*NAFANUA AND THE AFAKASI SISTER:* SEVEN LINKED LYRICAL MEMOIR ESSAYS

WITH A CRAFT ESSAY

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## ABSTRACT

After receiving my adoption file from Hawaii, discovering my ethnic DNA, and finding biological family located on the islands of the South Pacific, I knew I had to document my experience. The process I used to create my collection combined conversations with relatives, and research of Pacific Island culture. During my research I found that many people in the southern region of the United States, were unfamiliar with Samoan culture. I hope my work will expand the field of creative writing by connecting readers to culture, and the adoptee experience, and to encourage readers to discover and feed their own curiosities about identity. My collection is a journey about who I thought I was, the scientific discovery of who I am, and how I have become part of a family I never knew existed. My goal is to complete 13 essays and submit them for publishing.

# DEDICATION

I dedicate my thesis work to my siblings, Alex and Gene Briski, Cain Kamano and Lisa Ino and my cousin Leah Schwenke Shipway who have welcomed me with open arms into their families and have been an inspiration and a treasure of knowledge for my writing. I also dedicate this thesis to my partner, my ride or die, Michael Herron. For loving me unconditionally and supporting me while I follow my dreams, I will forever be grateful.

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# PART I

## CRAFT ESSAY

### Poetic and Literary Devices to Create Connectivity and Emotional Momentum Within Prose Poetry, Lyric Essay and Memoir

The creation of written personal experiences can arrive in various forms such as poems, essays, and memoir. Their narration is driven by the decisions an author makes including the length of a sentence, point of view, and dialogue which all play a role in the momentum of a story. What then, motivates the emotional complexity a reader feels during the story experience and what type of strategies connect the pieces together? Poetry uses conventions to evoke emotive responses as they contribute to the sensory values which link people to their most personal emotions. These strategies are often utilized to form and create layered meanings which help to further deepen the messages of literary work. Both the subtle and profound power of poetic craft elements, such as metaphor, alliteration, imagery, and repetition, all work with the components of narration. Without these elements, the narrated events of an essay or memoir can seem systematic, stiff, and detached.

When poets use the technique of narrative, it is usually considered essayistic. The rules of nonfiction are applied to characters and the stories are influenced and energized by emotion. The author, then is determined to share with the reader through the vehicle of story, a message about the things that they have discovered or now understand (Miles). Poetry is often driven by how words sound and look on a page, while a story sometimes follows the path of an arc. The

musicality and tempo of a piece relate directly to the approaches of poetry, where context is associated with the elements of narrative. Poetry makes the reader respond emotionally by activating the senses which help influence the reader's perception of the story. In his *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, William Wordsworth mentions that in a poet's written account of physical items and the emitting of emotions, the two connect and become related, with the hope that the reader stays interested due to the gained insight, their appreciation and regard for whatever it is they are reading (4). Because the sensations in which the poet describes are also the sensations and interests of readers, the poet and the reader can connect on a level of passion (12). During the process, according to Wordsworth, "…poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings:" He goes on to explain that in the development of a poem, "it takes its origin from emotion and [is] recollected in tranquility:" The poet then may mull over the emotions until they are in word form and produced on a page, and then essentially come to life (13). However, times change and Wordsworth, an English Romantic poet, in this particular writing, was just at the brink of explaining one perspective of how poetry and feelings work together.

As poetry moves away from tradition, it can defamiliarize reestablishing feelings that may have been dulled or corroded. A similar position is presented in the essay "Art as Technique" by Victor Shklovsky, published in 1917. Shklovsky argued that the function of style in literature is to challenge familiar comprehension in writing and to enhance the perception of the world around us. Defamiliarization is an aspect of the reading process that is grounded in feelings. In response to stylistic devices, feelings influence a reader's withdrawal from ordinary interpretations. Stylistic methods such as metaphor and alliteration engage the reader's feelings and suggest more personal meanings (Kuiken & Miall).

Caught between the poetry universe and the essay galaxy, prose poems, lyric essays, and sometimes personal essays, can overflow with feelings. These types of works depend on language, tone and setting, but not so much on the narrative arc or character development. Prose poems are more concise, and their style appears more poetic, however, they are usually formatted as an essay (Snoek-Brown). In order to understand the various strategies of poetry and how they work well in prose, it is beneficial to examine examples from different types of creative nonfiction work.

In prose poetry, the lyric essay, and memoir, are all based in nonfiction. My collection of lyric essays intend to use a combination of the techniques of these chosen selections. Hali Sofala-Jones' collection of poetry, *Afakasi Half-Caste,* her collection of poems provide an intimate perception of the author's experiences of being a woman of both Samoan, and part European ethnicity. Maggie Nelson's *Bluets* is a collection of propositions, as the author calls them. These propositions are a way by which thoughts and ideas, similar to diary entries, are suggested in some sections and challenged in others. The propositions are then sewn together by something other than a narrative thread. Lastly, T Kira Madden's *Long Live the Tribe of Fatherless Girls a Memoir* is a lyrically written personal account which combines shifting points of view, tense changes, and chronology skewing to share a close personal account of growing up. Each collection, or book, contains techniques which I have also implemented into my creative work. In different ways, each author produces similar emotional effects that help to choreograph the personal experiences of which they write. Along with these literary and poetic decisions, Sofala-Jones, Nelson, and Madden all incorporate the use of cultural implications and mythologies which is a critical element to my work as well and one in which readers respond to.

According to Reader-Response theorists, the meaning of a text exists somewhere between the words on the page and the reader's mind. There are many ways to consider and comprehend the levels in which a creative process brings a text to life (Goetz et al 371). Readers have emotional responses to different aspects of literature and also attach emotion to various parts of literature (Hogan 15). Simple incitement is not the sole drive in a piece of literature. More so, it is in the strengthening of the stimulation which gives the story power (2). It bears on individual literary works which alter the sorts of questions a reader might ask, and the types of confirmation that might be extrapolated, and the sorts of ideas that might be concluded (6-7). Imaginative processes including imagery and emotional response are necessary in order to breathe life into the reading experience (Goetz et al 361). In her essay, "Engaging the Heart: Poetic Tools for Writing Emotion," Jen Bailey suggests, "…there is a great chance of losing your reader if they can't become, or stay, emotionally engaged in your story" (1). Emotional engagement is what seems to get the reader to keep reading, to turn the page. Of course, readers' tastes can be as diverse as they come, but whatever the genre, this seems to remain true. Readers who especially enjoy a particular work or find it moving are more likely to share the emotional experience they had while reading it. They will want to share with other people, friends or family, how and why the book, essay or poem made an impact on them (Hogan 15).

Sofala-Jones' collection of poems come in various forms including lists, free verse, and prose. Her eight-part prose poem "Driving in the Dark" is a story about a driver hitting and killing a deer, and the emotions during and after the experience. The poetic elements she incorporates into the eight-part poem such as imagery, personification and repetition, are just as diverse as her entire collection. One of the most striking ways the author incorporates imagery is her description of trying to stop the car. "All I hear is my car dropping anchor, tons of steel and

plastic trying hard to fight the instinct to propel" (32). This sentence integrates imagery which appeals to the implied device of onomatopoeia with the word 'crash.' By not actually using the word 'crash,' the emphases is on the synaesthetic experience of the auditory, hearing, combined with the tactile, feeling along with the perception of the incident: "hear…my car dropping anchor." The device of personification is also used where, the car, like a human, would drop and anchor. It assists in giving the image weight which more impactful than just stating the vehicle stopped suddenly. Personification also shows up in how the car is fighting the instinct to propel. Giving the non-living object a basic human response to fear, fight or flight, deepens the levels of how this incident should impact the reader.

Additionally, in this poem Sofala-Jones introduces her culture in a subtle yet distinct way. "I am desperate to have the knowledge of my ancestors; to feel the weight of a machete in my palm, to know how to wield it" (32). The mention of ancestors expands this experience to another degree. In the Samoan culture, of which the author belongs, the machete is a tool for bushwhacking. It is also a weapon and is used in traditional ceremonial dances which depict stories of the folklore and mythology of Samoan people. The accident is traumatic enough without the mention of the speaker's ancestors. Implementing the contemplation of the skills of people who are no longer living elicits an expansion of the experience than just a car crash and the death of a deer. It emotionally ties the reader to people who have shared their stories and practices with their families and who may have a more thorough understanding of survival, tradition and death, than the speaker does.

Following the ideas of culture and mythology, the implementation of irony appears in an unexpected way. "I want her dead like I've never wanted anything dead" (33). The author's stylistic choice of words are harsh, as this statement is something completely opposite of what

the speaker has actually professed to the reader already. Although the sentence's words are cruel by themselves, the sentiment is that the speaker does not want the deer to suffer. The author's choice, and the intention feels brutal which helps to layer the emotions of fear, helplessness, loss and love as they are all happening with in the same encounter. The death of the deer also echoes the lack of obtaining, or the loss of the speaker's cultural influence of her ancestors and the possibility of not ever knowing what it feels like to hold a weapon which could take a life, as her ancestors might have.

There are also several places where Sofala-Jones uses repetition to deliver more of a personal impact of the incident. As it is possible with traumatic experiences, the people involved can relive the moment over and over. The repetition of words and images, the tiniest of details, replay as the memory of the event moves through time. The speaker states, "I see her fur floating in the air" as she describes what happens after the impact (32). Close to the end of the poem there is a similar repetition of "fur," and the image of flight, when she collapses two natural images: "…fur flying like dandelion seeds in the low beams" (33). Using the simile brings significance to the detail of fur as it is expressed in a light and ethereal way.

The most direct use of repetition in the poem is the sentence, "It'll be okay" which is also intentionally italicized both times (32, 33). The first time it is mentioned to describe how the speaker in the poem wants to console the deer and to tell her it will be okay. The same sentence is repeated as the very last sentence of the poem where the speaker wants to console her hands because they are shaking. All the while, the "console" of the vehicle did nothing to calm or soothe the speaker's remorse.

Because Sofala-Jones' story appears as a prose poem within a collection of poetry, the poetic elements of "Driving in the Dark" are not surprising. However, the repetition, simile and

imagery all help to move the short narration along with a significant amount of emotion and weight within a very small space. Through cultural indication, reflection, repetition and imagery, the poems in Afakasi Half-Caste are connected by these devices and reveal an emotional, yet not so subtle message of cultural and gender identity by the end of the last poem.

In my collection, *Nafanua and the Afakasi Sister*, I use many of these same poetic devices. In the section "Commencement of a Family," I apply a single word multiple times in successive sentences. "I'm trying to grab ahold of the strange feeling that I was actually named after someone. Not a movie. Not *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. Not a jewelry store. A real person" (48). The repetition of the word "not" is meant to place significance on the idea that my name did not come from a *thing*. Even more so, since I have made discoveries like this about myself, I can't be concerned with these notions anymore. In most cultures, names have significance. They carry weight, shame, they change, and even have stories of their own. My hope being that the reader contemplates their own emotional attachment to, or the tale that goes along with their name. Maybe they will reflect on ways their perspectives have changed after learning about themselves.

Like poetry, the lyric essay is a hybrid mode of creative nonfiction where attention is placed on cadence and rhythm, as much as it is on context. Marcia Aldrich in the 2007 issue of the *Seneca Review* writes, "The lyric essay does not narrate a story so much as express a condition—often named, sometimes called human, but still to us unknown. It reverses foreground and background, cultivating leaps and juxtaposition, tensing between the presentational and the representational (111)." The lyric essay strives to reflect the complexity of the author's inner world as they cover topics outside themselves.

Lyrical essays are also frequently associated with inner monologue and their close relationship to poetry, compared to traditional essays (Dess). In her essay in *Assay: Journal of Nonfiction Studies*, Diana Wilson states:

> But a careful study of lyric essays will reveal a cornucopia of connectors and structures rooted in both poetry and prose—mythology, reflection, irony, repetition, spiraling perspective, lists, sensory details, voltas—binding the fragmented imagery within braided, hermit crab, collage, and elegy structures—bringing order to apparent literary chaos and allowing lyric essayists the freedom to push and prod poetic prose until an emotional message pops from the page. (15)

We see that the lyric essay's components are connected by the use of literary and poetic devices. Using at least two of these devices, if not all, create the layers and depth which assists the reader to become emotionally invested and give a piece propulsion. Along with the chain of thought and external ideas and subjects, the prose poem or lyric essay creates a lesson, a whole image, from a medley of parts.

At the end of Wilson's essay, she states, "But whatever structure the author chooses, the lyric essay is an unconventional journey, an art form that can only be fully appreciated when viewed as a whole, and always a wild ride" (15). An example of this "unconventional journey" is Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*. Considered either a lyric essay, or prose poetry, Nelson's book is a manifestation and personal contemplation about her relationship with the color blue. Similar to the long personal essay *The Physiological Inquiry On Being Blue* by William H. Gass, *Bluets* explores the emotions and ideas of love, grief, addiction and loss. But whereas Gass' work is in the form of an essay, Nelson's is fragmented and intertwined with references to history, art, literature, and philosophy. Yet, however disjointed the pieces may seem, they are held by the

devices, including the extended metaphor. The entries, called “propositions” by Nelson, are chronologically numbered. Though they are sometimes directly, or loosely connected to the next, each proposition, if read independently, seems to be able to stand on its own.

Even the propositions that contain only one sentence feel like a profound statement, something for the reader to mull over and examine more intimately. For example, proposition 17 states: “But what goes on in you when you talk about color as if it were a cure, when you have not yet stated your disease” (7). Although the question seems hypothetical, and there is no question mark at the end of the sentence, the author brings the reader in close just by offering the inquiry, giving the reader something specific to think about. At the same time, the word “color” becomes a metaphor for “cure,” a poetic device to make the idea of color, of blue, more emphatic. There is also a clear stress between the concept and the term “proposition,” as the author “propositions” the reader to answer this question. The existence of this fragment sets a heaviness on the reader that blue does something “in” a person, not to a person, or just what they may think about it, but that there is something which may go on inside of the whole space of a body. Additionally, the stylistic effect of no punctuation of a question mark, a symbol which begs for a reply, complicates the proposition and instead and requests the reader to allow their body to feel the effects of the color.

In Proposition 89, it is the imagery of a single sentence which is striking, but as it is contemplated, there is more going on beneath its surface. “As if we could scrape the color off the iris and still see” (34). What makes the idea behind the imagery even more powerful, are the poetic devices of consonance and alliteration. The “s” sound in the words “as,” “scrape,” “iris,” “still,” and “see,” emote the senses of how it might feel, sound or look- the sound of an “s” punctuating every stroke of the eye. The onomatopoeic use of the word “scrape” can almost be

heard even though an eye is made of soft tissue which might render no sound at all. And as each of the sibilant "s" sounds like the action of scraping, the poetic devices stand out, connecting themselves to the craft of creative nonfiction, establishing a bond between the writer's self and the reader. Another stylistic choice which enables this relationship, is Nelson's use of the word "we." It is a subtle narrative/narrator voice that interjects the reader into the writer's writing. The use of "we" is substantially melodious as if the author is taking the reader's finger and together, performing the action. The graphic image the sentence evokes, echoes both the emotional and physical pain which arise throughout the entire book.

Besides its connective tissue of lyrical and essayistic content, there are other brilliant strategies within Nelson's collection. The ligaments which reach throughout the book, hold seemingly vastly different concepts together, where the nerve endings of the details are triggered as the reader comes across them. Even with no surrounding context, the previous two sentences which are pages apart from each other, feel self-supporting and related. Both sentences use the word "color," although neither includes the word "blue" specifically, and both sentences use the conjunction "as if." The small repetitive occurrences, whether the reader notices these or not, tightens each proposition to create the interrelations of the book. The word "blue" is expected to be repeated. The word "color" feels predictable as well, but the way in which the word is used in each sentence are complicated by its reference to its visual property of the appearance of an object. To use the word "color" as a verb means something different than to use it as a noun that describes a characteristic versus something just visible on the surface. Thinking about "blue" as a verb means to give the word a sense of emotion which may vary from the reader's typical understanding of it.

Nelson's employment of the exterior world, self and emotion would not complete her lyrical mosaic without the ideas of Helen Cixous and the French feminist theories of women's writing. In essay "The Laugh of Medusa," Cixous examines the idea that the stream of consciousness style of writing is essentially more feminine and by engaging in this type of writing, it would assist women in comprehending what happens inside and outside their own minds. By practicing this style then, the oppression women have experienced when it comes to the ideas of sex and pleasure, can be eradicated (887-88). It isn't just the mention of sex or love that Nelson reveals in her propositions which make them feel like emotional heartbreak, or a love letter, but as the speaker asks questions of the reader, so does she talk directly to someone who appears she is warmly familiar. For example, proposition 188: "How often I've imagined the bubble of body and breath you and I made, even though by now I can hardly remember what you look like, I can hardly see your face" (Nelson 75). In this sentence Nelson uses reflection to connect an image's physical adjacency to her reminiscing and the realization of not being able to recollect what the reader may thing would be the most obvious to recall. The author also uses alliteration in "bubble," "body," and "breath." The "b" sound is soft and romantic like a whisper, and is ironically, the same sound in the word "blue."

Repetition continues to be used with the phrase, "I can hardly remember." Although the speaker says this twice, as if she is trying to convince herself, or maybe convince whoever she is speaking to, the reflection, remembering and repetition propel the narrative forward. Nelson's handling of the repetition technique has been a direct influence upon my work. Similarly, where I repeat the word "not," it signals both an inability, as in the idea that I can no longer imagine my name coming from anything other than a person now. It also speaks to the inability to conclude that my name actually came from a person.

Reflection emerges again in proposition 189. “How often, in my private mind, have I choreographed ribbons of black and red in water, two serious ropes of heart and mind. The ink and the blood in the turquoise water: these are the colors inside the fucking” (76). As the speaker feels the need to articulate that she is sharing her private thoughts, this interruption poignantly gives the reader the sensation of being let in on a secret, which is disruptive because the speaker is letting it be known to the world. The introduction of color is not surprising although they are in no relation to the blue of the author’s main theme. Red presumably is representative of the heart, black, the mind. And as the ink and the blood do their dance, Nelson brings the reader back to blue with the mention of turquoise, and water. It is not until the end of the second sentence that the reader understands why the thoughts may be private. The portrayal of the colors as ink in water signify a fluid motion and image but then the proposition ends with the harder sounding word, “fucking,” suggesting a dichotomy of sensation.

In proposition 190, Nelson writes that the past is the past and that the past could be left as it is, which moves to proposition 191 where the speaker admits “…that there are aftereffects, impressions that linger long after the external cause has been removed, or it has removed itself.” The author quotes Goethe in reference to the image of looking at the sun and how it can stay with you for days. She proceeds, “And who is to say this afterimage is not equally real? Indigo makes its stain not in the dyeing vat, but after the garment has been removed. It is the oxygen of the air that blues it” (76). Here, Nelson creates a longer-term impact of the lyrical essay on the reader. There is a connection between the cultural significance of slave plantations, the practices of working indigo which was historically accomplished at the hands of ethnic people, and the long-term impact, like the way indigo leaves a stain, as there is an impact after an encounter with another culture. As Nelson indicates aftereffects, and impressions that linger, it depicts how the

author's techniques are pertinent to the communication of cultural entanglements much in the same way Sofala-Jones implements the cultural impact of her ancestors, and how I include the findings of my cultural DNA in my creative pieces.

This technique is asking to what Diane Wilson means when she says the lyric essay uses links, rooted in poetry and prose to, "…bringing order to apparent literary chaos and allowing lyric essayists the freedom to push and prod poetic prose until an emotional message pops from the page" (15). This brief section of proposals connects and sews itself within a deep emotional story. Starting with the soft "b's" of bubbles, body and breath, and then within the space of 17 lines, weaves itself through a narrative of passion, sex, and lingering impressions that the mind holds onto. It then moves to the process, and cultural implication of indigo dyeing, and to the return of the color blue.

Within my work as well, I have used the practice of alliteration and consonance in order to create stress and emotional friction. In describing my nephew, I write, "When I saw Sepp lumber toward me, he had a sheepish, shy, but sincerely pleased look on his face" (35). The "s" sound throughout the sentences is designed to inflict slow, and a little bit of uncomfortable emotional movement. Unlike the harsh jabs of Nelson's "s" with the word scratch, my intention is more of the gesture of a sleepy snake. As something that meander unhurriedly as my nephew did towards me.  I also use the technique of alliteration. "My mother's dad lived for many more years afterwards" (50). The long "m" sound is repeated in mother, many and more to emphasize length and time. The traditional normalizing emotional connection to the idea of mothers is elongated, as if this should be heartwarming. When in fact, the reader will be disrupted by the resentment of my mother's accusation.

*Long Live the Tribe of Fatherless Girls a Memoir* by T Kira Madden is the final creative work to culminate this study. Madden's work is different than the others because it is called a memoir, not prose poetry or a collection of lyric essays. However, the elements which shine in Sofala-Jones' and Nelson's writing, are also evident in Madden's. In a short nonfiction writing class, our professor stated a quote that the author Kao Kalia Yang's father had said: "The human life is individual. It is not unique." One of the most frequently asked questions while writing and reading creative nonfiction is why should the reader care? When connecting to readers, it is not only the idea of making a piece unique that is important, but also striving to reach the reader on an individually deeper, more intimate level.

*Long Live the Tribe of Fatherless Girls a Memoir* is thick with profound emotion. The author writes about growing up, the loss of her father, both of her parent's drug addictions, and how she navigated through trauma, and tumultuous family dynamics. She also explores her understanding of her sexual, and racial identity. Madden's mother is native Hawaiian and the author features Hawaiian traditions and family legacy. As the Hawaiian language and mythology has been frowned upon by colonialization the author's inclusion of it again, brings a personal story to another level. In the compilation of lyrical chapters, Madden combines poetry and prose where each piece contains a labyrinth of time and situation. Each part holds a significant place within the book, and as they are distinct from the others, together create a larger design of a story in the form of a memoir.

Stylistically related to a collection of essays or poems, each part, section, or chapter of Madden's book is titled. There are 13 chapters in Part I, 12 in Part II, and one title in Part III, although it contains 22 sections titled with a season, year, city and state, in non-chronological order. Each part, section, or chapter, although sometimes similar and reflective, has a structure,

style and form all its own. Some of the sections narrate a story, while others have no narrative at all. As Aldrich mentioned in her essay, the lyric essay often expresses a condition which is often human but can also be unknown (111). Madden names some of these human conditions such as overdose, sex, assault, love, and death. For instance, at the end of the first chapter, the narrator remembers when she was a young girl and her parents were getting married. “My father’s lips part as he squeezes my mother by her waist, their slow song tickling the water in my glass, and I am jealous of the both of them” (Madden 6). The portion of the sentence sandwiched between a very literal observation and a very familiar human emotion, uses the device of personification with the song tickling the water, to move the tension through the scene to the sense of jealousy. The reader can feel the heaviness of the juxtaposed death of her father with the innocence of tickled water and a little girl’s jealousy. Madden’s use of the poetic device of personification enhances the weight of the sentiment even if it isn’t easily identifiable.

Madden finds other ways to complicate feelings and to disrupt the reader’s sense of what they are expecting, and what is actually being said. Approximately halfway through the book, Madden describes a friend, and states, “There’s a glittering viciousness to Harley Pelletier when she wants something” (138). Using an approximate oxymoron to describe a person the speaker is very close to, helps confound the already difficult relationship the speaker has with Harley. The word glittering, implying something sparkling or dazzling and usually attached to the feeling of delight, is in conjunction to the word vicious, which suggests something nasty, something which would make a reader scowl at. The author goes on to give more details about how Harley acts when she wants something, such as asking her friend to wipe her rear-end. However, the initial introduction of this side of Harley’s personality engages the reader, enticing them to read further, encouraging them to see what happens next.

There is also a progressive recurrence of the word "glitter." The word's very first appearance is in the preface. "The droplets roll and glitter over their bodies like mercury from a smashed thermometer" (xvii). There is an indication here of both beauty and danger. Similar to the glittering viciousness, the image of glitter rolling over a body is sensual, but the vision is abruptly redirected to the dangers of mercury and the sharp edges of glass from the smashed thermometer.

The next mention of glitter is early in the memoir when the narrator is a young girl. "Small, sweet facts. I spritzed the envelope…sprinkled glitter all over the wet bull's-eye of facts" (10). The speaker is describing a letter she has written and how she squirted a glittery body spray over the letter. As a girl, the letter felt important, the facts were significant, but the action of the glitter reveals the immaturity of the narrator without the author stating directly how glitter symbolized innocence. The following example is similar to the previous indication of youth and beauty products. "You and Clarissa sit still as figurines while Beth paints on the glitter powders, the goopy gloss" (92). In this sentence, Madden reveals how girls grow up believing they need to decorate their bodies with these products in order to be seen as more mature, and attractive. The meaning is more concrete and less metaphorical.

However, this changes with the speaker's age and with the statement of "glittering viciousness" from before (138). But then it returns to a more physical depiction. "At school, everybody stares at the ring, the glittering JOSH" (140). Now the speaker has a boyfriend who is much older than she is. The significance of indicating the name of the boyfriend as glittering, emphasizes still the little girl, the naivety and the implication that shininess of it will soon disappear. When reading the context of the word glitter in *Long Live the Tribe of Fatherless Girls,* it is difficult not to consider the aphorism: All that is glitter is not gold. In other words, all

that seems precious, is not necessarily so. The message that portions of the speaker's charming life are nothing but a façade, is not outrightly named or written, but due to each chapter's lyric essay style, the layers which are created by the device of repetition, deepen the sentimental impact every time the word is seen.

The repetition of such a charismatic word makes it almost impossible for the reader to miss. The word shows up a couple of times in the same chapter, mostly in Part I, and only once in Part II. Looking at the entire piece as a whole, the word glitter is obviously significant. Each use of the word comes in various forms- on the body, the face, a letter, personality, a piece of jewelry, but these varying forms add layers to assist the overall emotional message to be highlighted and stand out from the narration of the memoir, similarly to the mission of a lyric essay.

Nelson's extended metaphor in *Bluets* and Madden's continued theme of "glitter" is a technique that I have experimented with as well. I use the theme of being forgotten, the emotional turmoil humans feel when being left behind, throughout an entire essay. In order to portray being abandoned by our biological mother in a way that offers multiple levels, I integrate the noun and present it as a proper noun, as if it is a living, breathing creature. "Maybe Abandonment held her face in its greedy grip whenever she looked in the mirror" (57). In order to prevent this idea from coming across as an avoidance strategy, I give it various dimensions. "I can imagine Abandonment threw a going away party for Alex" (59). I also make sure to include it along with very real and identifiable sentiment. "I will always remember the sound of the busy dial tone, the same tone a phone gave when it was unplugged from the wall or had been disconnected. I will always remember the whispers crawling under my skin; the anxious message I received from Abandonment" (73). The combination of the feeling connected to an experience

that children go through on a regular basis, along with the extended metaphor will bring the reader in close to the characters and become emotionally connected to them and the story in which they live. I also have a continuous thread of the implications of feeling like a tourist no matter where I am, no matter where I go. The personification of Abandonment, holding the hand of a perpetual visitor weaves its way through my lyric essays like a path through the jungles of my adventures and is bound to the external information I have discovered along the way.

The literary and poetic devices which move narrative and help connect content and layer emotions within creative works, deepen the reader's investment within a narrative. Wilson's "cornucopia of connectors and structures rooted in both poetry and prose" (15) is applicable to a collection of poetry such as *Afakasi Half-Caste* even though each poem does not address the same exact condition. Wilson's use of the word "cornucopia" and its effect cannot go unnoticed. The horn of abundance was initially portrayed in the mythology of Zeus but is more modernly identified as a symbol of the American tradition of Thanksgiving. Like Solfala-Jones' mention of her Samoan ancestors, the cultural and slavery significance of Nelson's use of indigo, and the implications of Madden's Hawaiian ethnicity, the lyric essay is an unforeseen way of giving a voice and power to nonwhite cultures, even when the advocates or authors of the form don't necessarily see it.

The connectors and structures of essays that are linked, like the extended metaphor of the color blue in *Bluets* however varied in content, poetic and literary devices, still emphasize and complicate the connections between them and helps to propel the reader forward through the piece as a whole. Even though it is a larger piece, this connective process can also be seen in Madden's memoir. Starting with the preface of the book, and going to the very historically documented end, each section has poetic verse flowing through it. The impact of the use of these

devices helps to bring the reader in close, to sense, if not feel, the emotionally layered message in which the lyric essay intends.

The elements of prose poetry, lyric essay and memoir, along with the use of poetic and literary devices in which Sofala-Jones, Nelson and Madden use in their own works, have significantly played a part in how I have approached the techniques and methods within my essays. As I tell the story of finding my biological family I include the scientific studies of geography, ecology and DNA research. These external subjects are a just a portion of the pieces which show up as I consider the developments of my discoveries. These elements are placed throughout each essay as they connect with reflective stories of my past, my internal thought process, what I have found and how I have contemplated the various dimensions of my journey began since its inception.

Within each lyric essay I apply the poetic tools of imagery, onomatopoeia, and personification to enable and complicate the sentiments and experiences of engaging with blood relatives of which I have never met, how the innumerable dynamics of family are successful and how they fail. I also incorporate alliteration, assonance and consonance on the sentence level to bring depth and subtle emotional value in the sections where I discuss how I've always felt like an outsider, and how even after I met my biological siblings and other family members, I am still considered other.

Similar to Nelson's work and her stream of consciousness, for the most part my work is not chronological. Like Sofala-Jones and Madden, I infuse my ethnic culture into my writing by using the Samoan language, mythology and cultural history to tie all that I have learned so far into the contemplation that there is still so much more to learn. The intention, then, is to bring the reader in close so that they might not just witness the experiences but feel a connection and

become emotionally engaged enough to want to keep reading, enough to hear the lyric messages of the collection of as a whole.

# NAFANUA AND THE AFAKASI SISTER

## ESSAY ONE

### A Commencement of Family

Lagilagia gave birth to a son whose body consisted only of a skull. This skull fell to earth and was caught by Valavala who placed it on a long-legged chair that he had made. Valavala wished that the skull be given a body so that he might have a companion. His wish came true and the skull suddenly acquired the body of a boy. As the boy grew up he became very wise. Valavala asked the boy, as he pointed to the different quarters of the compass, "where is this, and this, and this?" The boy answered, "North- south-east-west-above-below." Valavala was pleased and told the boy how clever he was for knowing and understanding all the points of the compass.

The boy self-proclaimed his name to be Ituagieseese, which means different points of the heavens. Ituagieseese grew up and when it was time to marry, he married the East, West, North and South winds and conceived a child with each, all named Tui. As a result of these marriages, and their offspring, this was how the four corners of the earth were populated.

~

When we exit the doors of the airport and look for my siblings, the nerves of my jet lagged body are taught with anticipation. Of the thousands of scenarios in which I had imagined the first meeting of my newly found biological family, not one of them actually happen. It is not always a disappointing thing. Sometimes I am pleasantly surprised, but I seem to do this a lot. I fantasize about how a situation is going to play out, how I will react, how I will feel. The multiple moments and multiple ways, I can't remember ever, not once, having an experience

happen the array of ways I created in my mind. I have tried hard not to have any outlook or hopes at all. Just fly by the seat of your pants, I tell myself. Let whatever happens, happen. I attempt this same approach with my trip to Hawai'i.

Unexpectedly, the first person out of the vehicles is Cain's wife, Liz. We hug and laugh but I had hoped to embrace my brothers, Alex or Cain, first. As the group exits each car, I recognize everyone right away. I abandon my luggage, and my husband Michael seems to disappear as my eyes flutter with tears, my mouth stuck in a toothy smile. We are all laughing and talking at once. For now, the only person missing is our baby sister, Lisa.

Twenty-four years prior, I handwrite a request to the state of Hawai'i's Department of Family Services to see if they have any medical information about my biological family. I don't want to know who they are. I know I was given a way for a reason and do not want to disrupt someone's life just because I am struggling to answer questions. All I am thinking about is the number of the times at the doctor or dentist's office I have needed to answer the question: Does your family have a history of …?

I receive a letter from the state of Hawai'i. It says, sorry, but we do not have that information. I am not shocked, but I am not quite sure what I had expected. Maybe some advice about what I should do next, or how I might approach questions like the ones at the doctor's office. Is there some futuristic test that could be done to reveal all the secrets of my blood, muscles, nerves, my mental faculties?

I suppose I will just have to wait and see what pops up. See if I get cancer. If I get schizophrenia. Depression.

As we load our luggage into Liz's car, I mention my nephew Sabastian, Alex's son. He is on the Oregon State University football team and they are playing the University of Hawai'i this

weekend. The game is what generated the idea in the first place of us all meeting in Hawai'i. We all have tickets to the game, and t-shirts with Sepp's number and last name, Briski, printed on the back. We plan on tailgating and everything.

Alex says Sepp won't be joining the team for the game. My heart collapses into my stomach. I am in shock. I ask why not. Since Sepp is redshirted, he cannot travel with the rest of the team. This makes perfect sense. I'm sure plane tickets for a whole football team to Hawai'i are not cheap, even from the west coast. But still, I say out loud how disappointed. Gene says that they have already gotten used to the idea. Gene, from Alpharetta, Georgia, Alex and his wife Alicia, from American Samoa, arrived in Honolulu the day before. They have had hours to deal with the disappointment. There's nothing we can do, so we might as well not dwell on it, someone says.

And we don't. There's no time to dwell on something we have no control over. I wonder how long Alex knew before he told anyone. It doesn't matter. What matters is that we are all here together. We are still going to the game, wearing our Briski shirts, grilling out and tailgating. But in my mind, I tuck away the little unanticipated circumstance, just one more scenario I hadn't emotionally planned for.

When we arrive at Cain and Liz's apartment in Honolulu, we unload and wait for Lisa to get off of work. She is a middle school teacher. We all plan on going somewhere for dinner. When she enters the living room I am up on my feet and bound towards her. Her arms are open wide, I hug her tight, and she matches my embrace, and even though the temperature of the air is quite warm, and I know I am sweating, I don't want to let her go.

When I was a little girl, my adoptive parents told me I was going to be a big sister. I remember vividly hoping that I would have a brother. After the announcement, I had drawn in

my journal a picture of crossed fingers next to the word “boy.” My adoptive mother and her first husband were unable to have children, hence my adoption, and after their divorce, he married a woman with two daughters. After spending a few weekends with them, I truly believed in evil stepsisters.

The two girls would gang up on me. I remember riding in the car somewhere and we had been told to be quiet. You know, because children are supposed to be seen, not heard. In the backseat, the girls pinched me until I yelled and told on them. The stepmother warned us that if we didn’t stop, we would all get spankings. I was so confused. I didn’t like the girls. I didn’t want to be like them. I didn’t like the way the word sisters felt in my mouth.

~

In Honolulu, we pile into vehicles to go to dinner. We want something authentic. Not just Samoan or Hawai’ian, but Pacific Islander authentic. An old strip mall holds our treasure. Because Michael and I are the biggest palagis of the group, we have to be told what is what on the menu. I want to try everything, so we allow others to order for us.

I can’t remember the names of every dish we eat at the restaurant. We all share each item, family style. There is fish, raw and cooked. There is roasted pork wrapped in leaves, and a bountiful amount of rice. We are asked how we like everything. With our mouths full, we mmm, and nod in agreement with it all. We have nowhere to be, but the meal feels rushed. We stuff ourselves, pack up the leftovers and roll our full bodies out into the Honolulu air. After dinner, we head to Eva Beach. We go straight to a sandy beach as the sun is setting, let the wind whip our hair, and the waves crash on our naked feet. We all take pictures and Lisa and Cain tell us about the landmarks that we see.

Lisa and Cain live about an hour's drive away from each other on the island of Oahu. Lisa works about two blocks from her house. The beach, the sand, the Pacific Ocean, is only four blocks from her house. As the sun goes down, the beach is deserted, and I tell Lisa I could stay there forever.

We drive to Lisa's house where she, her four sons, and husband live. Her brother, TJ, from the family she grew up with, is visiting from American Samoa. All but Lisa's husband come outside to greet us. Toa is at choir practice and usually doesn't get home until late. From oldest to youngest her sons are UJ, Thomas (Masi), Mathias, (Matti) and Caleb. They welcome us and embrace us as warmly and familiar as Sebastian did the first time I met him. Not with the stiff body and tight limbs of a stranger. We were already "aunty" and "uncle," like we had known them all of their lives.

Watching us all in the gray of twilight, I see the flash of teeth and the squint of eyes. We ask the kids about school and what they like to do during their free time. I can tell Lisa is a force to be reckoned with. She never yells but commands the calming of Caleb and the quietness of Masi with just a mention of their names. Teacher, mother, wife, my little sister. She impresses me so much. My heart feels massive with pride.

~

The next day, everyone gathered at Cain and Liz's apartment. Alex and Alicia brought fresh produce from American Samoa. When Lisa arrived, she carried bags full of items and walked into the kitchen as if it were her own. As the cooking started, warm aromas crammed themselves into the small space, even though the door was open, it was if they didn't want to leave. When everything was prepared, all of the dishes were placed on the table. We stood

around the bounty. I felt the food's power. Not the power of nourishment or desire, but one which humbled me.

I was eating vowels.

Palusami, taro, breadfruit, poi. Altogether, they created a meal I have never eaten before. Although the flavors and textures remain foreign in my mind, at the same time, they were exactly as I had dreamed.

Palusami is a dish of taro leaves and coconut milk. The leaves of a taro plant can be larger than a person's head. Cooked, they taste similar to the earthy iron of spinach without its gritty bitterness, its flavor and texture is easy and smooth. The leaves are layered and formed into a bowl shape, filled with coconut milk, and wrapped closed. Each green pouch is traditionally cooked on an umu, an outside stove made of lava rocks and fueled by palm fronds.

This time, the dish was both fried and steamed on a modern-day stove. Cain prepared the steamed version and Lisa, the fried. Each claimed theirs was the best, ensuing a perfect sibling rivalry. Living in the American South, I expected to prefer the fried dish, but the saltiness of the steamed taro seemed to come straight from the ocean. It melted into the nutty sugar of the coconut, penetrated my sense of taste and complicated the unexpected flavors with the palusami's billowy, soft texture. The timid crunch of its fried counterpart was no match.

The breadfruit came from American Samoa. It was baked and didn't taste like any type of white, wheat, or rye bread I had eaten before. After being cooked in the oven, the meat of the breadfruit was more like a baked potato. Butter, salt and pepper were smothered over it, and eaten with a fork; its cream-colored banks crumbled and broke off just like a cooked Russet. It was filling and dense and sat heavy and pleasant in my stomach.

Poi is made from the taro plant's root. The root is cooked in water and then pounded to a pulp. A sickly gray-purple porridge, poi had the smell of jungle ferns after a passing rain. As I ate it, the poi stuck to my teeth like a thick, sticky paste and then connected to the roof of my mouth. My tongue worked it around, spreading the putty as if I were trying to plaster a hole. The texture didn't bother me. I love yogurt and puddings- tapioca and grits are enjoyable to my palate. However, my brain searched hard, poi's essence ghosted my taste buds.

Because of its unique purple color, locals also incorporate taro root into other foods. A malasada covered in sugar and as big as a fist, looked like an ordinary donut, but when I bit into it, a brilliant lavender stared back at me, an aloha for my eyes. Unlike its color might suggest, this was not just a treat for kids. Purple poi cakes and various types of breaded goods were sold in shops all over the island.

A large pot of steamed rice sat in the middle of the table. It seemed effortless enough to overlook, but rice was served at every meal. It was even served at breakfast the next morning with scrambled eggs. At a tailgate party before a football game, a pot of rice sat on a grill right beside the hamburgers, hotdogs, ribs and potato chips. It was always bright and sticky, setting off every meal with the perfect amount of harmony.

As prominent as the waves at the beaches, the fruit of this tropical paradise shouted its abundance. Like rice's fancy cousin, fruit was at ever meal. Coconut was expected in some form or another, shaved, chunked, milk, water, and it did not disappoint. But did you know there are at least ten different varieties of pineapple? The surprise was the mango, guava, liliko'i, and carambola. They sat sliced and cut into shiny wet pieces at my brother's apartment and housed in glass bowls like indulgence for the gods. Their flavors and freshness shamed the fruits of the mainland of which I had once believed to be delicacies. Throughout our trip, I ate fruit raw, in

baked goods, spread as jelly on toast and drank their juices. Each time I bit, sucked, chewed, or gulped, sweet vowels dripped from my dreams and off of my smiling chin. I was the image of gluttony itself.

~

Before our trip, my cousin Leah tells me about some other relatives which live in Hawai'i. There is a great aunt Marie, which just so happens to be my first name, the one on my original birth certificate. Marie, sometimes Maria, Nonie Loa was my full name. I am assuming, then, that I was named after Aunt Marie. I'm trying to grab ahold of the strange feeling that I was actually named after someone. Not a movie. Not *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. Not a jewelry store. A real person. A real woman who is still living. Leah gives me Aunty Marie's phone number and tells me I should try and meet her while I am in Hawai'i.

I want to let Aunt Marie know I'm coming, so a week before our trip I call the number Leah has given me. I'm nervous. This woman is in her 90s and she has no idea who I am. What if she can't understand me? What if she can't hear me. I call and all of my fears spring into action and become very real. She keeps shouting, "Who?" and "What?" when finally, her son, John, takes her phone from her and asks me who I am. I explain.

He seems enthusiastic. His voice is light and friendly. John gives me his cell phone number. Our second day in Hawai'i I text him. The day after, I call him, and I leave a message. He never responds. It wounds me in way I can't explain. I suppose that is just the aftermath of rejection. It can be from complete strangers, blood relatives. Rejection doesn't seem to differentiate between them.

When I mention this to Cain and Lisa they tell me they had both met her. I tell them, isn't it interesting that my first name was Marie? Don't they think I should meet her? They are

hesitant to say anything. I think it's a great idea to meet the woman who took care of my biological mother, who, when she was 12, her own mother died in Apia, Samoa, which left her nine siblings scattered to other family members living throughout the Pacific. The scene I built in my mind slowly starts to crumble. I had believed this woman, no matter her age, would have some insight into who my father might be. Maybe give me some information about my mother, what she was like growing up. Maybe tell me why I had been named Marie, or where the name Nonie came from.

Lisa doesn't care to visit Aunt Marie. She and Cain will take me to her apartment if I want to go, but I don't think it is a good idea to just drop in on people. Then Lisa says she thinks Aunt Marie is the one to blame for how Clara turned out. You know, because Clara deserted all of her kids. We don't go. Maybe it is for the better, but it is surely not what I anticipated. My disappointment dwindles over the next few days but leaves a ball of ache in my jaw.

But we are going to meet Aunt Anna. Clara's biological baby sister lives on the other side of Oahu with her daughter, Fuluula. From what I have been told, none of Clara's siblings spent much time together. Only in 2012 did the remaining who are still alive, all meet up for a reunion. Clara was dead by then. I feel the sad irony. A family dispersed, never growing up together. The difference is Clara's mother died and her father could not take care of nine children on his own. Alex, Gene have the same father and grew up together until, at age 16, Alex moved to American Samoa. Me, Cain, and Lisa all have different fathers. Lisa and I do not know anything about our biological fathers. I wonder if it is because we are girls.

We walk the ramp up to the tidy house. The air inside is comfortable and cool compared to the humidity outside. We are introduced to Aunt Anna. She is short, and her muumuu makes her look stouter than I imagine she is. But her face, and cheeks, even her hair, remind me of a

cheery, tropical snowperson. Her eyes slice up in half circles when she smiles. As I bend to hug to her, her tiny short arms barely make it up to my shoulders. She says nothing but Talofa to me.

Alex's wife Alicia and Lisa speak fluent Samoan. They stand in the kitchen with Aunt Ana speaking in quick, soft voices. Their conversation looks intimate as if they have known each other all of their lives and are filling one another in on family gossip. My ears are straining, begging to understand. I know I am staring, but they pay no attention to me. I am surprised at this yearning.

We are corralled then, to go in and meet Ulu, as they call her, Aunt Anna's daughter. Ulu has terminal cancer and is bed ridden. She is laying in a hospital bed and hooked up to a few machines. She is sitting up and looks as though she might be melting into the covers and pillows which are snuggling her. She has a huge bright smile. I don't have much experience with terminally ill people, but the aura Ulu emits into the room is bright and contagious and I can't help but smile back at her.

She is saying hello, hello, Talofa, as we line up by her bed, taking turns to bend down and hug her. Someone is saying, this is your cousin Gene, this is your cousin Tiffany. When I raise up from our embrace she looks at me with a scowl behind her glasses, oh I've heard about you, Tiffany. I am terrified. I can feel my face drop. I ask her what she has heard, and she releases a laugh so full it jiggles her body and the bed. I can't help but laugh with her.

Days later, when I get back to Tennessee, I receive a friend request on Facebook from Ulu. We talk through messenger and even though she calls me her beautiful palagi cousin, I cringe at the word palagi. I know it is true, but I tell her I don't want to be a palagi, I'd rather be Afakasi at the least. With this she sends me a laughing emoji. I tell her I want to learn Samoan. Okay, she tells me, maybe someday you will learn, I'm not sure how, hahaha, but you will. I feel

the power of her laughter all the way from across the ocean. Ula's place in my heart is unexpected.

Certainly, we are heirs of Ituagieseese, the boy formed from just a skull, and his wives, the four winds. And surely, then, their children, Tui, are our ancestors. It feels as if my siblings are at the corners of the earth. We are like seafaring coconuts, transplanted on various soils, involuntarily grown in alien dirt, and emerging with hybrid souls.

After visiting Ulu and Aunt Anna, we spend the rest of the day at the Polynesian Cultural Center. Each Pacific Island is represented by dance, or song, or some other tradition which is significant and in individual to those specific islands. We scurry from one "village" to another as fast as we can so we can make it to all of them before they close. I am hot, I am tired, I am sweating, but I am smiling the entire time.

We eat at the center before an evening show where live performers dance and sing. It is a spectacular event. The glistening tan bodies of the performers glow against fire that is thrown into the air. The songs are loud and provocative with drums and shouts of joy. And sometimes they are slow and quiet like a low lullaby. We all sit in a row. I can hear Cain laugh, and Lisa say wow. I feel my husband's intent attention even though the room is dark, and I know he is as exhausted as I am.

Later, when Michael and I are in private, I ask him what he thought about the experience. He says it was cool, but. I know what he is thinking before his words are formed. I say, you know how they've done those exposés on say, Disneyland, where they reveal all the dark and dirty stuff that happens behind the happy, glitz and glamour? Yes, he says, agreeing with me. The whole place feels like that. As if behind the singing, smiling, and dancing Polynesians, the

all-powerful Mormon church is lurking in the shadows, controlling the show like a puppet master. Knowing the Mormon Church owns the PCC is what bothers us.

While we were leaving the park, there are middle aged, to elderly white representatives of the PCC, dressed in Hawai'ian print clothing, handing out flyers to patrons about Brigham Young University, and the Mormon religion. Ten years ago, this may not have bothered me. I may not have even noticed, but now, I have the feeling that at least some, if not all of what we experienced, was manipulated and molded, wash in colonialism. It surprisingly makes me sick.

I don't mention any of this to my siblings. The day was extremely special. I did feel like a kid at Disneyland. But at the very end, if I think about it too long, the magic is tainted, and as I think about it in the months to come, it makes me angry. Now, I don't believe anything historic which was solely written or compiled by Caucasians. It is not the entire truth.

The theories of the American anthropologist Margaret Mead and New Zealand anthropologist Derek Freeman are at odds. In the 1920s Mead visits Samoa for a few months to observe Samoan culture. What she develops and writes a book about are the ideas of Samoan society, especially when it comes to sex, and the Samoan girl coming of age. This depiction is not accepted by many Samoans. Even today, my sister tells me she is disgusted by what she read in Mead's book.

In contrast, Freeman goes to Samoa and writes a book about his own experiences which scrutinize and contradict much of Mead's work. When Freeman's research is published, the American anthropology community condemns it, stating his study is poorly written and not scientific.

Both authors are Caucasian and educated in predominately white establishments. I have yet to read either of their books.

It is dark when we leave the PCC. Liz and Cain don't drink so they head home and the rest of us head to a bar. We are in Waikiki and the majority of people we see are palagi tourists. I use the terms Afakasi and palagi a lot while I am in Hawai'i hoping to sound, and feel, more native. It has the opposite effect. The more I say, or attempt to say Samoan words, and Hawai'ian words, the further away I seem to be. But I keep trying.

The women are going to the grocery store to purchase food for tailgating. The men are going to the liquor store, loading the grills, and buying ice. While we are shopping, Lisa is guiding the way. She is familiar with the store and knows what we should bring to the tailgate. She stops at some point and turns to me. We both start a question for each other, the same words, at the same time. We blink and stare and start to laugh. Yes, jinx, but it's more than that. We shout at each other, we are sisters! And then we start to cry, and then we hug. We must have been a spectacle in the middle of the produce section. I really don't care. Months later when I tell people this story, I still tear up.

We meet at the stadium parking lot and set everything up. Our group of 14 stand out with the orange of the Oregon State University shirts, in contrast to the University of Hawai'i's dark green. It's all good. Everyone is friendly.

Lisa's husband, Tua, is the grill master. As he drinks beer and wipes sweat from his brow, he bounces to the beat of someone's music. He doesn't say much, but he looks completely in his element, as if there was nothing on earth he would rather be doing than standing over a huge, hot grill, cooking pounds of ribs, chicken, hamburgers and hot dogs. Later in the stands as we are watching the game, I look around the stadium and my eyes rest on Lisa and Tua sitting close by. He has his arm draped around her shoulders and as he says something to her, he pulls her in close. She smiles and laughs. I know I am lucky to be a part of this.

It is a risky thing. To seek out adults who, over the course of at least 40 years, have lived completely different, detached and separate lives, and ask them drop what they are doing, both physically and emotionally, to be a part of a relationship they did not ask for. Why would anyone want to do this? It just means there are more people to care about, worry about, to keep in touch with, to contribute joy towards and mourn for. More souls to fret over, to bicker with, to forgive, to share, to love. To love.

I wouldn't consider myself a lonely person. I am not like Valavala who only had a long-legged chair which he had built to keep him company. I have never yearned for companionship so badly that if a skull were to drop from the heavens, I would wish it into a person. It is something else for me.

On the evening Michael and I are to leave and head back to Tennessee, we all sit in Liz and Cain's living room. Cain starts to talk about our time together and what it has meant to him. We all take turns telling each other how important and special it has been that we have been able to all meet. Even our spouses contribute to the conversation. We all agree that it is an amazing thing that we have all come together so by chance. At the end, we have decided to be a family. Yes, blood makes us related, but we have also chosen each other.

I cry because I am both happy and sad. I don't want to leave, and yet I am filled with emotions that need time to decompress. There is both a dull and pointed feeling. There is a part of me that wants to drop everything and move closer to my siblings.

When we were driving to see Aunt Anna on the other side of Oahu, we saw tents established on the beach. We were told that homeless people live there. Many of the tents were rather large and did not look tattered or worn. I told Michael I could live there. How would you eat? I'd fish. How would you shower? I'd swim. What if you needed to go somewhere? I'd get a

bike. Looks like you have it all figured out, he said. I know it is unrealistic. But what if I wish for it hard enough. Would my ancestors hear me, would the West wind unexpectedly blow me to the corner of the earth where I belong?

## ESSAY TWO

### The Blood of Strangers

There is a common trick people play on each other. It is the one where someone taps you on the left shoulder and when you turn to the left expecting to see a person, no one is there. Maybe you hear a laugh, or a chuckle and as you look around, searching, the prankster watches, enjoying your confusion. I often experience the sensation from this prank; my brain takes a second too long to catch up with my eyes. I feel it when I see my reflection in a mirror.

I was born and adopted as a baby in Honolulu, Hawai'i. The birth certificate the hospital gave my adoptive parents states I am Samoan and Irish/Turkish. Throughout my life strangers have asked me what I am. What is typed on my birth certificate is what I tell them.

I wonder why they ask me. Sometimes I think it's because of my curly hair. The entire family I grew up with all have straight hair. My curls aren't tight enough for a much-envied fro, and not loose enough for the waves made famous by blonde bombshells. I think sometimes they ask because of my skin color. It's not red or yellow, olive or brown. My family is pink and cream, where, depending on the season, I am the colors of sand, orchids and coconut husks. My eyes aren't completely round or squinty, although they are difficult to see when I smile. They are so inky, my pupils melt into my irises. And while my mother has brown eyes, my father has blue, my brother's green. My butt has been called flat, as well as fat. My lips are full and thin and sit over big white teeth. I am taller and thicker and weirder than any member of the family I was raised by.

I continue telling people I am Samoan and Irish Turkish until a commercialized DNA testing company taps me on the shoulder. The test tells me I am Pacific Islander, most likely Samoan, and Eastern European. From my profile, Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, and Poland are in a highlight of yellow. The results giggle at me. Not Turkish. I am, however, two percent Irish. I am aware the science in this field of study cannot not be one hundred percent accurate. I am curious to see what else is out there.

The results of the DNA test are fascinating. There are maps and graphs. There is a section designated to finding relatives and explanations of to what degree we are related. I scroll through the faces in profile pictures and I find a new confidence when I reach out to a second cousin who lives in New Zealand. She is only a year older than I am, we look nothing alike, but any connection is better than none.

I send her a message:

My name is Tiffany Herron. I was adopted in Hawai'i when I was a baby and now live in Chattanooga, Tennessee. I know nothing about my biological family and I am really excited to see we may be related. Would you like to talk or communicate on here? I have no idea where to begin! :)

She responds:

Hello Tiffany! Wonderful to hear from you and how amazing is this DNA ancestry testing right? My name is Falenaoti Roache but I go by the name Leta Roache. I live in New Zealand but I was born in Samoa in 1970. My parents came to New Zealand in 1971 with my older brother and myself and we have lived here ever since. I would love to find out how we are related and help you connect with your biological family if that is something you are looking to do.

I am ecstatic that she has written back. We chat frequently by Facebook Messenger and she is always so warm, signing her correspondence: “Much Alofa (love).” We realize it will be very difficult and expensive to find out how we are actually related. My giddiness slowly subsides. I constantly stare at a world map to let my eyes swim in the Pacific.

There are 4,344 miles from Tennessee to Hawai’i.

There are 2,581 miles between Hawai’i and Samoa.

There are 2,031 miles from Samoa to New Zealand.

Hawai’i is an open adoption state and I request my records. I check the mailbox every day for two weeks until an oversized tan envelope arrives crammed inside. I want to tear into it while I am walking back into the house, but I resist. My husband greets me.

“What’s that?”

“My adoption file from Hawai’i.”

“You going to open it?”

“I don’t know, I was about to rip it open, I’m nervous now.”

“C’mon. Let’s go sit down.”

My vision is blurry and I’m not sure if it’s due to the sharp temperature change from coming inside or if the tentacles of anxiety are wrapping around my eyeballs and using them as rattles. I open the envelope and pull out a stack of papers. There are many documents including my original birth certificate. My husband leans over and reads with me.

“Is that a birth certificate?”

“Yes, oh I don’t know where to start.”

He laughs at me.

"Is this mine? Oh, I had a name before I was Tiffany. Was it Clara?"

"No, silly, that's your mother's name, see here?"

He points to the words "Mother's First Name."

"Oh, ha ha, I can't read! So my mother's name is Clara Loa and where is my…"

"Here, Maria."

"Oh my gosh, my name was Maria. Maria Nonie Loa. Wow."

I really do have a difficult time reading. I get to the box on the birth certificate that says "Race." It states that I am Samoan and part Spanish as well as German with a little Chinese. There is another document from a doctor. This one claims I am French Polynesian. I feel the tap on my shoulder, and I can hear Science and the State of Hawai'i's Department of Health laughing hysterically. When my eyes and brain align, the results from the DNA test feel more trustworthy than the hospital records filled out in 1971.

I continue to skim through the papers in my lap. There is a document entitled "Final Divorce Decree." It states that Clara was divorced in 1969 and I wonder why it is included with my adoption file since I was born two years later.

"Who knows," my husband says. "Sometimes people get back together for a night. Could be your biological father." He has a kind of kind of sideways smile across his face, but it is full of hope that I will find all my missing pieces.

I keep reading. Clara filed for divorce on the grounds of mental and physical cruelty. I skim through the legal jargon. At the very bottom of the page, in the lower left hand corner, are six small words:

Marital Offspring: Alex Briski, Gene Briski.

I show my husband.

“I think I have two brothers. I wonder if I should look them up online. I wonder if they are on Facebook. Oh, I’m scared, I’m excited. They might not want anything to do with me. Should I look them up?”

My husband is laughing at me.

“Yes, yes, go see. Go see if you can find them.”

I am standing up now. The pile of papers are scattered on the coffee table except for the Divorce Decree. I hold it tightly in my hand as I move to my laptop. I type the name Alex Briski first. The profile picture is of the famous performer Dean Martin. I assume Alex is a fan. I can’t see any other the other pictures so I move on.

I ignore the tapping on my shoulder. I expect the joke now after so long and I don’t care if my eyes and brain are working together at this point. I type in the name Gene Briski. There, looking directly at me, are happy eyes like parentheses turned upside down. They are dark and emphasize a smile of large white teeth, just like mine. His skin tone isn’t quite red or yellow, olive or brown.

I show my husband.

“He really looks a lot like you.”

“I think so, too. This is so crazy.”

“Are you going to try and contact him?”

“Yes. I have to, right? I’m going to.”

“Do it.”

I start creating a message and all of my concentration and concern about typos and first impressions are trampled under the flurry of my fingers as I type.

I send him a message:

Hi, my name is Tiffany Herron. I know you dont't know me and this may seem strange, but I just recently received my adoption records and I am thinking you and Alex may be my brothers or half-brothers. I was born and adopted in Honolulu in 1971. The paperwork mentions Clara Briski (Loa) as my mother. I don't want to intrude, just trying to find where I come from. Any info you have would be greatly appreciated ☺ thanks!

I distract myself by looking through the rest of my file as I wait for a response.

Gene:

It's very likely you're my little sister, well half-sister. Besides Alex and me you also have another younger sister, Lisa, and brother Cain. All of us were abandoned by Clara as babies.

Me:

Thank you so much for responding! I know it's late, I would really like to to talk more if you are willing, this is all kind of weird I'm sorry if it brings up an ugly past, it's very exciting for me to meet you and see a face similar to mine! I'd love to reach out to Lisa and Cain, too.

The next morning, we continue our conversation.

Gene:

Sure yea, I turned in last nigh. my cell is 678 ***-****. I live in the Atlanta area now.

Me:

I'm sorry, "ugly" might not have been the best word to use, maybe painful would've been better. I guess I should have looked for you all sooner but I figured if I did find anyone they would be so far away. It's crazy, I live in Chattanooga, TN. Please let me know when a good time would be to call.

Gene:

Ugly is accurate.  I'm at work but after 2 I don't have much going on.

It is difficult for me to interpret Gene's tone over text. His words, however, are very clear. *All of us were abandoned by Clara as babies*. And, *Ugly is accurate* does not feel good when I read it but what my heart responds to most is the honesty. I am sincerely afraid I have offended him. I think, and re-think, and over think, and I realize he gave me his number. Who would give you their number if they weren't at least a little curious themselves?

My heart is racing, and I close myself in the bedroom so I'm not distracted by my two dogs, or two cats, or the noise from the television my husband is watching in the living room. I dial Gene's number and his voice is a happy sound in my ear. I can almost picture him smiling into his phone. We laugh at the absurdity of it all. How for the last 20 years we have lived no more than two hours away from each other and never knew the other existed. What's even stranger is he was born in Tennessee.

I tell him how I found him, and he shares in more detail his haphazard relationship with Clara. He says they talked a couple of times when he was an adult, but she asked for money. He says his father was a tyrant and he left home as soon as he could and joined the military. I have many questions, but I want him, as I've always wanted an older brother, to guide the way.

I tell him about my childhood. I tell him about going back to Hawai'i once in the early 90s with my family because my father had to go to a conference in Honolulu. We made a family vacation of it. We visited the Polynesian Cultural Center and, I tell Gene, as I was watching the dances representative of each archipelago of Polynesia, it was first time I had ever found men in skirts extremely hot.

I was laughing and Gene laughed at first but then stopped.

"Those aren't skirts."

“Oh,” I said.

“They are lavalava.”

“Lava, what?”

“Lavalava, the traditional clothing.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know. I was 19, maybe 20 years old. I wasn’t paying attention to much other than their dancing.”

Gene chuckles at this and I laugh at myself, at my ignorance. More than a year later I am still ignorant. But my older brother tries to educate me and I am appreciative. He tells me that many native Samoans are xenophobic. There are three categories: Samoan, afakasi, and palagi. An afakasi is a person who is part Samoan and part European, a term derived from the words ‘half-caste.’ A palagi is an outsider, a white or non-Samoan person.

Gene considers himself afakasi because Clara was afakasi and so is his father. We discuss how people have mistaken us for all different ethnicities. He says when he and his partner Jackie, who is white with blonde hair and blue eyes, went to Florida a few months prior, a bartender carded him.

“All the craziness with immigration and ICE, I know the bartender thought my ID was fake.”

“Oh, wow, really? Why do you think that?”

“He didn’t ask to see Jackie’s ID. I’d been in the sun too; I was too brown. He took a long ass time looking at my license, looked me up and down.”

“People are stupid.”

“Yeah, I had a hard time not speaking my mind, but I’m in Florida, with a Georgia ID, I just wanted to drink a beer and relax.”

There is the other side, then, of being too white. Gene and Jackie went to American Samoa a few years ago to visit his older brother, my oldest half-brother Alex. Gene says he was called palagi by some children even though his skin was darker than some of theirs. Gene isn't fluent in Samoan and his mainland accent helps distinguish him. I understand very quickly palagi is not a something you want to be called, especially by a Samoan. It feels like a synonym for cracker, honky, haole, and gringo.

Gene:

We have another sister. Tiffany Herron shares our biological mom. She was born in 1971 and was given up for adoption. She just reached out to me last night.

Me:

Thanks Gene! Hi everyone, I think I've been able to introduce myself [on Facebook messenger] to everyone but Lisa. Thank you all for taking the time to respond.

It does not take long for all of us to be engaged in a crazy mishmash of conversation. Between the five of us, initially, Gene comments the least.

I get the sense if I want to meet Gene I will need to be the one to initiate it, so I send him a message.

Me:

Hi! What are you all doing next weekend?

Gene:

we were just talking about that, coming to see you?

Gene surprises me with a video call. As it is with many of my emotions, I respond by laughing so long and hard my eyes tear up. Through my blurry vision, all I can do is stare at what

seems to be a male version of myself. Gene is giddy too, I can tell. His image on my phone bounces around as we try and work out plans to meet.

He and Jackie decide to come to Chattanooga and reserve a hotel room downtown. As Jackie texts me letting me know they have arrived, my husband Michael and I head to meet them. We pull into the parking lot of the hotel and I am jabbering.

I am desperately trying look out of my window to see if I can locate them, when all of a sudden a figure pops in front of me. It's Gene and he is smiling and laughing at my startled expression. I jump out of the car and we hug, big, bold, bear hugs and laugh. I embrace Jackie as well. Michael shakes hands with them both and we head towards a place to eat and drink and talk.

The bubbles in our beer have more self-control than I do. I explain to the waitress, the man sitting across from me is my brother and we are meeting for the first time, ever. My husband and sister-in-law grin alongside us and wait for the woman's reaction. She hands us our drinks with a complimentary smile.

"Oh, that's great."

"She doesn't care." I say this with false surprise, disappointment and my lower lip poked out.

As the disinterested server walks away, the tan apples of my brother's cheeks rise to touch his bottom lashes. His dark eyes squint and he is laughing as he tries to take a sip from his beer. My eyes and cheeks do the same.

As a child, I was told staring was impolite, so I try not to gaze too long at my new older brother. Although, when we make eye contact, I am held uncomfortably like a bee suspended over honeysuckle. The encryptions of my blood have been revealed and proven by an original

official government-issued birth certificate and verified by a DNA test. I still hesitate at the truth of it all, but I am content, because his is the only face I have ever seen that looks like mine. And isn't it funny, ironic even, that his name is Gene?

It is a Saturday night and Clemson, my alma mater, has a televised football game, so we decide to go where we can keep an eye on the score. Earlier that evening over the phone, my mother, whom I call Mom, not "adoptive mother," asked me what I was going to wear. I had wondered how I should present myself the first time meeting a half-sibling. I've never dressed for an occasion like this. Do I dress up in a mature, conservative fashion so he knows I know how to act like an adult? Do I dress for comfort? I have no idea what the evening has in store for us. I tell myself the Tigers might lose if I don't wear something indicating my support. I decide on a Clemson t-shirt, shorts and Chaco's. I am so relieved when I see Gene in a t-shirt and shorts as well.

As we walk towards the restaurant, the sun is fading. We walk through a parking lot and Gene stumbles slightly in a small pothole. He laughs but keeps walking. I ask if he's okay and he says yes.

"Wow," Michael says, "You two really are related. Tiffany does that all the time."

"I do. All the time." As I affirm this out loud, I am delighted, even in these subtle ways that we have more in common than just physical features.

The restaurant is crowded and noisy, but we still keep talking. Jackie and Gene met when they were going to school in Oklahoma. Jackie says Gene was a wild child and Gene just smiles. She shows me a picture of them at a party when they were in their twenties. Gene is tan with hair to his shoulders, a mischievous look in his eyes. I wish I had known him back then.

While we are waiting to be seated, I see a woman who is a supervisor where I used to work. I tell her I am there with my brother, who I have just met for the first time. I point him out as he stands at the bar ordering drinks. She comments on how much we look alike; how happy she is for me. We are about the same age and I notice how sophisticated she looks. Her attire is fashionable, hair and makeup done just right and for once I am surprised I don't feel awkward or self-conscious, second guessing what I chose to wear.

We sit at a table in the bar area and order our food. Like me, Gene eats with enthusiasm. Unlike me, he does Zumba several times a week. He's in great shape.

We talk about Lisa and Cain and how Gene and Alex found out about them.

"You know I think out of all of us," Gene says, "you got it the best."

I look at him. Between the eating and drinking, this point in the conversation looks casual, but my gut feels knotted.

"What do you mean?" I know what he means, but just like everything in my life, I prefer verbal confirmation.

"I mean, our childhoods. I think out of all five of us you had the best one."

"Oh." It's the only thing I can manage to say.

But I want to say more. I want to apologize for somehow being the "lucky" one. I can feel my eyes get heavy with tears. I can't read Gene's face. I'm not sure if it's resentment, just a matter-of-fact statement, or if he's somehow reassuring me that my upbringing could have been significantly worse.

Jackie is saying something comforting. I nod my head and smile and continue to shove food in my mouth. Michael is watching the game.

In retrospect I want to argue but I know I would sound like a whiny child. I hear her voice: “Nu uh, you know who your biological parents are, you look like your family.” When I was growing up there were many photos of my family hanging on the walls of our home. There were also many portraits at each set of my grandparents’ houses, too. At every family get together, without fail, someone would always mention how my little brother, the son of my adoptive parents, looked so much like both of our grandfathers, or how much he resembled my uncle and father. No one ever said I looked like anyone, and to be fair, I didn’t. I didn’t think about how it bothered me until, as a young teen, I started counting how many pictures everyone had of my younger brother hanging on their walls. And then I would count the photos of me. My mother had once said there were always more pictures of the first child and then, as an aside, mentioned that all of mine were on slides.

The inner little-kid voice argues more: “You know where you came from, your culture, your medical history.” I’ve always known after being born in Honolulu, Hawai’i that we moved to Sacramento when I was still a baby. In experiences such as going to the doctor or filling out paperwork for school, I became more embarrassingly aware of the parts of me that were missing.

My grandparents on my mother’s side had a large book about the islands of Hawai’i with glossy color photographs titled *The Hawai’ians.* I was given the book after my grandparents died and have never read it but as a little girl it was the only reference I had to people who looked remotely like me. I took the book out every time we visited. No one read anything from it to me. There is a photo of a little girl with flowers in her hair who I pretended was me. There are also pictures of women performing the hula and others in muumuus, their large rear-ends billowing over a bench. And there is one image of a young woman in a parade dressed like a princess who

I imagined I would look like when I grew up. But sometimes I made believe that she was an older sister, aunt, or even my biological mom.

When I was in middle school there was a student whose name was Leilani, and someone had told me she was Polynesian. She was older, and she could sing like I had never heard anyone sing before. Leilani was beautiful. I was intimidated and I never talked to her, and then I moved along with my family from California to South Carolina. On my last day of school, my mother picked me up and asked me why I was crying. I told her I was going to miss my friends. Now I realize, I was also going to miss the visits to Fisherman's Warf in San Francisco, the smell of the Pacific Ocean, the book about Hawai'i, and the sound of names such a Leilani.

This moment at the restaurant with my brother Gene is not meant to be a competition. Gene says nothing more that evening about the differences of our childhood. It's the only time during the entire visit that I get choked up. I am surprised, again.

We go play pool and darts and I find Gene is as bad at chugging a beer as I am. We laugh and toast to our newly found family. We close the bar down and make plans for brunch in the morning.

The next day we drive around Chattanooga and I show Jackie and Gene the touristy spots. We drive up to Ruby Falls and Rock City. We stop at the top of the Lookout Mountain Incline and walk out to the platform. It's a brisk fall day but the view is spectacular.

Michael and I take them to our humble basement apartment and introduce them to our dogs. I show them pictures of me as a kid from an old family album and then some wedding pictures. The decorations at our ceremony represented each of our cultures – turkey feathers for the Lakota blood running through Michael, and fresh flower leis for the Pacific Islander in mine. Almost ten years ago we were both just beginning to discover how to be more connected with

our origins. I wish my newly found sister and brothers could have been there for our wedding, but more, to teach me how our people might prepare and participate in such a celebration.

I never understood why people renewed their vows. It always seemed pretentious to me, just an opportunity for the rich to spend money and to be the center of attention. But I fantasize what that might look like for Michael and me now. I think I would just prefer a huge party, without any religious connotations. All of my siblings and Michael's relatives from the Sisseton Wahpeton Reservation would be there. We would have a pig cooked in an umu, sunflower-crusted trout, roasted bread fruit, deviled duck eggs, fresh mango and wild berry wojape. Maybe someday.

It's time for Gene and Jackie to head back to Alpharetta. I give them long hugs goodbye and we make plans to visit soon. It can never be soon enough. Whatever the doubts I had about the science of the DNA test, and the vagueness of my adoption file, disappears with the merging of their car onto the highway, and out of sight.

# ESSAY THREE

## Aesthetics of Learning

The islands were at war. The eastern islands of Samoa were winning and enslaving the people of the western islands. Seeking help for their people, the last two able bodied warriors summoned the goddess Nafanua to help them defeat the east and return freedom to their people. Nafanua agreed but made the two warriors promise that they would always fight with courtesy. In other words, no unnecessary brutality, and if an opponent retreated, or asked for mercy, they must grant it. The warriors were skeptical, they were completely outnumbered, three against thousands, but they agreed.

As the three warriors battled, one got carried away and killed an enemy even after he had asked to be spared. The warrior from the west thought he had gotten away with his kill when suddenly, he heard Nafanua's voice in his ear. It whispered like a breeze reminding him of his promise. With a sigh of disappointment, he fell to the ground, as dead as the enemy he had slayed.

Now only two, the warriors battled on. If an enemy from the east asked to be spared, they would be, but they were told never to come back to the western islands. Nafanua kept fighting. The one thing the eastern warriors did not know was that the warrior besting them all, was a woman. She fought as bravely and strongly as any man. But standing at the edge of a cliff and wielding her talavalu club, a strong wind blew in from the ocean, lifting Nafanua's top and revealing that she was a woman. The warriors were so shocked, and the battle ended right then and there.

The legend of Nafanua was the first, and one of many stories I came across on the search of my ethnic identity and biological family. It seems fitting that it was about a warrior goddess. Growing up, my favorite characters of lore were always the bad asses. I preferred Diana to Venus, Athena versus Aphrodite, Mulan to Cinderella. I fell in love with Linda Carter's Wonder Woman, even though I was never allowed to watch the 1980s television show. But she fought bad guys, and had long dark hair compared to the normalized "good guy" blonde. She battled evil all while wearing high heeled boots and basically, a one-piece bathing suit.

My mom has mentioned to me a few times, that I was prejudice against blondes. This is completely untrue. Some of my best friends are blonde. My dad's hair was blonde, my brother's hair is blonde, my best friend growing up, Cate, is blonde. Hell, I even spent hundreds of dollars trying to turn my hair a golden blonde. All joking aside, it wasn't the color of the hair I was against. I am completely aware people can be prejudice against the very things they claim to love. But truly, I took no offense to the color of the hair or the people who wore it. My distaste and disgust lay within the representation of most good versus evil stories. The "good" character was fair skinned and usually had any color hair but dark brown or black. Like mine. In my day, in the world of Disney princesses, Snow White is all I had. And Snow White was weak.

Although representation is not a new societal revelation, its demand for attention and recognition is louder than it was just ten years ago. There are more women doctors, politicians, and more women of color in positions of power. They are on covers, front and center, and in stories as the star protagonist, with no need of a male hero. And they come in all shades, shapes and sizes. It is absolutely lovely being a witness to this evolution, and at the same time disheartening that it has taken so long to happen.

With the constant practice of explaining to people that I was Samoan; you can imagine my delight in seeing the thick legged characters in *Lilo and Stitch*. Before I found or met any of my biological family, I went to see *Moana* in the theater. Yes, I saw it more than once — sat top row, center seat, and you may think it ridiculous for a forty something year old woman, but I cried through the first ten minutes of the movie.

It wasn't just the swelling of voices singing in a language my heart longed to know that made me utterly emotional. It wasn't the vision of curly, dark headed villagers with their brown skin tightly wrapped over dense, rounded muscles that made me smile so hard my cheeks obstructed the sight of my eyes. And it wasn't the exotic lushness of the island home or the magical sparkle of the ocean that made me sit straight up, on the edge of my seat, wanting to be absorbed into the landscape on the screen. It was the prickle in my blood telling me that what I was watching, and hearing was something so incredible, the entire world was going to know about it. Children would drive their parents crazy singing the songs over and over. People would dress like the movie characters for Halloween.

As the movie put me in a trance, synapse in my brain pierced holes in whatever held my reason together. Tiny wounds inside of me opened, the warmth of knowing I was genetically a part of this magnificence spilled out onto a cold ground. I had completely missed out on all of it. I was a stranger to a true culture. I was frozen and barren to the meaning of what it was to be Polynesian, to be Samoan. My curly hair, my brown skin, my DNA didn't mean a thing. I was, I still am, a palagi. For those first ten minutes of *Moana*, I wanted to wail out loud like I had lost a child, and, for some reason, it felt as though the grief was all my fault.

I wrote a poem about my nephews before ever meeting my biological brother, Alex, his wife Alisha, or their sons Dean, 16 and Sebastian, 19. (I still have yet to meet Dean, but I have

seen photos.) I know we have all come across people in a crowd, or photographs of people and thought, “Oh my gosh, that is the most amazing looking person I have ever seen.” The reaction from the eyes to the brain don’t care about lighting or pose, all it knows is that by the time it is truly thinking about what it has observed, your whole body has filled with desire. It could be the desire to stare, or maybe to keep the photo randomly on your phone or tucked in the pages of a book, and it might even coax you into research, what that person looks like in other photos.

I’m not talking about the type of romantic or lustful desire. I merely mean the kind that holds you spellbound, maybe for a few seconds, maybe for days. A friend of mind told me once she read a study where the researchers had determined that seeing an impressively attractive person does something to the brain, scientifically scrambles it a bit. But let me tell you, when I saw photos of these two boys, I couldn’t contain myself. That I was related to them made my heart so bright I swear people could see it pounding through my ribcage as I shared their pictures.

Nephews
Towering boys have grown as strong
as the mango trees planted
by their father

From their mother,
a canopy of hair holds a tint that hovers around their heads,
like a glow from an angel set on fire by Pele,
of hues orange and red that only occur

below dancing kelp, the glowing dreams of the reef

The songs they bring from their island home
sow thick jungle vines through me
In forgiving, rising voices,
unlike the hard tongue of the mainland,
they explain:
*"Lava-lava"*
*a* garment foreign to my body
*"Polusami"*
*a* cuisine exotic to my mouth

These nephews of mine are so beautiful,
I am embarrassed
because I want to carry them everywhere
and show them off
as my colonial grandmother did
her pearl earrings

My oldest brother Alex is 6'8" and when I first met him, online, he told me he weighed over to 400 pounds. He has since lost over 100 pounds but is still a really big guy. In photos next to his sons, Sebastian is just a little bit shorter, where Dean is almost as tall as his father. Their

mother is from Samoa (western islands), not American Samoa (eastern islands), and is about 5’9” but looks so tiny standing next to her husband and sons.

Over the last two and a half years Alex and I have talked a handful of times over the phone. He told me that his sons get their dark fiery hair from somewhere on their mother’s side of the family. He told me people think they dye their hair, but it is natural. Dean wears his hair short, like his father, but Sebastian’s hair is long. It sits right past his shoulders and is curly. It’s about the most beautiful hair I have ever seen. Yes, I know I am being biased, but I promise there will be a photo of him at the end of this book.

Alex shared many stories of his sons. Sebastian was the captain of his high school football team, student body president and became valedictorian. As any good parent, even with all of these achievements, his father was still nervous about his son’s future. He worried that the education Sebastian had received in American Samoa would not be enough for him to attend a top school in mainland, United States. It was hard for me to imagine at first, but I had to remind myself I knew nothing of the academics on our country’s territories and I realized it should not be surprising if they were subpar. When has our country ever invested in brown-occupied lands unless there was a resource to make the people in power, rich?

The story which stands out most in mind is the one about Sebastian standing up against the school board in order to keep his hair long. Over the years I have heard of teachers and schools making children cut their hair before they could reap whatever benefit the school assumed they were providing. We do the same thing on the mainland, still. From New Jersey to Texas, Black students are being told, being made to cut their hair in order to participate in everything from walking in graduation, to prom, and even before engaging in a wrestling match. I don’t understand the explanation of the powers that be – it’s a distraction. I want to scream

when I read these articles: “Your face is a distraction! Your colonialism is a distraction!” But that gets us nowhere. Who set the rules, what is acceptable, what is appropriate, beautiful?

Sebastian had to write and then present a statement in front of the members of the school district defending his impressive, phenomenal, well-maintained locks. He had the support of his family, and of two other classmates who wanted to keep their hair long as well. But because Sebastian was the star athlete, the student body president, he was the one who orally pleaded their case. He told the panel of men that his hair was more than just an accessory. His hair represented his heritage, his culture. He explained that the brave warriors and chiefs of Samoa grew their hair long, that it was a sign of strength, commitment to the traditions of the past.

I wish I could have been there. Alex said he and Alisha were not able to attend but that he had read Sebastian’s speech and was so proud of him. The school administration told Sebastian and his classmates that they may keep their hair long, but it must be pulled back and kept neat. The boys agreed. After Alex finished telling the story, all I could say was wow.

Not long after that, Sebastian was accepted to attend a junior college in New Mexico. My nephew, although his grades were great, wanted more than anything to play football. Alex fretted about his son going to this school. I told him a lot of athletes, my husband included, go to two-year schools before attending a bigger college so they can get their bearings and get acclimated to college life. Some go to bring their grade point average up, but Sepp (as we call him) did not need that.

Alex, though, had something in the works. He told me he had been talking to an assistant coach who was Samoan and now worked at Oregon State University. The coach told Alex that there was no scholarship available, but if Sebastian came to OSU, he could try out for a walk on position. The college in New Mexico had promised Sepp a starting position on their football

team. Alex had told Sepp the decision was his. Later, when Alex and I were talking on the phone, I could tell he was excited for his son.

He said, “I’m glad Sepp chose OSU, besides, if he had gone to the other school, he would have had to cut his hair. It was a military school, ya know?”

I hadn’t known, but upon hearing this I was as relieved as his father, and happy for my nephew, too.

The summer before Sebastian’s freshman year at Oregon State University, he came to stay with our brother Gene in Alpharetta, Georgia. I was not going to miss the opportunity to meet my nephew straight from Pago Pago, American Samoa. I regret now that we were only able to visit for a weekend. But you know, work.

In the foyer of my brother’s home I was surrounded by giants. I am not a small person by any means, but everyone was 6’3 and taller. When I saw Sepp lumber toward me, he had a sheepish, shy, but sincerely pleased look on his face.

“Hi, Aunty.”

He wrapped his long arms around me and gave me a natural hug, like ones that I have only known to be reserved for people you really care about. But one thing I have come to realize, and appreciate, is that most Polynesians that I have met, do this. It is an honest show of love and support for another human being. It is sharing your life force with another, your mana. It is by far one of the most powerful feelings I have ever experienced. More than beauty in a photograph.

That weekend I got a brief glimpse into my nephew’s personality. He presented us with gifts from American Samoa. There was a traditional styled Samoan weapon, made of wood, given to my husband, Michael. I was given a lava lava and a woven handbag made from palm tree fronds and tropically colored fabric. We also received some tuna, canned right in American

Samoa. I tried to imagine Sepp lugging all of these items in suitcases halfway across the world for us. It didn't seem to be burden as he smiled and joked about the gifts as he gave them to us. His calm demeanor was contagious. I usually can't keep quiet. I laugh too loud, talk too much, ask too many questions. I know I was exhilarated to meet more of my blood relatives but the anxiety I usually feel when meeting strangers, the anxiety to please and the insecurity to always be funny, had left me.

We had gone to a restaurant one evening which hosted a poker night. No cash was exchanged, it was just for fun. Sebastian's father is a competitive poker player. He has gone several times to Las Vegas to compete and is always playing online. It is no surprise then that his son had picked up quite a lot of knowledge about the game. Me, on the other hand, know nothing about gambling. I played anyway but made sure to sit at the same table as Sepp. I watched him closely. He showed no emotion and did quite well for a kid. I realized later, talking to my husband, that Sepp never turned over any of his cards, never revealing his hand. Not once. Michael told me Sepp's tactic was so no one could get a read on his tell. Whatever that meant. I knew however, that it was smart.

At the end of the night as we were mingling and getting ready to leave, Gene introduced Sepp to a young woman in her early twenties. As we hung around, the woman and my nephew made small talk and Gene told her that Sepp had just moved to the states from American Samoa and was going to be a freshman at OSU. She smiled.

"Oh that's fantastic, so how old are you, 18?"

It was as if this whole incident happened in slow motion. I could see Sepp smile and start to nod his head when Gene, who had had a couple of beers, loudly spoke up.

"Oh, no, he's 17, right? 17."

If the look that Sepp gave his uncle was a Samoan warrior's club, it would have taken Gene's head off. Realizing his mistake, Gene laughed. He laughs as loud as I do. And then Gene apologized, several times. Sebastian had skipped a grade in school, so he graduated at 17. He wouldn't be 18 until January, seven months away. The young woman laughed along with us and eventually, so did Sepp. It was hard to believe this 6'4" 230-pound person with long curls, and a bit of stubble on his face was still, really, just a child. Gene had innocently embarrassed, and perfectly messed up Sepp's attempt to impress a mainland woman. But isn't that what family is supposed to do?

## ESSAY FOUR

### Others

In loud artificial light I smiled, only half listening to someone else's conversation. I looked down at the table where energetic colors bounced from their positions into my eyes. The array of books looked brightly up at me, and as I scanned titles and authors I did not know, there was one book that leapt from its spot. I stared, my mouth popped open a bit and I picked it up, holding it in both hands. The woman my friend had been talking to was the keeper of one of the hundreds of tables at the conference we were attending. She looked at me as I turned to show the cover of the book to my friend.

"Oh, you know Hali?" the woman at the table asked me.

"No, I am, I'm Afakasi." I pointed to the title of the book; the sound of the word still unusual on my tongue.

My eyes were blurry and I'm not sure if it was the jet lag, a bug I felt coming on, or the excitement from the word in the title of the book. Afakasi Half-Cast by Hali Sofala-Jones.

The Samoan term is used to describe someone who is part Samoan and part European. The English translation means "half cast." Half cast always tasted bitter and hard, like dirty coins banging against cavities. Afakasi released flavors of displaced coconuts. There are more negative titles in Samoan, like palagi, which means outsider. Or even worse, colonizer.

I traveled across the country from Chattanooga, Tennessee to Portland, Oregon to find a poet who, coincidently lives in Milledgeville, Georgia, who is also Afakasi. At this point I had

only met one other Samoan in my life, a co-worker, and one Afakasi, my newly found biological brother who lived in Atlanta.

The woman at the book-fair table continued told us that Hali was doing a reading that afternoon if we'd like to come. I looked at the woman and nodded. I'm sure my face looked like a deliriously huge bubble of hope and happiness.

My friend and I went to the reading and when we walked into the venue she poked me in the ribs and leaned into my hair.

"There she is. There's space at Hali's table."

My friend was bold for me. She lead the way, courageously walking ahead. I followed her and then she turned to me, her face warm but stern, her eyes told me to introduce myself. I did.

Hali read and told the room about awkward childhood moments, about being a Samoan girl growing up in the south, about being an Afakasi visiting Samoa. She shared her poems of identity, joy and heartbreak. She used Samoan terminology, sounds strange to my ears even though I knew the blood of that very language swam through my veins.

When Hali finished reading, I was in tears. Embarrassed, I had to walk away from the table. Maybe it was the cider I drank, the time of day, or her words drilling into a raw geyser, discovering another like me.

During this conference in Portland, Oregon, I asked my friend and travel companion, Jacque, if she would want to go visit my nephew Sepp with me. Jacque rented a car for a day and we went out on our adventure.

The plan was to meet Sepp in Corvallis, a cute college town where OSU is located. He picked out a restaurant for lunch and was joined by Dave, Alex's brother from their father's

second marriage, and Dave's fiancé, Lindsey. Dave and Lindsey, as well as Sepp's grandparents, live relatively close to Corvallis and Sepp visits with them often.

I had seen photos of Dave before squished in between Alex and Gene. He looked tiny and very Caucasian. In actuality he was a just a little shorter than I am, and both of his parents are Afakasi, part Samoan, part European. His eyes are light greenish brown, his hair is curly, but a light brow and he is paler than any of my biological siblings. He looks like a white guy. At this point in my journey and in my life, why does this even surprise me? He's a really nice man, kind and warm. And he listened, intently.

I shared with Dave and Lindsey my story of finding my biological siblings and how I got to meet Sepp the previous summer. Dave shared a little bit about being the younger brother to Alex and Gene and how he feared that his older brothers resented him. We learned Sepp's major was biology and that he was making good grades but all he really wanted to do was play football. He didn't want to sit on the bench in the upcoming season.

Dave and Lindsey apologized but they had a party that they were having to go to. I didn't realize they had expected Sepp to go with them. I offered to take him back to their house after we spent the rest of the day together if he wanted, and Lindsey said she had wanted to introduce Sepp to some people at the party. My lungs felt squeezed. The lines of my poem, my colonial grandmother's pearl earrings, plucked the nerves behind my eyelids, and a haunting competition rattled my eardrums. We had driven an hour and a half to spend an hour and a half visiting my nephew. Who knew when I was going to get to see him again?

But I didn't even have to ask Sepp what he wanted. I didn't even have to wait uncomfortably as he weighed his options not wanting to hurt either of our feelings. I didn't even have to come up with some bribe to coax him into staying with us.

"I would really like to spend the rest of the day with my Aunty."

Sepp said this looking directly at Dave, and then at Lindsey. When I was 18 and was, even mildly, guilted into doing one thing or another, my stomach would get queasy. I still struggle with that situational feeling today. And I could never look the people I was about to disappoint straight in the eye. Ever. I was impressed by my nephew. I was so impressed that I blurted out loud.

"Really, you would?"

I looked at Sepp as he nodded and affirmed again for all to hear, that, yes, he really would. I then looked at Jacque who was smiling at me with a, aw bless his heart, look all over her face. I told him I would love that, too. I didn't have the nerve to look at Lindsey, but Dave said it sounded good to him and that he would text me his address and let me know when they would be home from the party.

Sepp gave us a tour of the campus. He showed us the apartment complex where the Samoans lived, where the Tongans lived. His roommate was white, and a nice guy, but Sepp spent most of his time with the Samoans. I bought t-shirts from the bookstore and fabric markers. We went to a park and on the picnic tables I had Sepp sign his autograph on the shirts I had bought. Sepp had his hair pulled up before writing, and the sun hit it just right to reveal its color.

There is no color in the English language, that I am aware of, in which I can use to describe it. It isn't red, auburn, or orange, rust, or amber. It isn't cinnamon or ginger. I remember as a teen putting chemicals and lemon juice in my hair to lighten it. It turned a strange color of orange which my adoptive family told me looked ugly. But now that I reminisce about the color, I think it resembled Sepp's. Or maybe that is just wishful thinking. Who knows, and who cares.

What feels better than having hair that is beautiful, or maintained, is the sound of Sepp's voice when he calls me aunty.

Much of my growing up focused on how I was supposed to behave as a girl, and a lot of how I was supposed to look. I know this is a common thread through the childhood of many women. One thing I have noticed is that there are still so many women my age and younger who try and modify their looks to fit whatever their families, the media, or Disney even, define as beautiful. A young woman I knew once told me that she used the Victoria Secret models as inspiration to stay in shape. I watched Frozen with my mother and my 13-year-old niece, and every time Elsa came into view, my mother would comment on how skinny she was. Like it was a good thing. Crazy, absurd, but it sticks with me.

Science has proven that physical traits are important in every realm of the animal world. Attractiveness is an essential component of the chances of finding a mate, of keeping a mate, of just plain survival. Humans barely act superior to other mammals, so it is no surprise we place great value on what we find beautiful. Whether it's bone structure, the degree of facial symmetry, hair color, we all have preferences. But that's just it. One is not better than the other. Of course, we may agree or disagree, but physical features are not good or evil, felonious or law abiding, intelligent or ignorant.

Long before the islands were infested with missionaries and colonists, the traditional hair styles of the Samoan people were quite different than what people know today. As my nephew explained to his elders attempting to convince him to cut his hair, men wore their hair long and curly. They let it grow as long as it would go and never cut it. Women, on the other hand, wore their hair cut short. If a woman was of royal status, a chief's daughter or wife, she would let two curls grow from the left-hand side of her temple. If her status was below royalty, she could grow

one curl. It wasn't until the colonists told the native Pacific Islanders that they had it all backwards, that the styles changed. They were told that women are supposed to have long flowing hair and men are supposed to cut theirs short. It was what god wanted. The Samoans, in their transformations, took on new beliefs and values and at the same time, tried to keep true to the old ways. Today in (western) Samoa, most women wear their hair pulled up in a bun. By letting their hair grow long, they are abiding by the colonial traditions in which they have adopted. But they are also being respectful of ways of their ancestors. At the same time, wearing their hair pulled up and off their neck and shoulders, Samoan women can symbolize the short hair style, too.

When I think of the story of Nafanua I wonder how the tale originated. Over the years I have come across many stories which include the theme of women, or girls, disguising themselves as men, in order to fight in a war. This theme even shows up briefly in *Lord of the Rings*. Nafanua didn't hide the fact she was female; the warrior was just trying to do the right thing. The heroines of these stories were not glorified or praised for their beauty, how their bodies were shaped, or what their hair looked like. They are recognized for their honor, intelligence, strength and determination. I want to be a part of that. I want to show others how magnificent that can feel.

## ESSAY FIVE

### Complications of Death

With the new knowledge of mortality, Ti'iti'i, the Samoan version of the demigod Māui, sets off on a quest to find everlasting life. He is told that he must go to the horizon, where the red lights of sunsets greet he dark earth. He must find the great chieftainess, Hine-nui-te-pō, the Great Woman of the Night, the goddess of death and the underworld. He must then enter her while she is sleeping, and then make his way out through her mouth in order to achieve immortality. The demigod is warned though, that she is powerful, her eyes are red, and her pupils made of jasper. Her teeth are like the barracudas' and made of volcanic glass, and her hair is like tangled seaweed. The hero is not worried.

Ti'iti'i brings along a variety of bird companions to accompany him, because like every great ego, conquests always need witnesses. While the Great Woman sleeps, Ti'iti'i sneaks up to her and changes himself into the shape of a worm. His bird friends are quite entertained and try to maintain their composure as the great demigod wriggles himself into Hine-nui-te-pō. Just as Ti'iti'i gets inside, one of the birds can't contain its laughter, or in other versions of the tale, one of the birds warns the chieftainess, and cries out. The great goddess of death wakes up and kills Ti'iti'i.

They did not cover this story in the movie *Moana*. Maybe it will happen in *Moana 3*? But then what would that say about humanity, glorifying rape and what not? As much as I love the stories and the depictions of Māui, love that he is tattooed, that Dwayne, The Rock, Johnson voices Māui in *Moana*, the tale of the demigod's death disrupts my obsession for a traditional

hero's happy ending with the journey fulfilled and honor, justice and loyalty dispersed among all who deserve it. It is obvious that Ti'iti'i's death is unavoidable because he is only demi. However, I imagined him sacrificing himself to save all of humanity from a specific terror, or evil, but instead he becomes a perpetrator, succumbing to the worst of all human traits, even if his intentions were good. It disturbs me, and at the same time, I love how his death complicates his existence.

~

I used to be haunted by lonely, rectangular boxes. They would sit in a dim basement on sturdy shelves where cobwebs draped across voided spaces like tired lace in shadow. The boxes would be stacked neatly, their contents aching to be claimed, carried out of the mortuary and scattered, buried or entombed. In my sleep, I could feel the vibrations of their moans — don't leave me, don't desert me, don't forget me.

"She was cremated and (I think) placed in an unmarked grave... or / Potters field."

From Hawai'i, my younger brother, Cain messages this information to me. My biological siblings have had more time to come to terms with their feelings about the woman who gave birth to us. I have only just begun. I am the latest of five children who have discovered we all share the same birth mother. No one seems to know much about her including where her remains are, or how they got there.

Soon after my adoptive parent's divorce, my (adoptive) mother's father died and was cremated. When the divorce was final, my (adoptive) mother bought and drove her RV to New Orleans, Louisiana to help with the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina with Habitat for Humanity. She then traveled on to Apache Junction, Arizona where she worked at a horseback riding tour company, carrying her father's ashes with her in a square, white, carboard box.

Almost a year later, my adoptive mom returned to South Carolina, purchased a house in Greenville, and left the box in the RV. And then after the walls were painted and the photos were hung in her home, the RV sold, my mother placed the box where her father had been residing for almost five years, in a closet. On a visit to Greenville once, we planned on taking the ashes to Caesar's Head State Park and releasing them from atop a bald boulder to the dense wooded forest below. But the day was so windy, a scene from *The Big Lebowski* ran through my mind and made me panic. The timing just didn't seem right. So back to the closet my mother's father went.

Almost ten years later my adoptive mother comes to visit me in Chattanooga and brings her father's ashes with her. We have talked about finding a place, out in nature, maybe somewhere she could imagine him fishing. Since there are plenty of creeks and streams and rivers in Chattanooga, we drive around, the squat white box at my mother's feet, to find the perfect place.

When we do, it is on the bank of a creek that my mother opens the box. In the box is a clear bag, rounded out by the dark gray dust of a man I once called grandpa, tied at the top in a knot. My mother opens the bag and in an awkward motion, scatters its contents into the green water as if sprinkling parmesan onto spaghetti. There is not much current in the eddy of the river where we are standing so the ashes hover in the quiet water the way pepper sits in a soup until you stir it. My mother laughs nervously as we hear the voices of people on the trails above us. I have no idea if there is a law against this. I don't really care, but my mother wonders this out loud. She then bends over to the water and mixes it with her tiny hands. She says goodbye, dad. I say goodbye, grandpa. She tells me she's glad we were able to do that, finally, after all these years. I am not nostalgic, but I am glad he no longer has to sit in a closet.

I was not haunted by my grandfather's box. My haunting doesn't start until the day I think it would be interesting to find out where my biological mother, Clara's remains are. My friend Jacque and I spend most of an afternoon digging. I come across an article about abandoned cremated remains. How distant relatives, the closest kin living on the other side of the country, promise to pick up the box one day, or have it mailed to them. But there is a high cost for both of those options, so the boxes get stacked higher, on shelves, in storage rooms.

Jacque looks over her laptop at me and says, "I found her."

"You did?"

"Yeah, she died in Pierce County, Washington. March 13, 2006."

Clara died one month and seventeen days before my 35th birthday.

I call the state of Washington's Health Department and order her death certificate. I am a little embarrassed to let my siblings know what I'm doing. They have been more than generous by filling me in on their recollections of our biological mother and their lives in general. I hope it doesn't hurt them to think about the past. I tell them thank you many times. I say, I really appreciate you rehashing all this, I know it isn't the most cheerful of subjects. They don't acknowledge or respond to my gratitude and I worry I have tiptoed my way past an emotional no trespassing sign.

While we eat dinner, I tell my husband Michael what my friend and I have found. He has been with me from the beginning of my family discoveries. He actually initiated the search with a gifted DNA test. He mutes the television as I try to find my words and he asks if I'm okay. I tell him I don't know, I'm uncertain how to feel. I tell him, it's no secret our bio mom basically deserted her children. I understand why my siblings are knotted and tangled with empathy,

indifference and fury. There is a unifying sense of disappointment whenever we, the bio siblings, discuss Clara.

"It is the thought of her dying alone," I say.

I wonder why I am emotional about a woman who didn't want me or any of the other children she gave birth to. It makes me curious as to why I'm so indifferent about my mother's father's death. I think I know why now. I don't regret not being there for him at the end. He was in a convalescent home with strangers professionally looking after him. After a while, he did not recognize my mother anymore when she came to see him. He would go sit in the common area to watch television completely naked and then become violent with the staff as they tried to guide him back to his room. This makes me cringe a little, just for the simple reason of human decency. But I hardly ever think of him. It is so easy to forget my mother's father was someone's son, brother, uncle, husband.

Although my memories of my mother's father are not bad, he was never mean to me, as I grew up to understand the ugliness of divided beliefs, I never developed a deep sense of familial love for him. When I got older, and before I found my biological siblings, I lived in my own place and I hung photos of the only family I ever knew on the walls and sat framed pictures of them on bookshelves. It is a common practice and tradition to surround yourself with images of loved ones. Now I think I was just trying to force myself to feel something that wasn't really there. This lack made me feel ashamed. It used to make me feel guilty.

My mother has told me a few times that she and her first husband had the option, before I was born, of adopting twin African American baby boys. She says that she and her first husband decided against adopting them because what it would do to the boys, you know, having a

grandfather that would never accept them, never really love them. So, my adoptive mother and her first husband waited. I became available in 1971.

Good thing I was an indeterminate mix breed.

Good thing I was light skinned.

Good thing I didn't have kinky hair.

Good thing I was a cute little baby girl wrapped in a yellow blanket as the social worker handed me off to my white parents.

Good thing.

Being grateful for something you have no control over is a complicated feeling. I am extremely thankful that I was adopted by people who took care of me and made sure I had enough to eat, and clothes to wear, and took me to the doctor when I was sick. They loved me; I know. I will always be thankful for that. But I am so jealous of the idea that those twin boys might have had the opportunity to grow up in Hawai'i. I don't dare share this thought out loud. It's so petty.

My junior high and high school years in South Carolina I consider my white years. I was veered away from anyone of color by my family, by my friends. Some of it was unintentional. Some of it was blatant. When I was a sophomore I was asked to a dance by a senior. Keenan lived in the same neighborhood we did, his father was a professor, his mother a pillar of the community, his younger brother Kyle was super sweet, and he had a baby sister who I never met. My mom asked me if I really wanted to go. Even though I felt nothing romantic towards Keenan, I was a late bloomer and didn't have those feelings toward anyone at that time, I was still honored a senior had asked me. Keenan drove to my house. We were both dressed up. It was right before the Christmas holidays. We had a tree up with decorations, and someone, either my

mom or dad, took photos of us. We had a fun night. Years later he would tell me that he was disappointed that he never got to kiss me. I told him I was sorry, but I just didn't feel that way towards him.

These were the days when photo albums were a thing. Every photo was developed, even if it was a bad photo, it made it into an album. A few weeks after the dance we got the pictures developed. They were blurry and haphazard, but they got put where all pictures got put. We were two skinny kids, standing awkwardly, and smiling.

A year or so later I was looking through the album and did not see the photos of me and Keenan. There weren't empty spaces where the photos had been, they just weren't there. I thought maybe I had imagined putting them in the album. But then, I had a feeling in my gut as to why they weren't there. That feeling knotted and twisted inside of me and prevented me from asking anyone what happened to the pictures. Embarrassment would overtake my tongue, even as an adult. I didn't want to give either of my parents an opportunity to lie.

A few years after we had all graduated from high school, Keenan's little brother was driving home from work early one morning and tried to beat a train at a crossing. He was in the hospital for a few days and his family was asking people to donate blood because he had lost so much. The day I donated, Kyle died. Years after Kyle passes away, Keenan was having a difficult time managing his diabetes. He was 38 when he died.

I was on academic probation my freshman year in college, so I had to come home and attend the local technical school to get my grades up. I worked at a grocery store and had two coworkers who became good friends of mine. Hope and Alexis are both Black. I felt as though that yellow blanket that had swaddled me as an infant started to strangle me with the strength of all the Caucasians in my life. As I spent more time with Hope and Alexis, the blanket lost its

grip, but I felt like I was constantly in a fight. Eventually, I didn't have to pretend my skin was just a nice tan or be a little embarrassed that my curls were natural instead of the stylish perms of that era. I became less self-conscious of how small my breasts were, how thick my thighs were, how big my butt was.

I fell in love with a Black man.

"You are going to kill your grandfather. You know how he feels about this. His heart can't take it."

When we decided to get married, my mother's panic reached a tight, sharp point and she stabbed me with it whenever she got the chance. I got married anyway. And even though they were all invited, not one single person from my (white) family showed up to the wedding. My mother's dad lived for many more years afterwards.

I don't feel guilty anymore.

Michael has helped me with that.

"Really though, who wants to die alone? I don't want to die alone."

I think about our inability to have children. I wonder if he thinks he will die before me. He smiles, and in the only way he knows how to bring me out of sadness, he jokes.

"You won't die alone. You will have your cats and dogs crawling all over you."

The cramp in my throat dissolves as I laugh, although it isn't what I want to hear.

I wish I knew what Clara Schwenke Loa's last thoughts were. I wish she knew how we all turned out and that we found each other despite the circumstances of her life and ours, despite the choices she made. I discover that on March 13th, 2006 in Pierce County, Washington, the high was 52 degrees and the skies were overcast. I also learn Clara died on the same day as a

famous Scottish football player, an American actress, and the inventor of the chicken nugget. There were no other events on that day which were significant enough to record.

Those nights before Clara's death certificate arrives in the mail, I dream about souls trapped in boxes. I try and convince myself that perhaps my biological mother wanted to be alone in her death. With no obligation to apologize to anyone, or witnessing of tears of sadness or disgust, her last five breaths could exit her lungs and sigh a farewell to an empty room. I envision her ashes scooped and placed in a bag, tied, put in a box and carried by a mortuary worker, downstairs, and placed in the next empty spot on a shelf.

"She was cremated and (I think) placed in an unmarked grave... or / Potters field."

I read this over again until I can hear it. The (I think) is what pulls at me. What if she is still on the shelf, abandoned, like her offspring? Unlike the boxes in my dreams, I have a feeling she would remain silent. But for all of her trying to hide while she was alive, I've discovered her, whether she likes it or not.

I receive Clara's death certificate in the mail and read over it carefully. My oldest brother Alex had told me that someone from the hospital had notified him when she died but he didn't know much after that. She had been in a coma and then had a heart attack which killed her. She was 59 when she died. The certificate had a section that asked questions like was she pregnant, no, was there an autopsy, no, did tobacco contribute to cause of death, probably. I don't know why, but I still find the word "probably" humorous for this question. But then trying to find a more formal word for "probably" there really isn't one.

The death certificate also indicates, to my surprise:

Method of Disposition: Burial

Place of Disposition: Mountain View Memorial Park, Lakewood, Washington

Not cremated. Buried in the ground. Not in a potter's field. In a grave site. I feel a sense of relief but also a slight pinch in my ribs by the absurdity of my haunting dreams. And now I wonder, what is the difference between being forgotten as ashes on a shelf or being forgotten as a corpse in the ground? Either way you are taking up space. It must just be my overly dramatic imagination that places one situation more morose over the other. I mourn the lack of existence of my ethnicity more than I mourn than the death of a grandfather I knew for at least thirty years.

I call the cemetery for more clarification. Yes, she's here, we will email you a map because the park is so large. No, she doesn't have a headstone but there is a marker. If you come, we will be sure to show you where she is.

I would like to see it. The photos of the park were taken in spring and it is beautiful. I often wonder why such beautiful spaces are designated for those who can't really enjoy them.

When I receive Clara's death certificate, I don't cry, it doesn't upset me. I feel more like an archaeologist uncovering an artifact. I realize I am reading something no one Clara was ever related to, has ever read. That creeps me out a bit because in reality, until recently, she was nothing but a vessel that had brought me into the world.

I confess to Alex. I feel this is necessary because his name is on the death certificate and because out of my four biological siblings, I get the feeling that he and Cain are the most empathetic to who Clara was. Alex asks me if the certificate says we could move her. It does not indicate that but I send him a photo of the document so he can read it for himself. He doesn't text anything for a while, so I ask him if I upset him. He teases and says yes, but then no, he just got busy with something else. But he does say when he read the certificate he did feel a little twinge. He said he was surprised by the indication that tobacco may have played a factor in her death. He

wonders how the doctor knew since she had been in a coma for a couple of months before she died. Alex says that is all the more reason why he hates smoking.

I hurt for Alex. Out of all of us, I am thinking he remembers her the most because he is the oldest, but I could be wrong. Over a phone conversation I also tell my brother Cain about where and how Clara is buried. He was the one that gave me the initial information and I want to be sure he knows the truth. I'm hoping that sometime in the near future, when the time is right, I'll be able to ask my siblings more questions about what they remember. I realize the time may never right. I hope they understand that I am just extremely curious. I hate that my curiosity causes them pain. I hope someday I can get past wanting to know.

Portland is about three hours away from Pierce County, Washington where Clara is buried. While in Portland, Jacque and I have decided to go check it out. We have one whole day in Portland with free time, so we plan on our schedule. Should we first drive north three hours to the cemetery, and then south an hour and a half to visit my nephew Sebastian? Or the other way around? Due to Sepp's scheduling, we plan on going to see him first.

As Jacque, Sepp and I sit in a park and talk, I mention to him that we had planned on going to see where my, and his father's, biological mother is buried. My nephew's eyes get big for a second, but he doesn't say anything. I tell him he is more than welcome to come with us, but it is about a four-hour drive from where we are. He asks me if I am talking about everyone's mom, Alex, Gene, Cain and Lisa. Yes, I tell him, I ordered a copy of her death certificate to see where she was buried. He doesn't say he wants to come, but he doesn't say he doesn't either.

Sepp tells me about a photo of a woman he doesn't recognize that sits on his father's dresser. He says it has been there ever since he can remember. I tell him I wonder if it is a photo

of Clara. He shrugs his wide shoulders and I tell him I have picture. I pull up the photos on my phone of Clara that Gene had sent me and hand my phone to Sepp.

"Is this her?"

He squints, the sun is shining from behind him. He cups his large hand around the phone to shield the sun. He doesn't say anything right away. I lean over and scroll to the next photo. He almost shouts.

"That's her."

"It is?"

"Yes, that's the exact same picture my dad has."

Sepp takes a closer look, bringing my phone closer to his face.

I ask him if his dad never told him who the woman was in the photo. I ask him if he ever asked Alex who she was. Later, when I return home to Tennessee, in a conversation with Alex on the phone, I tell him about how Sepp didn't know the photo on his dresser was Clara. Alex says he dropped the ball on that. He says he thought his sons knew. Sepp hands my phone back to me, but I can see the energy of wonder snapping behind his eyes

Jacque and I consider the time. The cemetery closes at dark. If we left right then we would just get a chance to look at Clara's grave, but then we would have to leave. I ask Sepp what he wants to do. The large 18-year-old shrugs again.

"I don't know, Aunty, what do you want to do?"

I look at Jacque, our day hasn't gone as planned. I ask my nephew if he is hungry yet, again. He says he loves fried chicken, so we seek out a restaurant that has fried chicken. While we eat and talk, Sepp mentions that he misses his dad. We call Alex and the mood of the afternoon shifts up into a bright excitement that wasn't there before.

After we eat, I look at my phone and I see how far we are from the Pacific Ocean. I ask Sepp if he's been to the beach since he's been at school. I am guessing Sepp misses the smell of the it. It is only an hour away. I tell Sepp and Jacque that there is a beach not too far, let's go.

Our journey takes us to the edge, where Oregon meets the ocean, and we arrive right when the sun is setting. We get glorious views of yellow and orange. I think of the chieftainess, the Great Woman of the Night. Her red eyes are probably watching us from across the wide water. Under her gaze, a pebble of guilt works its way through my brain. We had planned to visit a grave, the resting place of the woman who carried me for nine months, who gave birth to me. We had not planned to go to the beach.

It's March, and cold on the coast, but I take my shoes off and feel the cold wet sand bang against my flesh. We take photo after photo until the sun has completely gone down. Sepp's smile does something to my heart, to the blood rushing to it. I have no idea when I will ever get to see him again. He thanks us for bringing him there. I thank him for coming with us, that I am so glad we could spend this time together. Before long, we are all more than a little cold, we get in the car, and head back.

About half-way into our return trip, Jacque nods towards the back where Sepp is. The young giant is spread across the back seat, sound asleep. I thank Jacque for driving, for coming along, that it has really meant a lot to me to be able to share this experience with her. She tells me she is glad she could be a part of it. Have you ever had one of those experiences where you were glad other people were with you to remind you that it really took place? That's probably what the demigod Ti'iti'i was thinking when he asked his bird companions to accompany him. It was a day that if it had happened while I was alone, I may have second guessed that it really took

place. I know pictures help with that, but pictures can't talk, they can't share or give you various perspectives, versions of the same story. Anyway, for me, it was that kind of day.

I tell Jacque that it is too bad we didn't get to go up and see where Clara is buried. Jacque had helped me do the work to actually find my biological mother, and now we aren't even going to get to see where she is. Since the first time we discussed the idea to visit the grave site, I tried to imagine how I might feel. Nervous, sad, angry. I have no idea, and I may never know. One thing I do know, and I tell this to Jacque, spending time with the living is more important to me than spending time with the dead.

## ESSAY SIX

### Abandonment

There is an estimate of 60 million children and infants abandoned each year in the world. Of those, 7,000 are in the United States. On any given day there are over 400,000 children in foster care in the US. And approximately 135,000 children are adopted in the US each year.

I wonder how many times my siblings cried because of the absence of their mother. How many times did they fight the demon Abandonment? I can see the cruel thing crouching in my brothers' chests. It laughs as they feel alone. As they are mistreated, they ball their fists and the creature cheers on the suffering. Abandonment pours them drinks and lights their smokes. I see the monster making itself at home in my little sister's stomach. It is amused as her young body tries to defend itself like a scrappy Cinderella against jealous relatives. It clenches her heart and whispers; you do not belong.

I think Abandonment was with our blood before we were even conceived. Clara was born in 1947 in the town of Apia on the island of Samoa. She was the second youngest of seven children. After their mother died, all but Joseph, the baby, were sent to live with other family members. Those who were still alive reunited in 2011. Clara was married at the age of 16 to an almost 30-year-old man who was enlisted in the Navy.

Maybe Abandonment told her that the idea of other people raising her children wasn't so terrible.

Maybe her own experiences meant that she would never understand the influence, ramifications, the detriment of her actions.

Maybe Abandonment used her emotions like a toy.

Maybe she had PTSD.

Maybe Abandonment held her face in its greedy grip whenever she looked in the mirror.

Maybe I was the product of rape.

The maybes are exhausting.

I feel sometimes I am a reminder of an agony my brothers and sister may have already folded snugly, placed in a vault, sealed in cement and tossed into the Pacific. I arrive with my issues, my own Abandonment plucking at my spine. It helps me wield a pickaxe; I aim it directly at their memories. I scratch with my questions. My desire to know whose blood I am a part of fuels my pursuit, but I have a sense I am becoming more lost and confused. As I scrutinize and chew on the bits my new family gives me, I am overwhelmed. I stop inquiring. It isn't fair that children from the same maternal frame should have such different childhoods. I should have been with them during their battles. How do I ask for their pain? It is only right that I share the burden.

Finding Alex, Gene, Cain and Lisa is so much more than luck for me. They are welcoming with no reluctance. Their hearts are wide open, and I am surprised how perfectly I fit, and how they fit in mine. Their lives are not without struggle, but they are happy and full. They all have biological children. I am proud they are the parents we hoped for when we were growing up. I am encouraged by them because I know their bloodline will live on. I am glad they can look into the faces they are related to and recognize parts of themselves. They deserve more joy than they have been dealt.

Alex

Alex is our biggest brother. Not just the oldest, but he stands 6’8” and has just lost over 100 pounds to bring his weight down close to 300. He has a long gray beard and when my husband sees a picture of him for the first time he says Alex looks like a Samoan Gandalf. Alex says he gets that all the time.

Me:

Hi, my name is Tiffany Herron, I know you don't me and this may seem strange but I just recently received my adoption records and I am thinking you and Gene may be my brothers or half-brothers. I was born and adopted in Honolulu in 1971. The paperwork mentions Clara Briski (Loa) as my mother. I don't want to intrude, just trying to find where I come from. Any info you have would be greatly appreciated ☺ thanks!

Alex:

Clara was my mother’s name. Cain is a half-brother from Clara, and he lives in Honolulu. Find him on my friends list and write him. I think he was born in 74 in Honolulu. Clara passed away in 2005. Write me any time

Alex is funny. He is always cracking mostly crude jokes on our group message. I think I find his jokes more hilarious than my siblings. Along with a few other personality traits, my adoptive father and I strangely have this same sense of humor in common, as does my husband. The older I get the more I feel conflicted with the honest ease of which I find offensive humor funny. I am overwhelmingly more aggressive with where I stand on women’s issues and since most of this humor stems from sexual content, I wonder if I am actually contributing to the

problems women face. Or, because I laugh at gross and traditionally socially unacceptable humor for women, maybe I am pushing through a barrier.

Before we met, Alex and I talked on the phone and his voice is softer than I would have expected a man of his size to have. Alex lives with his wife Alicia and his sons Dean and Sebastian and has called American Samoa home since 1980. Later, he will tell me that he thinks Gene is still resentful of him for moving away. Alex tells me he left home in Eugene, Washington, and the tyranny of his father at age 16 to move to Pago Pago with his Aunt Joyce. Gene, who is two years younger, was left behind. I wonder if Alex felt guilty. I can imagine Abandonment threw a going away party for Alex. I can see it waving happily to his turned back, gluttonous over the new opportunity. I wonder if a 14-year-old Gene argued with his older brother, asked him to stay or begged and pleaded for Alex to take him along. I can imagine Abandonment dragging Gene into the house, ignoring the boys cries for his brother. Or did Abandonment help Gene put on his coat, slide a cigarette between his lips and accompany him somewhere, anywhere but the house where his abusive father stayed.

Just like the rest of us, Alex's history comes with complications. His first marriage at 18-years-old fell apart and he was kept from seeing his two children from that relationship. He has stopped trying to reach out to them. He has been in the same place for over 30 years. It makes sense that if they wanted to get in touch with him, they would not have a difficult time doing so.

When I was in my early twenties my adoptive mother was upset with me for some reckless behavior of which I can't recall the details. What does stick out in my mind though, is in the midst of her irritation that maybe my promiscuity had something to do with my DNA. Or, maybe when, for the first few months of my life I had been in a foster home, something (inappropriate) happened to me. I know my mom wanted to make sure she was not responsible in

any way. I find her comment more of an angry attack on my behavior rather than a scientifically qualified theory. It is difficult for me to believe. Although, I can't help but think about the choices my siblings and I made as young adults, some of our circumstances, and how in a way, we can trace their paths back to our person in common.

Me:

I was wondering if you could elaborate on some things you told me about Clara. Would you mind?

Alex:

No I dont mind. It would be a pleasure. What would you like to know?

Me:

Thank you! You had said that she had mentioned touring up and down the California coast as a backup singer, when do you think that was? After she left your dad, before she went to Hawai'i or after that?

Alex:

I think after dad before Hawai'i 69 70

I pictured her in white go-go boots, a bright colored mini-dress, long dark hair, and a tan face in an easy smile. I try to hear her voice. Maybe it was smooth and smoky, or loud and shrill.

My brother said Clara had a way with turning a tragic story into something she could joke about. One time, she was at a bar for a gig and there was a man who approached her. The pictures I've seen, I bet there were many men who approached her. On this particular occasion,

she told the man she wasn't interested. He tried again. I wonder if she was annoyed, if she struggled to ignore his persistence.

Avoid eye contact. Stay close to people. Don't accept drinks.

In the nature of small talk, I once asked an acquaintance how she had met her husband. She said they worked at a department store and he kept flirting with her and asking her out. She complained about him to security, but somehow he won her over. Does no just mean try harder?

My brother continued. That night, Clara headed to the bathroom. Her admirer followed. At the end of the dark hallway he cornered her. I can imagine the discomfort, or panic, or maybe she was just pissed off. Perhaps the man had bad breath and greasy fingers. But suppose he was attractive. Did it matter? Does it matter now? She was probably ready to cuss, or maybe she wished someone she knew would appear and call her name. Had her companions or bandmates deserted her? Was Abandonment there, hiding in a silhouette, sensing her anxiety? Clara again said no. This time, the perpetrator pulled out a gun. I wonder if it was a revolver, if it was silver or black.

An internal flip must have switched, her body language must have changed. The man who violently demanded her attention made it clear he wasn't leaving without it. Had she been in a situation like this before? Could she feel the metal nose pressed against her? I can image her hand moved to a sexy, jutted hip. Perhaps her skin snapped to relax, a grin creeping over her teeth as she took one last drag from a cigarette. Maybe she let the smoke roll around through her saliva, then blew it through her nostrils as she casually glanced down at the weapon pressed against her waist. Batting lashes and without a catch in her voice, Clara responded.

"Well hello, handsome."

I think I can hear her draw out and raise the tone of the "o's" in the word hello.

My brother said when Clara told him this story she laughed. She thought it was funny. There are no details. Maybe she wanted to spare her oldest son. Maybe that man, or one like him, who could not take no for an answer, is the reason I was adopted, the reason she abandoned me.

Alex can't read my mind. I don't want our conversations to focus on painful memories but that seems difficult to avoid. I respond to his willingness to engage with me and answer my questions.

Me:

Okay, thanks. When you left home was it your intention to go find her or just get away from your dad? Was Aunt Joyce your dad's sister? How long have you lived in American Samoa?

Alex:

AJ [Aunt Joyce] was my dad's sister by adoption. He was adopted by her mother and father. At the end of my jr. year my aunt sent tickets for Gene and I to come for a visit. I knew I wasn't coming back. My dad was mad but there wasn't anything he could really do. I lived with her a little while and then moved to my dad's house that he built in 75.

Me:

Did you ever go over to Apia to find or meet other relatives?

Alex:

I met her (Clara) for the first time in Apia but she didnt introduce me to anyone other then her husband at the time.

Her husband's name at that time was Kenneth Powell. I search for that person online. Maybe he is our youngest sister's father. I find a few photos, but none that reveal much information.

Alex texts nothing but send me a photo of a sunrise over the ocean. There is a small dark shadow in the water in the lower left-hand side of the photo. Alex later tells me that was him, that his wife had taken the picture. The colors of the sunrise, the shapes of the clouds, even the ripples on the water make my blood ache. As a kid, I went away to camp. I left home my freshman year for college. I could go weeks without talking to the family that raised me. Until this moment, looking at this photo, I have never really felt homesick. I am guessing that is what the feeling is deep in my chest. But maybe Abandonment is just playing with me, making me ache for something that never was mine in the first place.

Cain

After Gene's introductory group message, Cain is the first to respond. He is the youngest brother and lives in Honolulu, Hawai'i.

Cain:

What??? Awesome! Welcome to the Aiga TJ! I'm you're "Hawai'ian" "baby" brother. LOL! Just friended you on FB. In a way, you do look like mom... do you have any pictures of her?

Cain does not wait for me to respond about pictures and before I know it, I am staring into the face of my biological mother. I could never have prepared myself as I sit in my car getting ready to go to class. I am not sure what I was expecting but in the first photo, Clara is

looking straight at the camera, semi-posed with her left hand gently touching her cheek. She is smiling, closed mouth but her eyes are bright and happy looking. Her hair is dark except at her temples above her ears where it is starting to go gray and is pulled back. She has on a white long-sleeved blouse with a collar and a black vest with large mauve flowers and green leaves. The large buttons on the vest are white.

I stare longer. Clara is smaller than I thought she would be. She is more Asian looking than I thought she would be, and I struggle trying to see myself in her features. Then Cain sends another photo. This is a faded black and white photo-booth strip of pictures. The first picture is cut off, the one below it is tattered with some pieces missing from the image of the couple who are trying to squish themselves in the booth. The third picture affects me. The face of the woman reminds me of photos of my 20-something self. The woman is smiling so broadly, with all of her teeth and dimples, her eyes look closed. She is sitting on a man's lap, who I learn is Cain's father, and Clara is caressing the side of his face with her hand pulling him into the space between her cheek and neck. They look like they are having a wonderful time.

Cain:

Hey sis... that might explain somethings for me... see I was born in June of 73 in Honolulu and my dad meet mom sometime in late 71 or early 72. So I suppose I have you to thank for bringing mom here? One way to look at it for me... anyway, have a great day, I'm headed to work and might not being able to respond all that quickly but looking forward to meeting you... one day... soon! Aloha!

Me:

Oh Wow! Thank you Cain! This is all happening so fast, I have never seen anyone or pics of any bio family of mine. This is so intense. The family that adopted me is very Caucasian and short ☺ I never fit in or looked like anyone I knew, thanks again, I look forward to talking with you more

I am still staring at the photos and I am forwarding them to my husband. I receive a text in response. All it says is: "WOW!" I am thrilled and a little freaked out. I want to know so many things. I'm not the only one who has questions. Cain pops back into the group message with a few.

Cain:

Tiff... is your adoptive parents still here... in Honolulu? Is Herron your maiden name? If not, what was your surname growing up? And where did you go to school?

I tell him I am on my way to class, but I will answer all his questions when I can. It makes me feel good that he is just as curious. I go to class and I truly cannot hold myself together. I share the information with another student whom I barely know, showing her the pictures.

"You're telling me you've never seen what your mom looks like?"

"No, this is the first time."

"You look a lot like her."

"You think so?"

"Yeah. What about your dad?"

“I have no idea what he looks like.”

“Wow, that’s incredible.”

I think it is incredible, too. I want to be somewhere on a porch overlooking the ocean, sipping something refreshing and talking openly about our pasts. I want to be able to take our time and really listen. I want to know everyone’s details and I want to share all of mine. But somewhere in the layers of excitement there is a tug of doubt. Abandonment hums a tune, it’s lyrics a message of silence and forgetfulness. These new people will leave you, it sings. They can’t help it, it’s in their chromosomes.

I respond to Cain but find it difficult to express, to give the right amount of context, but I try.

Me:

Hello again! So to answer Cain's questions, the woman who adopted me, I call mom (Joyce) was married to a man in the navy they adopted me and about a year later moved to Sacramento, got divorced, Joyce remarried (Mike) who adopted me and who I call dad. They had a son Nate. We moved in 1985 to Clemson, SC (if you follow college football they were National Champs last year 😬) my dad was a professor, Joyce and Mike divorced in 2005, I graduated from high school in 1989, got married in 1995 for the first time, divorce 2000, moved to Chattanooga in 2002, I remarried in 2009 to Michael Herron.  There is so much more but that's my nutshell. My maiden name is Bell -Ellison (Joyce and Mikes last names together). I went to Clemson, undergrad and masters in parks and rec worked in the industry for a while, now I'm in school for a ma in creative writing, ya only live once ☺

Cain:

Is it ok of I call you Tiff? Anyway, just wondering what your thoughts are? Just wanted to let you know... Lisa and I might know how you're feeling so anytime you're ready to open up... I'm here. Just let me know! Aloha!

Me:

Yes!  Everyone calls me Tiff! Just a lot to take in right now, lots of feelings. Thank you so much!

Cain:

You're welcome sis... like I said, I probably know how you're feeling. The truth is, I'm crying my eyes out over here so I just want you to know... You are not alone! Love you!

I am not alone. I am not sure what this means to me. Is the internal feeling of missing something uniquely important the same thing as being alone? Cain's Abandonment was different. It lead him to search for our mother when he was in his 20s. They had planned on him coming to visit but when he arrived at her apartment, she wasn't there. He looked in the windows and her furniture was askew, the place was messy, like someone left in a hurry. A neighbor told him that something happened, and she was taken away. Later, he was able to find her in a psychiatric hospital and was able to visit with her for a brief time. Apparently she had run out of her medicine and had an episode.

Cain's heart is big. He wanted to connect with his mother. I don't even think he cared why she did the things she did, but more so, I believe he wanted to show her he didn't hold grudges. Why else would he have traveled so far to see her? I'm not sure how, but I know Abandonment had a role in the collapse of their relationship, because Cain never saw Clara

again. Maybe the little monster told Cain on his return home, see, she's crazy, it's better that she deserted you and the others, it's better for everyone that you left her.

I know I should be grateful. I have parents who made sure while I was a child that I was cared for and loved. I have a husband who is completely different than I am, but unexpectedly meets me at the levels I would be uncomfortable showing other people. And yet, one night, before I found my siblings, my husband and I were enjoying drinks on the couch and he asked me how I felt about not knowing anything about who I came from.

"I know this sounds crazy but stay with me. Sometimes if I think about it long enough, I can creep myself out."

"Like how?"

"Like since I have no real biological connection with anyone, maybe I was dropped off by aliens."

"From outer space?"

"Yeah, I mean, you can't believe anything anyone tells you these days. Maybe my documents were just made up."

"You're silly."

"I know."

"Do you have any special abilities?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"That's too bad."

We are both laughing. I laugh so hard I spill my wine.

Lisa

Lisa and I are the only two siblings who do not know who our biological fathers are. Lisa is the youngest of us and lived most of her life in American Samoa. She now lives in Hawai'i and is many things I am not: a mother, a teacher, a survivor. When I hear her story, even though we have just met, I have this overwhelming desire, if it were possible, to exchange my life for hers. It's a strange desire to want to take the pain of her youth over the comfort of mine. It seems unfair sisters should have such different childhoods. More realistically, I wish I could have been there with her in the moments of desperation. I would have been there to fight with her and for her.

Lisa:

And here i'm thinking I was the only girl😟 I'm having an emotional moment right now. This is amazing! Mom sure was a busy woman! Can't wait to meet and see everyone in person. Hopefully a reunion will happen soon😬

Lisa's first sentence in our group message makes my heart sink. When she says that knowing I exist is "amazing," I don't believe her. There is something about her inclusion of the sad face emoji that makes me hate disappointing her. Abandonment releases its little cousin, Shame, to taunt me and make me wish so desperately I was a boy.

As a child, Lisa was adopted by relatives. She is lighter in complexion than the rest of the children she grew up with and because of these differences, was mistreated by adults and picked on by her adoptive siblings. Abandonment fills her more like a parasite than the creatures who cling to my brothers. It takes control of her tongue and her jaw. She is not hesitant in the least to

tell us that she holds Clara responsible for the trauma that has happened in her life when she was growing up. After hearing a condensed version of her horrors, I don't blame her. If only Clara had not left her, if only Clara had been there to protect her, then all of these things would not have happened. Abandonment's siblings, neglect and rejection feed off of Lisa. She is apprehensive to trust, and I don't blame her.

Lisa:

So I'm the youngest of this bunch of awesome people right?

Me:

You are the baby! 😁 What year were you born again?

Lisa:

Lol.. I like the sound of that. From being the oldest to being the youngest. 77

Me:

💔 I like it too, I always thought it would be great to have a younger sister, I promise I won't be bossy lol!

I am so desperate for her to like me. I want her to accept me so badly that I am willing to lie. Lisa's emotional moment may have been that she was happy knowing she has an older sister. But I can't help but think she is really just disappointed. It is my own fault for seeking the validation I am looking for in this text. Maybe Insecurity is related to our Abandonment. Maybe it flows freely in my genes, too.

Lisa:

So does this mean...given that I am the baby...haha.. In the Samoan culture (I had to rub that in) the older siblings have to do everything for the youngest one... bwahaha. That's the American culture, boss around the younger ones

Me:

Lol! I probably know the least about Samoan culture and I'm a sucker so, yes!!! What can I do for you?

Lisa:

In the Samoan culture we respect our elders but cater to the young...hahaha

Come visit me soon. 😀

The Samoan culture. I have truly little idea what that means. I have a book called *The Samoans, A Global Family* which was given to me when I was an adult as a gift by my parents for either a birthday or Christmas. I am not even sure when I received it, but it was well before my search for my biological family. The book about Samoa is very similar to the book about Hawai'i that I used to look at as a kid when I visited my mother's parents. As much as I value books and love photography, these were my only guides on how to "be" Pacific Islander. They taught me nothing.

In 1970, one year before I was born, 175,000 children in the United States were adopted. This was the peak of the adoption trend. The legalization of birth control has helped this number decline.

But I still wonder. Even in the best households, with the perfect parents, and the abundance of love and opportunity, how do all of the children, unwanted by their biological

families, conceptualize their feeling of being left behind? Assuming they all knew they were adopted, or given up, if they were to draw it, what would it look like?

Once in fourth grade, my adoptive mother forgot to pick me up from school. I usually rode my bike to school but this particular morning it had been raining so she had driven me, or I had gotten a ride, I don't remember. But by the time school was over, the sun was shining, and I sat in front of the school waiting. Almost everyone had left, when the David Lubin Elementary School secretary came outside where I was sitting and asked if I wanted to call someone to pick me up. I called home, but the line was busy. So, I continued to wait.

I know this is not an unusual occurrence. Life gets crazy, the mind holds on to patterns, and any stray from the norm is easily forgotten. I knew that if I had to, I could walk home, but then I started thinking that maybe something happened to my family. What if they were hurt? Or worse yet, what if they had just left me? I wonder if these same thoughts are more prevalent in children who are adopted, or children who are in foster care. I've seen lost children cry so loudly for their parents it made me wonder how they could ever get lost in the first place. When their frantic mother or father sweep them up into their arms and kiss them and say they are sorry, I wonder if that child is scared that they were not wanted.

Years later when my mother tells this story, about the one and only time she ever forgot me, she mentions that in those days, there was no call waiting. She had been talking on the phone with a friend and kept mentioning to her friend that she wondered where I was, I should have been home by now. She would continue to talk until she realized she needed to pick me up. I'm pretty sure she told me she was sorry. I'm pretty certain I wasn't so upset that I bawled or threw a temper tantrum. But I will always remember the way the sun felt on my head as I sat on the cement with my backpack pushing me forward. I will always remember the sound of the busy

dial tone, the same tone a phone gave when it was unplugged from the wall or had been disconnected. I will always remember the whispers crawling under my skin; the anxious message I received from Abandonment.

## ESSAY SEVEN

### The Responsibility of Rainbows

The Maori god of rainbows, Uenuku once was a man who fell in love with the morning mist-maiden, Tairi-a-kohu. They married but Tairi-a-kohu made Uenuku promise that he would not tell his people about her until their child had become an adult. Before the sun rose over the horizon, Tairi-a-kohu would leave their earthly home and ascend to the heavens. She would then return to Uenuku at night. Uenuku became impatient. He wanted to reveal his wife to his people so one morning, Uenuku bound the blinds where they slept so no sunlight could shine in, and he tricked Tairi-a-kohu into staying with him until after dawn. When she discovered his deceit, she left him, taking their child with her. Heartbroken, Uenuku wandered the earth trying to find the mist-maiden, but with no success. Then one day Rangi, the Skyfather, took pity on Uenuky and changed him into a rainbow so that he could join his family in the sky.

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How does it make you feel to say your birthplace out loud? It has always felt special to be able to say that I was born in Hawai'i. When I would tell people, their eyebrows would raise, and with question mark stares I knew they wondered why I ever left. With a chuckle, they would say, what brought you *here,* as if anywhere, but Hawai'i was less than, or as if they thought me ridiculously stupid for moving. I had no say in the matter. I was a toddler and my new adoptive family moved to the mainland. I was groomed to believe the islands' exotic attraction. The hula was sexy; surf boarders were strong. Hawai'i was paradise. Sunshine and blue waters, waterfalls and rainbows every day.

Maui is only fourth in *U.S. News and World Report's* "Best Places to Visit in the US." But the islands *are* special. So special in fact, Mark Zuckerberg has tried to swindle native Hawai'ians out of parcels of their land. The islands are so precious that governments of various nations are willing to fund the desecration of a sacred mountain to build telescopes.

I am now in my forties and visiting for the second time in my life. The third day on Oahu we were driving, and as my hungry eyes relished the terrain. The view is a complete contrast from the wooded mountains of where I live now. As I stared out the window, trying to memorize every detail, I saw a double rainbow. Not two rainbows going the same direction, one on top of the other, but one right after the other, left to right, forming a magnificent, rounded-topped letter M.

As my husband and I watched in awe, I realized I had seen a rainbow every day of my visit. It makes sense why the state of Hawai'i is called The Rainbow State. And why the University of Hawai'i 's football team mascot is the Rainbow Warrior. And why rainbows occur in many native Hawai'ian songs. No one seems surprised by these occurrences, but I could drive straight through the state of Georgia and never see a peach. I could ramble across Idaho and not see one potato. And I know Florida is the Sunshine State, but for some reason, sunshine in the context of the mainland is not as magical. But witnessing the arcs of refracted light over and over is moving. It is as though you are witnessing the Hawai'ian gods send messages to each other.

The British explorer Captain James Cook met his demise on the sands of Kealakekua Bay on the big island of Hawai'i. Locals joke that he was chased, bludgeoned, cooked and then eaten. From what historians have written, Cook was attempting to kidnap King Kalani'ōpu'u after one of the cutters belonging to the British was supposedly stolen. Cook was going to hold the king for ransom. A king for a boat, how colonial of him. The captain was hit in the head and stabbed,

but he was given a death ceremony reserved only for Hawai'ian high society. History doesn't say how many rainbows Cook's men saw that day.

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The sign said Government Property No Trespassing, but there was a gap between the fence and the embankment just large enough for a person to squeeze between. The worn dirt trail did not relieve the apprehension of risk. But there was no explanation for the closure of an old road that was being devoured by thick vines and tree debris. The canopy closing in like tight knitted hands, blocking out the sun.

We hiked up the long meandering road and came to a spot where water and gravity had split the blacktop apart like a dense aging scab, exposing rich slimy mud. I wondered what would happen if we were caught by authorities. I was about to ask our local tour guide, my younger brother, why the area was closed off, when a group of women with children came over the crest of the hill. They did not look like native Hawai'ians and my heart sank. This secret spot in the middle of Honolulu, was not as furtive as I had hoped.

I wondered why I had been surprised at the sight of people on this "restricted" trail. Most of the earth has been discovered so I shouldn't have been shocked. I suppose what disappointed me, and still does somewhat, is that the women and the children looked just like regular tourists. I know I am being biased and prejudicial. I am complete hypocrite because I know I will always be a tourist in my place of birth. And it doesn't feel good at all.

The name Oahu translates into "the gathering place." The island is also known to have the longest consecutive rain which lasted over 200 days. The island has been inhabited by people since the 3rd century A.D. The Kingdom of Oahu was once ruled by the most ancient royals in all of the Hawai'ian Islands and lasted for over 300 years. The first great king of Oahu was

Maʻilikūkahi, who was known as the lawmaker. He was followed by many generations of monarchs. Kualiʻi was the first of the warlike kings and so were his sons. In 1773, the son of Elani of Ewa, Kahahana acquired the throne. In 1783, Kahekili II, the King of Maui, conquered Oahu and removed the ruling family and named his son, Kalanikūpule, the king. In the Battle of Nuʻuanu, Kamehameha the Great conquered Kalanikūpule forces in a mountain fight. In 1795, Kamehameha established the Kingdom of Hawai'i with the occupation of Oahu. Hawai'i was not unified until the islands of Kauaʻi and Niʻihau surrendered under King Kaumualiʻi in 1810. Kamehameha III moved his capital from Lāhainā, Maui to Honolulu, Oahu in 1845, and his royal family built the Iolani Palace. It is still standing and is the only royal palace on American soil.

King Kamehameha. I like saying that name out loud.

Back on the trail, the powerlines that climbed the sides of the road drooped and leaned and looked as neglected as the asphalt. Some of the lines had detached from their wooden poles and dangled, camouflaging themselves, pretending to be live liana. An entire tree had fallen across the road, but it was just as alive and growing as its relatives standing vertically. There were red and yellow flowers that peeked out from deep emerald drapes, and single leaves the size of an elephant's head that bobbed up and down with a passing breeze. I wondered what this place looked like before the power of electricity.

At the lip of a thin trail which fell straight off the side of the mountain, there were ropes which some previous adventurers had tied to the trunks of trees and to thick knobby roots. It was a handrail of sorts, or a repelling belay line. This was going to be my initiation. A mountain of my homeland was either going to accept me or send me to the bottom, my form on its descent, processed by rocks, and then ready to be digested by the elements.

My stomach squelched with the anticipation of the test my muscles were about to take. I could hear the waterfall. It pounded so hard I could not hear what anyone was saying below me. I was the last of our group to climb down. I didn't want anyone to witness my fearful clumsiness. I slid and hung, slipping and catching myself, spreading chocolate pudding-like soil over my knees and shoes. When I reached level ground my legs quivered. I stepped out of the jungle. There in front of me, the majesty of 40'Kalihi Falls plummeted into a small pool like a sheet of watery stars.

Our guide climbed barefoot over lava stones and boulders to a rock more than halfway up which jutted out barely further than the others. I wondered how we would rescue him if he were to get hurt. He is younger than I am, but not by much. He scaled the waterfall like he had done it all his life. Then I realized, he probably had. As he chee-hooed and jumped into the water below, we gawked, and bit our nails, and applauded.

I have jumped off of my fair share of cliffs into the waters of lakes and blue holes. And I think now, if I had been 20 years younger, I might have tried following after my brother's footsteps. And I surely think, if I had been raised, 20 minutes down the mountain, well-practiced in sneaking behind a No Trespassing sign my whole life, I definitely would have. But I'm a tourist. However, even here, in the deep south, with pine trees instead of palm trees, dogwoods instead of birds of paradise, rushing rivers instead of crashing waves, I still feel like a tourist.

When returning to Tennessee I looked up the beaches and places we visited. Much to my disapproval, the waterfalls which I once thought were so secluded, were actually advertised all over the internet. I appreciate that people wanted to document their experiences. There are some wonderful photos and great descriptions on the best ways and practices of going on the exact same hike my family and I went on. However, my initial feeling, vanished instantly.

We needed to find a beach, or beaches. Cain drove me, Michael, Alex and Gene to two. At Sandy Beach there were a lot of cars, but I noticed not many people in the actual water. There were signs warning about the current and as we walked closer to the water the waves all of a sudden seemed enormous. I waded in and the tide was so strong, I had a difficult time keeping my footing and was instantly knocked down when a wave plowed into me. My larger than life husband was having a great time. He was getting pushed around too, but he looked as if he were enjoying it. Me, on the other hand, got pummeled. No. Thinking back, I got my ass handed to me, literally. I think the ocean was trying to rip my swimsuit off. I came up from under the water after every wave, gasping for air. I'm sure I looked like I needed help. In fact, I know I did, because at some point, a kid half my age, and at least half my weight, yelled over at me. He told me to be careful, that I should watch out because I could really get hurt.

I know now that at Sandy Beach, more injuries occur per year than at any other beach in Hawai'i. Not on the island of Oahu, but the whole state itself. Its nick name is "break-neck beach." I was not prepared.

Through gulps of air, and the burn of saltwater in my nose, I thanked the young man. Embarrassed, I lingered a moment more, before I hauled my sad, beat up body out of the ocean. The trail to the waterfall didn't kill me, but I knew if did not heed the local's warning, the waves at this beach surely would. Maybe later, while talking to his friends, the kind Hawai'ian kid called me a haole. I wouldn't blame him if he did.

You know those moments where you look back and get all embarrassed again over something you might have said or done? It could have just happened the day before, or years previous, but for some reason when you remember it, there is still dread that sits in your gut. When that happens to me I have to shake my head, take a deep breath and let it out quick and

hard. I do that often with this memory. I felt completely rejected by water and by the people, who if I had been raised in Hawai'i, would have called me one of their own. I wish Rangi, the Skyfather, had taken pity on me and turned me into a rainbow, but I'm sure there is some rule against Pacific Island legends incorporating outsiders. That makes a lot of sense to me.

Kaiona was a more family friendly beach. There were children swimming and snorkeling. The waves were gentle and not so aggressive. The sand was a billowy white. There is also a great view of Rabbit Island. Rabbit Island has a unique shape almost like the head of a rabbit with its ears lying flat into the water, but the island was actually named because there was a rabbit farm on the island. They started to destroy the natural habitat and effect the seabird breeding areas so in 1994, the rabbits were removed.

Located just south of Kaiona Beach Park, Pahonu Pond is an ancient Hawai'ian stone enclosure. It was constructed to be a turtle pond where fishermen put turtles. The ali'i, or Hawai'ian chiefs and royalty, ate the turtles and they were considered a delicacy. In the old Hawai'i, only ali'i were allowed to eat turtle meat. It was considered taboo for a commoner to eat this delicacy and breaking this rule was punishable by death.

After swimming and wading a bit, we sat in the shallow surf and talked. All of a sudden I felt a bright sting on my calf. Without thinking I just wiped at it with my hand. I didn't feel anything, but the stinging lingered. I looked down into the water and saw the most beautiful color of lavender and blue floating like a twisted bubble just below the water's surface. I told the group I thought I had just gotten stung by a jellyfish. I pointed at the distorted creature in the water nearby. We all agreed, it does look like a baby Man-o-war. I tried to splash it away to move to deeper water. Although I was not in pain, my eyes stayed stuck to the water, and I noticed, not just one more, but several baby Man-o-wars, swimming casually, minding their own

business. I then looked around the beach and the kids had left the water. I was about to tell my brothers and husband that I was getting out because of how many jellyfish I saw, and I was stung again on the thigh. Yup, time to exit the ocean. The mountain didn't kill me. Thanks to a local, Sandy Beach didn't drown me. But now, apparently I have decided to swim in the Man-o-war baby pool. I sense that the ocean life is annoyed with me. At least it is just the baby ocean life.

I know when I'm not wanted. It's a strange feeling not to be appreciated or accepted but most of the time for me, I can read that sentiment from people. I can even feel it with dogs and cats. With nature, sometimes it's difficult to tell because we are humans and we feel as though we belong anywhere we please. But there are signs. And anyone who spends anytime in nature should know how to read this language because really, nature doesn't give a shit about you.

The Portuguese Man-o-war is actually not a jellyfish. It is something called a siphonophore. It is a group of little creatures that create a colony and have the exact genetic makeup of the dozens, or thousands of individuals connected together. These miniscule organisms cannot live on their own, so they merge together into a tentacled mass. They must work together as one unit in order to travel and catch prey.

The fisherman of the islands have said that the best places to see rainbows is where the fish and birds are. Not many people venture that far out in small boats where the Ahi, Mahi Mahi, Marlin and Spearfish swim. It makes sense. The most spectacular views of anything in nature are where there are no humans.

On our last day, the last place we visited on Oahu was Waikiki. In the Hawai'ian language the word means "spouting fresh water." It is so called for the springs and streams that once fed the wetlands and that separated Waikiki from the interior part of the island.

Its crescent shaped beach softly faded into the turquoise of the ocean. Swells stretched towards the full mid-day sun. They curved forward, and rolled, their massive bodies contorted downward, unpredictably, sometimes erratically, but always with a sense of purpose. Sprays of salt flew into the air, encapsulating their own prisms of light. The palm trees' bushy coifs all bowed the same direction, towards the sea, offering their respect to its power.

We walked the stone and concrete pier which jutted out into the ocean. Huge waves collided against the fortification and sent fizzing white saltwater over the heads of observers. From the pier the view of water is expansive. At the end of the pier was a small gazebo type structure and despite its old and tetanus look, there were local children and teens climbing to its roof and jumping into the swells, disappearing under the breaking rollers below. They impressed me with their casual approach to danger. Their various shades of tan and brown shone under a dripping layer of Pacific water, and bounced off the orange, fuchsia and neon green of their bathing suits.

We had been on this island for five days. Not nearly long enough to satisfy the belonging that scratched at me from underneath the cloak of doubted identity. Watching the youngsters jump into the waves I fantasized about how this might have been me.

This time at the beach, it was just me and Michael. We found a spot on the sand and threw our stuff down, eager to get into the water. There was a long wall break that kept the tremendous waves from crashing on the beach. Even though the water pushed and pulled at us, there were no towers of water crashing down on our heads. And there were not baby Man-o-war.

From the water, we watched our belongings. We were told that Waikiki is where most of the tourists are so it is also where most of the theft is, that we should keep an eye on our things, because people, mostly kids, will just pick them up and run off with them. As we faced the beach

while we drifted and swam, I looked at all the humans. Hundreds, if not thousands, the beach was slammed with people. There were sunbathers, body surfers, swimmers, waders and snorkelers. There were surfboard competitions going on and catamaran rides. Boogie boarders bobbed and swayed in the water.

Waikiki originally was the area of the island where royalty would vacation and enjoy surfing on what is now called longboards. My first trip back after I was born was with my adoptive family when I was a young adult, and we stayed in a hotel in Waikiki. We would go to the beach every day. My mom asked if I wanted to get a surfing lesson. There was a surfboard stand advertising free lessons with the rental of a board. The instructor asked me where I was from. I told him I had been born there in Honolulu but had moved to South Carolina. The man told me I looked like a local girl. I remember loving the sound of those words. The instructor and I swam our boards out past the break, he gave me very instructions, and then left me out there to brave the waves on my own. From what I remember, the ocean was calm that day. I spent most of my time just lying on the board, paddling it, attempting to stand up, and then sitting back down. I did catch a few waves, but they were small. I was on a longboard.

The beach at Waikiki is manmade. At one point in the early 1900s, sand was actually shipped from Manhattan Beach, California, to Waikiki. The area is definitely the tourist hub for Hawai'i as it accounts for over 42 percent of Hawai'i's visitor revenue. So along with the people, even the sand is a tourist.

The word tourist to me is not a pleasant one. I suppose if tourism is how you make your living, the word is sweet. I never thought about it in a negative way, after all, I have a degree in Parks, Recreation, Tourism Management. It wasn't until I saw the move *Fight Club* that I thought, ew, that is a nasty word. The narrator in the movie is mad at Marla for crashing random

support groups, the very same thing the narrator is doing, and is not happy with the competition. “Marla, you big liar, you big tourist. I need this, now get out.” I know I’ve wanted to say this out loud many times. The hypocrisy is unnerving.

On this visit to Waikiki, no one told me I looked like a local, and the surfboard stand had grown into its own little building. There was a volleyball competition going on, and surfing competitors dragging themselves out of the water. The waves looked huge at this part of the beach. Everything was bigger, and more crowded than I remembered.

Michael and I picked up our belongings and walked further down the beach, past where the wall break ended. We set our stuff down, this time less paranoid and uncaring. The beach where we were now had slimmed to just a slip of sand which sloped into the water at a steeper angle, and the waves were bigger. But I was able to manage them better than the ones at Sandy Beach, the first beach we went to. The current was strong but not violent and although the crest of the waves were well over our heads, they were slower, more compassionate. We spent the rest of the afternoon playing in the ocean.

The beach at Waikiki has been eroding. The wall breaks were built to help prevent that, but nature does what it wants to. It has no care for a cement wall. It will drag the sand through the cracks and over the wall until there is none left. King tides come during the spring and the elevation of the ocean is ever rising. I imagine now, it is just the ocean’s way of tourist removal.

How do you describe the ocean and the beach without being cliché? How do you explain the impact on your soul without sounding hokey? How do you reveal the effect it has on your body without appearing raunchy? How do you explain the way it can turn you into something that feels mythically magical, like a rainbow?

Refracted light. Anyone can make a rainbow, so why are they so extraordinary when seen in nature? Tourists pull their cars over to the sides of the highway to get out and take photos. There are many things in play in order for Hawai'i to have so many spectacular sightings. The luminous arcs that span Hawai'ian skies owe much to the islands themselves: the height of the mountains, the distance from the equator. Air currents, moving across the Pacific, gather moisture and carry it on the trade winds till a mountain, Mauna Loa, Haleakala, Waialeale, blocks the way, forcing the moist air up into cooler elevations to produce clouds. There's even a word for it: orographic, "an effect induced by the presence of mountains." As rain falls, each drop separates its portion of sunlight into red, orange, yellow, green, blue, violet. Then the air moves on, warming up over the valleys and leaves the rain behind.

Hawai'ians have mixed views about rainbows. Sometimes rainbows foretell misfortune, foreshadow a death, or announce that a chief is journeying and is being watched over by the gods. It depends on when it happens and what the person who is contemplating the rainbow is looking for. Many times, the rainbow is a hoailona, or omen, that the Hawai'ian ancestors or gods favor what a person did or plans to do. Where physicists talk about the scientific reasons Hawai'i is full of rainbows, some native Hawai'ians see the rainbow as a symbol; a bridge to the rest of the world for spirituality and healing.

I stared at my surroundings. I tried to saturate my body with the waters of the Pacific. I wanted it in every pore and cell in my body. I ground my feet into the sand, exfoliating my callouses, needing to leave a little bit of me here. I attempted to memorize the horizon. I wondered how long I would last out there in a life raft. I wondered if Amelia Earhart looked at the sky the same why I was.  I tried to tell the palm trees farewell. I closed my eyes and beyond

the noise of humans, the pounding and low splash of the waves there was something I know I will not hear, or see, smell, taste, or touch for a very long time.

I think about ancient royalty feasting on fruit and fish. How their folklore is something so old, yet so new to me. By the time we made it to Waikiki, I realize now, this island of which I was born, was telling me that I needed to go where all the other palagis, and haoles, and outsiders, and tourists belong. I can't lie, it made me sad, but an experience I will never forget.

I walked into the water one last time. I dove under and opened my eyes. My eyes hurt and my vision was blurry, but I only closed them when I come up for air. I unintentionally swallowed too much saltwater on this day and my stomach complains. I kept jumping the waves. I kept diving into the walls of blue. Their pressure pushed me down and out towards the open sea. I stood up and walked slowly back to the beach. The waves lapped at my legs. I can still hear them. Please don't go. They said, you are our favorite tourist. I thought, you say that to all your tourists. A seagull laughed. The current's grip was tight around my ankles. It was pulling me home. I wanted to pay my ransom, but the islands needed too much.

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# Vita

Tiffany Herron was born in Honolulu, Hawaii and currently lives in Chattanooga, Tennessee. She attended Clemson University in Clemson, South Carolina and received Bachelor and Master of Science degrees in Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management. She worked in the Outdoor Recreation field for over 15 years when she decided to pursue a Master of Arts in English, Creative Writing. She enrolled at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and successfully completed the required post-baccalaureate hours to apply to UTC's Master of Arts English program. She received a Graduate Assistantship with the Library's Writing and Communication Center for a year, and then became the Assistant Editor for the *Signal Mountain Review*.

In 2019, Tiffany was awarded a SEARCH Grant scholarship which funded a research project in uncovering and brining attention to a historical civil rights event which took place in Chattanooga in 1980. She is also a semi-finalist for the Fulbright Scholarship 2020. Her poetry and short prose has been published in *Catalpa Magazine* for the 2019 and 2020 editions, the *Samoan News,* and the *Chronicle.* After graduating with her Master of Arts in August of 2020, her goal is to finish her collection of essays and continue her education in creative writing by pursuing a Ph.D. degree at the University of Hawaii, Manoa.