

The colorful school of to'au and ta'ape converged one last time over the coral head and then shot away down the reef. He took one last look around, slowly scanning the area for the best angle to approach the he'e, then he set his breathing, three complete breaths, before he leaned forward and pushed himself to the seafloor.

He immediately sensed the he'e was there even though he didn't see it. It had pinned stones from the seafloor to the bottom of the coral head, making a wall around its base, so with the spear Henry carefully began removing the stones. He saw arms slipping against the coral, so he stopped for a moment to determine the direction of their movement and to assess how the he'e might be positioned behind the wall. He felt the rays of the sun on his back and a cold emanating from beneath him. He had plenty of time left underwater, so he backed away just a bit and circled the coral head one more time. Nothing had changed, so he rose to the surface and towards the warmth of the sun. Then, as if on cue, a tiny tip of an arm began waving at him just outside the little hole in the wall.

He'd rarely seen a he'e, once threatened, return to a position in its hole as if waiting for prey. He thought perhaps he was lucky and that it had mistaken the disturbance as the result of shifting current, so he watched and waited, hoping the arm would slip out further from the hole and begin to restore the fallen stones. He waited for a few minutes, hovering just beneath the surface of the water with the sun on his back, but nothing changed. The thin tip of the arm swayed in the current just outside the hole.

There was only one thought that crept into his mind as he readied himself to make a second dive, and that was of the children on the Kawela shoreline. He imagined them circling around him, plying him with questions after he brought

the he'e to the beach. Aside from what was about to happen in the next few minutes, that moment was the only thing he could remember looking forward to. And he caught himself there, nearly a half-mile from the shoreline and alone in water twice as deep as he was tall, smiling just enough so that salt water seeped between the snorkel and his lips into his mouth.

He was ready now. He returned his full attention to the ocean floor and the coral head and the little hole with the arm still waving in the current. Then he calmed himself, filled his lungs with air, and dove headfirst with his spear and tee pointing toward the hole. When he was deep enough, he braced himself against the coral head in the oncoming current, using his left hand to attach himself there and the other to gently place the tips of the spear and the tee against the arm and into the hole. He was upside down, pushing with his fins, trying to get an angle with a view into the hole when the slithering arm quickly swirled up and around both the spear and tee, just as he'd expected, but it took a tremendous amount of restraint to leave his hand there, holding on, when another arm shot out through the wall and began to wrap itself around the first one. The spear and the tee banged against each other and made an underwater sound like a long, thin strip of metal siding that had fallen off a roof and was bouncing on the sidewalk. It took just about all his might to keep the ends of the spear and the tee in his hand from suddenly cutting through the water like blades.

When a third arm appeared, he let go of the tee and took hold of the spear with both of his hands, moving his left onto an open spot on the shaft of the spear. He was floating now, fins just beneath the surface, his body inches away from the coral head. The end of the tee had disappeared behind the red, pulsing arms of the he'e, so he worked for leverage, trying to find a place on his body that he could press against the coral head and use to help thrust the spear into where he expected to find the he'e's head. When the third arm wrapped around the spear and moved him into a position where he had his left shoulder against the coral head, he kicked with his fins and in one swift motion rolled his torso toward the ocean floor to drive his spear into the hole. There was a crunching he felt in his hands, and when there was no longer tension in the spear and he saw the arms suddenly expose the steel tee and sink to the ocean floor, he let go of the spear and took hold of the coral head again with his left hand. All that was left now was to retrieve the tee and secure it to the octopus before he surfaced for air.

At times like these, Henry didn't think much about life outside the ocean. But it was hard for him just then not to wonder about the he'e. *Why the outer edge of the reef all these winters (without a mate)? He was certainly large enough, strong enough. Able.* Henry wondered for a moment about the fact that somehow it had lived more winters near the reef than all the others he had seen or

caught, and then he wondered whether or not he had done the right thing. He began to resent the thrill and the relief he felt when there was no longer any tension in the spear when suddenly he felt a surge of sticky flesh wrap around his ankle and slide up his leg. He was shocked, but he knew instantly that what he felt was an arm—like the one he had just seen go limp—coiling around him. Instinctively, he reached back to grab the arm, and he panicked just a bit when instead of freeing his leg, he found himself held by the wrist. He looked up to the shimmering surface of the water and then back down to something that made him panic just a little more.

The he'e had revealed himself and was now completely wrapped around the coral head. He was looking directly into Henry's eyes, sizing Henry up. He had anchored himself using the rest of his arms, three around the underside of the coral head and three around the top. There was no hint of fear. He was there underwater, entirely poised.

The he'e then began to pull Henry toward him.

An arm suddenly shot up Henry's back and around his neck. Another arm slid further up Henry's leg. The grip tightened around his wrist.

Henry ripped at the arms sliding up and around his body, but there were too many, and they were too strong. He'd get away from one to have another take its place. The arm cinched around his right wrist was now pulling itself up his forearm, but he ignored it. The arm around his throat was now up the back of his neck and moving into his ear. Suddenly, there were flashes of memories. Days on the flat-bottom outside Kawela. Afternoons cleaning reef fish on the shoreline. He was sitting beside his mother at her bed. There was a black-and-white picture falling onto his father's coffin. He tried not to panic. He was on his back, at the top of the coral head. There was a blood-red arm now moving itself across his mask, blocking out the sunlight. An intense burning starting to move down his throat. He felt the tip of an arm twist into his eardrum, and then another arm prying into an orifice of his body that nothing else had ever entered. He tensed up and squeezed himself shut. He closed his eyes and imagined becoming part of the reef. He felt like a stone.

After Henry had stopped fighting, the he'e finally let go of the spear and began to slide to the top of the coral head. There, he held Henry for nearly a minute in what appeared more like an embrace than a struggle before he finally pushed Henry upward and out of the water.

From the sky, it might look as if Henry was on a pedestal floating just above the surface of the ocean. He would be more than half a mile from shore. The only man on the southern shoreline for miles. The sun would be warming his chest and his face. He'd be slowly opening his eyes.

In that moment, everything would be perfectly clear—he'd be thinking about his wife, his father and his mother, the aunts and the uncles. And he'd be longing for the children on the Kawela shoreline.

bamboo ridge

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