

LITERATURE

KAPOHO — WHERE DREAMS WERE BORN

Frances Kakugawa
Special to *The Hawai'i Herald*



Frances Kakugawa

Editor's note: Kapoho isn't a place one hears much about in conversations about the Big Island of Hawai'i. For most people, it is simply a town in the Puna District of the island that was swallowed up during a January 1960 lava flow. The fast-approaching lava forced Kapoho residents to flee their homes with little more than memories. Kapoho-born poet and writer Frances Kakugawa

recorded some of her childhood memories in her book, "Kapoho: Memoirs of a Modern Pompeii," which was published in 2011 by Watermark Publishing. In this special Big Island edition of the Herald, she shares some of those memories in two original pieces — "Dear Madame Pele" and "Outhouse" — and, from her book, "Once There Was a Kapoho."

DEAR MADAME PELE . . .

Dear Madame Pele,

Almost sixty years ago, you sent your fingers of lava to bury Kapoho, a village that already knew about fire and burial grounds, when all things Japanese were burned or buried after December 7th.

But guess what, Madame Pele, I found something stronger than lava to dig into what lay beneath your tons of magma. I found a way to return again, and again.

It began when I was 6: I went to school and discovered that Dick and Jane didn't speak as I did. They didn't say "*da kine*" and "*I wen go*."

I heard my first poem and saw visions of flowers speaking to each other through red painted lips, blinking eyes beneath long black eyelashes. All this through the use of words that didn't include "*da kine*." I vowed then that I, too, would someday become a writer and speak like Dick and Jane and create visions of beauty and magic. But, first, I had to get out of the outhouse.

. . . *I'm walking past four Issei men and women, sitting in front of Ueda Store. They're talking about the Kakugawa children. "They're all smart," one said.*

"Except for the middle one," another said, "That one won't amount to much." A feeling of painful shame accompanied me for about a hundred feet. Then I remembered. "You just wait," I vowed. "Someday you will be standing in line to buy my books . . ."

. . . *"Some people's children are so d-u-m-b!" the sixth grade teacher proclaimed after an incorrect answer from me. Each time she crowned me d-u-m-b, I looked at her in silence, defiantly pleased that she couldn't hear my voice: Someday you'll be buying my books, asking for my autograph . . .*

. . . *History after December 7 would add another vocabulary to my face, a face that would no longer belong to me . . .*

In the years to come, all the indignities that followed me home, I made them all mine and diluted them with my dream. All the mismanagement of humanities, I forgave, because I was

going to become a writer. And I became.

During the '70s, from O'ahu, I was invited back by the Pāhoa community, where we now called home. "The community is honoring you for the books you published," my mother said. "You need to come home."

"This is so embarrassing," I said. "I don't want to do this."

"If you don't attend," my mother said, "you will be showing your arrogance."

I flew home to Pāhoa that weekend. A large banner with the words, "Congratulations Poet," hung across the village road. People arrived with food and well wishes. I read a few poems, baring myself before my own community.

I looked at the line of people with books in hand and knew they were purchasing books, not because of the poetry, but because I was one of them. I felt such exhilaration.

Then I froze.

In line stood the four Issei men and women from Ueda Store. They held my books with both hands, bowed, murmured "Kakugawa-san . . ." and offered them to be signed. They were not speakers or readers of English. I signed the books and returned them with both my hands on each book, bowed and said, "*Dōmo arigato*."

Kapoho was a place to escape from for a young girl immersed in books, reading about parents who spoke elegant English in paragraphs instead of Pidgin and Japanese, families who ate with knives and forks instead of chopsticks, and children who watched television instead of listening to battery-run radios. It was also a place so isolated from the rest of the world that it became a fertile ground for dreams.

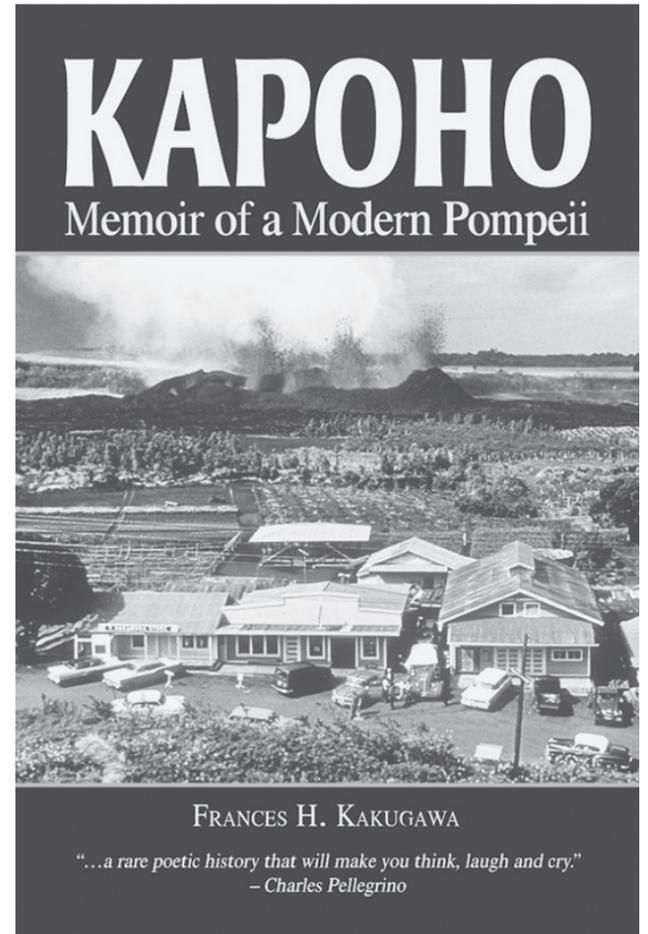
Ah, Madame Pele, was I part of your larger scheme of natural intervention? That, someday, the Kapoho I tried to escape would be the very place I would return to to complete my dream? That before we can dig for treasures, they need to be buried first?

OUTHOUSE

A house unpainted:
A corrugated roof, four walls.
A floor, six feet by two and a half.

A redwood seat with two round holes
Sized to fit two adult bottoms.
Balanced on used railroad ties
Squared over a bottomless pit.
It is here I sit and answer
Nature's call.

The fear of falling through
Turns my knuckles white
As I hold on to the edge
Of the wooden seat.
A generic outhouse,
Unlike a neighbor's



Where an additional hole,
Smaller in size,
Makes it a throne for three.

A wooden apple box against a wall,
Filled with red square apple wrappers

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Greets me with faint apple scent
 But only for a moment.
 At arm's reach, torn sheets of
 The *Hilo Tribune Herald*
 Hang on a nail.
 On the floor, Sears and Montgomery Ward,
 Pages of dreams.
 My Charmin.

Right out the door, a peach tree
 Reaches toward the sky.
 During the season
 When blossoms bloom,
 The scent of peach petals
 Loses to the stench.
 No flies, no gnats, except for cockroaches
 Dwelling below, often crawling across my butt.
 Dampness and heat rise from below.

Every outhouse has its own signature stench.
 I gag and hold my breath
 In neighbors' outhouses
 But seldom use them,
 Racing home instead
 When Nature called.

This is my place for refuge,
 A place where my escape
 For undisturbed solitude
 Is respectfully granted.

It is a place where I sit and read
 Books, comics, True Confessions
 Cover to cover,
 And Life in These United States.

"I stay in da toilet!"
 Is a shout I have perfected
 When called to do the dishes
 Or start the rice.
 A shout to be heard
 In neighboring houses,
 For what parent would dare call again
 To ask me to do chores
 When Nature's Call came first?

It was my House of Literacy.

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ONCE THERE WAS A KAPOHO

Once there was a Kapoho
 Where children played barefooted
 Until the evening sun disappeared
 And kerosene lamps and gas lamps
 Beckoned each child home.

Once there was a Kapoho
 Where outhouses and water tanks
 Prominently stood as sentry guards
 And 'ohi'a firewood sent signals above rooftops,
 Announcing a hot *furo* for the tired and the
 toiled.

Once there was a Kapoho
 Where mothers pumping sewing machines
 Marked the end of summer;
 Homemade clothes and one-strapped school-
 bags
 For the first of September.

Once there was a Kapoho
 Without television but battery-run radios:
 Ears glued to static shrieks
 For "The Romance of Helen Trent,"
 Dr. Malone and Arthur Godfrey.

Once there was a Kapoho
 Without washing machines, but wooden wash-
 boards
 Against concrete tubs, slippery, muddy denims
 Boiled in Saloon Pilot Cracker cans:
 Our Kenmore machine.

Once there was a place
 Without shopping malls and Macy's
 But catalogs from Sears and Montgomery Ward,
 Dream-makers, before turning into a Charmin or
 MD.

Once there was Christmas without lights.

Yes, once there was a place
 So simple and free
 Children swam in Warm Springs,
 Fished in Green Lake, Played marbles and *Ojame*
 And Steal Steal Stone.

Once there was a place
 Where life went on without question.
 Sons went off to war, Teachers taught the 3 R's
 Parents were the PTA
 And children pledged allegiance.

Yes, once there was such a place
 Until Madame Pele said, "No more!"
 She scattered all the children
 Like stars in the universe,
 Echoing Thomas Wolfe,
 "You can't go home again."

From: "Kapoho: Memoirs of a Modern Pompeii"

Frances Kakugawa was raised in the town of Kapoho, the third of five children. She was 18 years old when a lava flow swept through Kapoho, forcing her family to relocate to Pāhoa. Kakugawa worked as a public school teacher and writer in Hawai'i and Michigan. She has published a total of 11 books. In 2004, the Hawaii Publishers Association recognized her for excellence in children's books following the introduction of Wordsworth, the lead character in all three of her children's books..

Kakugawa, who now resides in Sacramento, is perhaps best known for her writing on caregiving after having served as her mother's primary caregiver for five years following her diagnosis with Alzheimer's disease. Matsue Kakugawa died in 2002. Frances Kakugawa continues to write and give workshops and talks on caregiving and writing. She will be speaking on caregiving next March in Hilo.



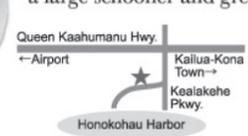
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