

IMPOSSIBLE SCATTER

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Abstract

This collection of poetry is an attempt at writing experiential poems from the perspective of a female settler in modern Hawai‘i. A lengthy introduction draws on articles about literature, poetry, and the politics of identity and representation in Hawai‘i to set the context for writing as a self-identifying settler. It also details the particular challenges of writing from a settler perspective, and considers other poetic influences.

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Introduction

“Do not doubt your own capacity to scaffold complex and cultural ways in which to describe the world.”

—Manulani Aluli Meyer

For me personally, poetry performs a vital function. I first understood this while reading Anne Carson’s *Eros: The Bittersweet*, in which, among other topics, Carson describes the different states of mind of pre-literate and literate human beings. To crudely summarize, Carson argues that pre-literate humans existed in a state of total sensory awareness and because of this were constantly in touch and connected with the world and the phenomena around them. However, when a person learns to read, she learns to focus intently on the act of reading, severing sensory ties to the outer world in order to shut out distractions, and becoming aware of a self that is separate from the world—a “self-conscious self, amazed at her own vulnerability” (41-45). Reading as a hapa (half white, half Asian) settler in Hawai‘i, I attach particular meanings to Carson’s generalities. Imagining pre-literate connection with the world, I think of Kanaka Maoli—who until a few hundred years ago sustained themselves and the land through a complex oral culture that passed on necessary technical and cultural/spiritual knowledge. Thinking of a separated literate, I think of myself—the recipient of a Western education who nonetheless finds herself perpetually vulnerable in the center of an often spiritually disconnected and economically unjust modern Hawai‘i. This separation of the self from the world can cause all sorts of problems, and poetry, which requires the disciplined openness of poetic perception, and produces the startling reconnection of felt emotional

resonances, has been my personal solution. The practice of poetry helps reconnect me to the world and other people, and teaches me how to use perceptual powers and emotional intelligences that would otherwise atrophy.

What purpose poetry serves for society is something I am less sure about. Robert Bringhurst writes, “The work of the mythteller or poet, like that of the scientist, is learning *how to think*, not deciding *what to believe*,” and perhaps if everyone were mythtellers, poets, or scientists, we would have a perfect society (147). Ideally the writing of poetry extends experiences to others, allowing readers to experience by written or spoken proxy what the poet has lived. This teaches the valuable skill of empathy. In addition poetry, like myth, produces a type of knowledge about the world that provides values to guide us through difficult situations. The problem comes when what was an *act* or a *practice*—the writing or speaking of poetry—becomes an artifact, with all its inevitable flaws solidified and exposed, and enters the realm of discourse. Then poetry must contend and engage with politics, where it can be just as useful as any other type of writing, or just as harmful, or just as trite.

Knowing that poetry is made up of imperfect words, and knowing that my poetic acts must inevitably become artifacts, I have been concerned with the political impact of my poetry. This is an odd concern in some ways, as poets who espouse the poetic functions mentioned above seem to rarely admit that even words used with the best of intentions cannot perfectly contain their meanings, and that as a result, we should be wary of even our best truth-telling impulses. Perhaps this is because worrying too much can be a major hindrance to poetic perception; teachers of writing who are wrapped up in encouraging students to write feel it would be counterproductive to stifle aspiring writers

with misgivings and uncertainties. Furthermore, Western artistic traditions stress the importance of freedom from state as well as self censorship. I have found however that writing in a place where the representational stakes are so high means that I can't in good conscience brush off this worry. Because the majority of poetry published in Hawai'i is overtly political, it becomes all the more necessary that I explain my own politics, and all the more impossible for me to claim an apolitical aesthetic, because even such a claim would be political.

To explain then, I will say that I write as a settler poet, and my poetry reflects, hopefully, the concerns and insights of a poet thus positioned politically. I write experiential poems that focus on clearly and truthfully telling individual experiences, both external and internal, with close attention paid to ambivalences and ambiguities, partially because I live in Hawai'i as a non-Hawaiian, and partially because I am hapa, or of mixed racial descent. Insofar as all of us are capable of transcending social and political identity categorization, I attempt to write poetry about human experience rather than limiting myself to overtly political topics. But at the same time, I recognize my inevitable positionality and treat it as a resource. Writing as a settler poet allows me to explore the epistemic uncertainties, spiritual anxieties, and social and emotional desires for connection that arise in the context of settler colonialism in Hawai'i, and globalization in general.

In what follows I will better explain how I came to take up this political and poetic perspective by performing an imperfect and non-exhaustive survey of literature in Hawai'i. In the process I hope to show how my adoption of a settler identity is an intervention that aims at being disruptive of the way writing in Hawai'i has been driven

by identity politics. Although calling myself a settler poet creates yet another identity marker to cleave to, I hope to show how such an identity, because of its inclination toward uncertainty and ambivalence, can destabilize or transcend established political and poetic identities in Hawai‘i today. A secondary motivation in doing this is to rehabilitate the terms “settler” and “settler literature.” In the current climate these terms seem to arouse negative reactions from people who see them as divisive or accusatory. Instead, I hope that discussing my poetry shows how the term—and the perspectival shift it stands for—opens up possibilities for more nuanced self-understanding and world-understanding. Finally, I’ll consider how my poetry may also be in line with some other contemporary poetic movements and discuss my commitment to mystical poetry.

Surveying literature in Hawai‘i will, I believe, reveal three broad categories of literary work, each emerging from the specific political dramas being played out in Hawai‘i today. I’d like to talk about these three categories in detail and consider how I’ve been affected by each. They are: writing that falls within the tradition of observer literature, contemporary Hawaiian literature, and local literature.

Unfortunately the first and most readily available of these is the kitschy, romanticized, or exoticized writing, often by outsiders, that seems to permeate the popular consciousness. This writing has a long history of descent from what Richard Hamasaki, following Rubellite Kawena Johnson’s lead, calls “observer literature,” which began with the journals of Captain James Cook and his sailors (34). This tradition extends through the writings of many visitors to Hawai‘i, and I would argue survives even up to the present day with publications like Sarah Vowell’s *Unfamiliar Fishes*. Such writing is usually meant for an audience outside of Hawai‘i, for whom it would be

possible for me to write. In fact during my early attempts at writing both poetry and fiction, the workshop classes at New York University that I attended did provide me with a mainland audience with which to share my work. There could be value in writing for outsider audiences; spreading knowledge about the place I'm from could be satisfying for me and educational for others. But picking this role as a perpetual translator and outsider would, I think, ultimately be much less satisfying and worthwhile than creating literature for the people of Hawai'i and the communities that raised me. Furthermore, to focus on a mainland American audience seems to implicitly deem Hawai'i audiences less worthy of my attentions, the underlying assumption being that on a global scale their thoughts and opinions count for less. This decision about my audience was one I was confronted with almost immediately upon putting pen to paper, and was one that annoyed me greatly. To be a writer from Hawai'i means that before anything else, one has to grapple with either type casting yourself as a certain kind of ethnic writer, or cutting out a huge segment of your possible audience.

A secondary issue with observer literature is the danger of perpetuating stylized Hawai'i produced in observer literature and other literary and artistic productions made by outsiders or even by people from Hawai'i. An example that I can recall listening to and enjoying as a child is the song "Pineapple Princess" as sung by the popular Hawaiian musical group Na Leo. The song describes a boy on O'ahu who, while "floating down the bay on a crocodile," sees the speaker of the song and declares his love for her while playing his ukulele and referring to her as "Pineapple Princess." The song was written by Robert and Richard Sherman and sung originally by Annette Funicello in the 1960s during a period when she starred in several "beach party movies." The advertising needs

of tourism as well as the prerogatives of Hollywood seem to play a role in the production of this kind of literary and musical work. I think it is worth noting that these inane, whimsical lyrics serve a colonial purpose, replacing meaningful, culturally essential artistic output with empty phrases. Or as Rob Wilson puts it “. . . a sense of place-bound consciousness was being lost in the simulacrous circuits of global imagery, where iconic value is repeated and signed until it displaces or replaces the actual with its own semiotic connotations” (28). Hawai‘i seems to be caught in a crisis of representation in global imagery in which false yet iconic imaginings prevail. I would not want to contribute to this problem.

Contemporary Hawaiian literature is what rightfully ought to come to mind first when we talk about writing and poetry in Hawai‘i today. Focusing on poetry alone, ku‘ualoha ho‘omanawanui refers to “contemporary Hawaiian poetry,” which includes a very broad spectrum of Kanaka Maoli poets and writers from the 1960s onward, who compose in ‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i, Pidgin, and English, doing everything from concrete poetry to slam poetry (“He Lei” 31, 55, 52). ho‘omanawanui claims that contemporary Hawaiian poetry has become a unique “merging of Hawaiian thought, metaphors, kaona, and other cultural articulations with some western forms,” and notes that an important feature of contemporary Hawaiian poetry is its “themes of resistance to colonization and loyalty to Hawaiian culture and cultural practices” (“He Lei” 72).

Kanaka Maoli poets who seem relevant to mention as influences on me are Sage U‘ilani Takehiro, Haunani-Kay Trask, and Wayne Westlake. Something I’ve admired in both Takehiro and Trask’s poetry and have tried to emulate is the way they mix descriptors for human and non-human natural elements, often with sexual overtones.

For example, Trask describes a sunrise in “Waimānalo Morning,” writing, “Ko‘olau
 vulva / veined with heat / extravagant / light plunging / in long violet / shafts” (72). In
 some poems of mine, like “My Man is an Island” and “Devastation and Reform,” I have
 somewhat less eloquently mixed descriptors of land with my considerations of people.
 However I can’t think of an instance in which my relationship with land or elements of
 the natural world was my primary concern, and human elements emerged as descriptors
 for land. This may reflect an ultimately non-Hawaiian attitude toward land (“This Land”
 136). In poems like “cats” and “task” I’ve borrowed Westlake’s concise, self-deprecating,
 Haiku-joke style. A poem of his that I think of often goes:

in the men’s room

at U.H.

people stop

and wonder

in the sink

bald head maniac

washing grapes.

(73)

But as a non-Hawaiian, something I must be careful about emulating is the rage
 and sorrow these poets each struggle with in their own way. I choose the word “emulate”
 here because I believe the Kanaka Maoli poets I’ve discussed serve as models for all
 writers in Hawai‘i, and this complicates the standard artistic practice of copying the

masters. Though I may be moved by witnessing or hearing about violence done to Kanaka Maoli, I experience that violence differently as a non-Hawaiian than I would as a Kanaka Maoli, and I must be moved to act in a different way than Kanaka Maoli poets act. Poems such as Westlake's "Down on the Sidewalk in Waikiki" series and Trask's "Sons" and "Colonization" among others, engage in the political work of resistance to colonization and loyalty to Hawaiian culture that ho'omanawanui discusses in her overview of Hawaiian poetry. Although I support this political work, to take these projects up in the same way that they do could easily become appropriative. Instead, as a non-Hawaiian poet I have to respond to these injustices in a different way.

To push this point further, avoiding appropriation is not all that is at stake in finding authentic ways to express anger and sadness over injustices inflicted on another. The standardization of anger and sorrow has a way of making other types harder to recognize and harder to express. Another way to say this is: without ways of understanding and telling our experiences of outrage for another, or sadness for another, we run the risk of giving up on being outraged or sad at all. To complicate matters, if as settlers, our anger at injustice done against Kanaka Maoli is mixed with shame, guilt, or fear, it becomes all the more important to examine the specificities of that anger. My own poetry focuses, thus far, more on sorrow than anger, but as a settler poet I feel the need to explore both and articulate their complexities without recourse to easier models of outrage or grief.

The third category—what I will call local literature—engages with politics in obvious ways by taking racism, injustice, sexism, and exploitation as subject matter, and choosing to treat these subjects in Pidgin, which in itself is a culture-affirming step. To be

sure there is a lot of good poetry written by these poets, but what I've taken from local literature is mostly an idea of the kind of poetry I don't want to produce. A poem by Ann Inoshita called "Red Banana in da First Grade," encapsulates the features of local literature that are either unavailable to me, or inappropriate. Inoshita begins:

My madda wen get red banana
 from somebody yestaday,
 so I going color my banana red
 fo show da teacha dat I smart.

However, the teacher reacts negatively, showing an ethnocentric bias:

Her face wen change right dea.
 She wen look real mad and tell me,
 "Bananas are not red. Bananas are yellow."
 I neva know wat fo say.

The rest of the poem is an account of the speaker returning home and confirming with her mother that red bananas do exist. The most politically striking feature of this poem is that it is written entirely in Pidgin. Although I read and value Pidgin literature, my adoption of a Pidgin style would be in fact an *adoption* rather than an affirmation of my devalued first language, as it is for Inoshita and other local literature poets who may also speak and write "standard" English, but choose to write in Pidgin. Another way this poem does

political work is to directly discuss ethnocentrism in schools, but similarly to the way I experience outrage differently from Kanaka Maoli poets, I experience ethnocentrism in a different way than Inoshita did. For example, I attended a university in New York and found that my particular cultural knowledges and values were not of importance compared to the dominance of numerically larger or culturally louder groups in the city. This is a very different sort of experience, and while Inoshita's poem develops a poignancy from our understanding of the context of ethnically-based cultural and economic oppression in Hawai'i, writing about my experiences of ethnocentrism the way Inoshita does, but from a perspective of relative privilege, would produce quite different—and I think inferior—writing.

Finally, Inoshita's poem is written retrospectively. Although it may gesture toward the speaker's childhood voice, it feels mediated and shows signs of the perspective of age being applied to what must have been a perplexing problem for a first-grader. With that backward glance comes a hint of nostalgia which I would argue colors a good deal of local literature, much of which is not colored but overtly concerned with the loss of a richer, perhaps more authentic past Hawai'i. This nostalgia does political work in that it serves as a warning against the excesses and forgetfulness that contemporary Hawai'i has rushed into. But for me, nostalgia seems inappropriate. I was born in 1988, at a time when many changes had already taken place. With the rise in the status of settler ethnic groups, parents were encouraging their children to look toward college and the future, rather than back to a now mythologized working-class past.

If these reasons for not engaging in identity-based political poetry seem disingenuous, consider the danger posed by a writer who writes from an imagined local

identity, rather than one that could be said to be “authentic” insofar as it is the legitimate experience of the writer. Wilson writes:

We don't need the marketing of 'local' (or local-seeming) writers whose metaphors of exotic remoteness and aesthetic charm are all too close, in language codes and protocols, to the packaging patterns of the tourist industry and the marketplace of semiotic and cultural kitsch. We don't need more writers of place and ethnicity who seek to 'add a tinge of cultural authenticity for marketing purposes' and would simulate cultural specificity and the mongrel languages of place for the purposes of historical laundering and self-aggrandizement as epic hero. (31)

Collective identities may always be imagined, yes, but one can choose to be true to how they really imagine themselves. To write within the confines of the local literature project would be, for me, false, and would therefore run the risk of turning into something akin to the exoticism and kitsch used in observer literature and other writing geared toward tourism and the selling of Hawai'i.

What should be clear from this consideration of poetic and political projects functioning in Hawai'i today is that I have found each of them unsatisfactory in some way, and that my reactions to the elements of each that I found problematic have shaped my style. I use very little, if any, Pidgin, and I make little overt reference to injustice, simply because I have rarely experienced it directly. Fearing to speak for people that are perfectly capable of speaking on their own, my poems are often personal and internal—to

the point of being self-centered—and focus on individual emotions rather than collective experiences. This leads to many poems about love and relationships, which, as I’ve noted, sometimes bleed over via metaphors into considerations of my relationships with land and place. The two types of relationships are often metaphors for each other, and both are characterized by an uncertainty about approach, meaning, and the possibility of real connection, rather than an understanding of land as ‘āina. I’ve also turned to writing about daily experiences as a way to defy the exoticized expectations of others, as well as myself. Focusing poetic perception on elements of the day-to-day steers me away from over-reliance on established metaphors about Hawai‘i, which could easily become either observer literature cliché, or an appropriation or poor mimicry of Hawaiian ways of speaking about the various non-human elements that make up Hawai‘i.

If then, I have a very clear understanding of what poetic projects I am not a part of, what kind of poetry can we say I *am* engaged in? Because of the political, often identity-based nature of most poetry in Hawai‘i, it has been easiest for me to define myself as a poet in relation to the broad categories of poetry I’ve outlined above. If I am not Hawaiian, not entirely “local” in sensibility or generation, and I refuse—as far as I am able—to take part in the literary exploitation of these islands, what space do I have left to write from? In answering this question I have had to rely on a controversial term that I feel best encapsulates my particular set of identity-based challenges. I’m speaking of the term “settler” as used by Candace Fujikane in her introduction to *Asian Settler Colonialism* and by other scholars working on theorizing the both exploited and exploitative role of the settler in settler colonial societies like Hawai‘i.

In the realm of literature, critics have applied the term “settler” to writers that

would call themselves “local,” rechristening local literature works as “settler literature.” Trask was one of the early proponents of a distinction in local literature between works by Hawaiian authors and non-Hawaiian ones, and ho‘omanawanui has famously extended this argument to inventory some of the dangerous characteristics of settler literature. ho‘omanawanui writes, “The goals of Asian settlers, like those of the haole Americans they pretend to despise yet secretly idolize, are to thrive in a capitalist environment and reap the benefits of hegemonic dominance” (“This Land” 127). From this starting point she argues that settlers have internalized “colonial views of ‘āina,” citing the fictional character Ivah’s negative view of Kaunakakai in Lois-Ann Yamanaka’s *Blu’s Hanging* as “typical of non-Kanaka Maoli colonial views of immigrants trying to find their place in America rather than connecting to the ‘āina as a place of nourishment and sustenance” (“This Land” 136). She also argues that in literature as in life, settlers write in order to “claim Hawai‘i as their own.” She is critical of Dennis Kawaharada’s “insertion of self as narrator of an indigenous Hawaiian mo‘olelo” and fears that non-native literary interest in writing about Hawaiian culture could signal a trend that will amount to a takeover of kuleana by settlers (“This Land” 142-145). Finally, in her conclusion she sends a clear message to non-Hawaiian writers, saying, “Settler writers and scholars must acknowledge Native kuleana over all things Kanaka Maoli, including literature” (“This Land” 146).

ho‘omanawanui’s criticisms make a necessary intervention, and despite the indignation many settler writers feel upon reading this piece, I believe her warning to practice greater caution isn’t beyond the bounds of reason. There are more important things than our artistic freedom to write without having our blind spots exposed by

unexpected critics. But this article also seems to have set the tone and definitions for how we discuss settler literature. ho‘omanawanui describes settler literature as something done by accident, by well-meaning but self-deceived non-Hawaiian or “local” writers whose appropriative and land-grabbing impulses will show through upon close reading. Since reading this article, if I have been consciously trying to style myself as anything in particular, it’s been as a settler poet who defies this retrospective labeling. I have attempted to own the identity-marker “settler” and explore what poems I have to write from this perspective. Note here that I don’t mean “have to” in the sense of being forced to write from a certain societally applied categorization, but “have” in the sense of an inner resource that can be tapped if I first take careful inventory of it.

I take as my starting point that my goal is not “to thrive in a capitalist environment and reap the benefits of hegemonic dominance” but simply to live in my own most productive and least harmful way. I would count as productive: growing food, writing poems, teaching others, having children, and helping my friends and family enact their own personal productivity. What is harder to do than this is to minimize the harm that my presence causes, both on the environment and on the people, such as Kanaka Maoli, who are in a position of relative oppression compared to my own relative dominance. There is no life guide for this new and constantly evolving set of challenges. There is no mythology to instruct anyone on how to live as part of a globalized world. Settlers are in the difficult situation of having lost touch with the coherent mythologies of their homelands, and the urge to insert oneself into someone else’s land, which ho‘omanawanui so aptly identifies, must be connected to this general desire for solid ground, for guidance, for connection that simplifies the divisive problems of today. For

me, and in my settler poetry, the challenge has been to express this desire in a way that does not infringe on someone else's connection to a sustaining source. Another challenge has been to honor the sense of unease, ambivalence, and anxiety that comes, I posit, from not knowing how to live in the world, if we are making the right choices, and if there can be a solution to the myriad problems of settler colonialism and global capitalism.

To take on a settler identity, quite ironically, destabilizes the prevailing ideas about identity in Hawai'i today. To understand this, it's useful to borrow Wilson's elaboration of Susan Schultz's "two postmodernisms." In this formulation, "postmodernism A" focuses on wordplay and deconstruction in a way that "calls into question any under-theorized, stable, or reified version of 'identity,' 'voice,' or 'sovereignty' of meaning, cultural self, nationhood, and so on" (1-2). On the other hand, "Postmodernism B" describes the identity-based and politically interested poetry that I've described as contemporary Hawaiian poetry and local literature, which uses "emerging tactics of voice and identity that . . . had pushed poetic language towards voicing a more trenchantly situated, affiliated, or localized kind of postmodernism . . . that wanted to align itself with forces and forms of imagined identity that were coming to be called, in the late 1980s, 'postcolonial.'" Although Wilson goes on to argue that there is plenty of experimental local poetry by both Kanaka Maoli and non-Hawaiians that makes use of postmodernism A as well as B, he points out that "in the local Pacific" postmodernism A has been associated with movements on the U.S. mainland, particularly in New York (2). It is postmodernism B then—the identity-based or even identity-forming postcolonial drive to ". . . recapture strong claims to cultural, cultural-national, and subaltern ethnic identity . . ." that characterizes much of the poetry in Hawai'i today. This is a better way

of saying that most poetry in Hawai‘i is engaged in politics based on identity, and that identity in Hawai‘i’s poetry runs the risk of becoming too “reified, nostalgia-drenched, and reiterative [of] primordiality” (Wilson 3).

Taking on a settler identity seems at first to follow in the footsteps of other identity projects that have come before, such as hyphenated ethnic identities, local identity or even Kanaka Maoli identity. My settler poetry certainly doesn’t experiment much with wordplay and deconstruction or other tactics that might have “uprooted the writing self from the place/identity of local embodiment,” and in fact my choice to write in and about Hawai‘i has meant, for me, a certain amount of turning away from experimental concerns that I was introduced to while studying in New York (Wilson 2). Writing as a settler poet, I am a proponent of voice, but of a different, more nebulously identified voice than is found in postmodernism B and much of local literature. Just as my settler poetry is anxious, uneasy, and uncertain, settler identity is always unstable and uncertain in a way that poets making a claim to a resistant identity cannot afford to be.

In thinking through these problems, and in thinking through the identity base of my political and poetic position, I’ve considered what it might mean that I self-identify as hapa. Literally “half” in ‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i, and borrowed from the older term “hapa haole,” the word today often indicates half or partial Asian heritage, and is defined by Kip Fulbeck as “mixed ethnic heritage with partial roots in Asian and/or Pacific Islander ancestry.” Though some self-identifying settlers are critical of the term and consider it an appropriation of a Hawaiian word, I find it relatively benign, as appropriations go. The term is useful because it distinguishes the concerns of non-African racially mixed people from the very specific and historically grounded concerns of racially mixed people in

America of partial African descent, who, if they identify as bi- or multiracial at all, seem to use the term “mixed” or “mixed-race” to describe themselves. Although some of these people do describe themselves with the term hapa (Fulbeck’s Hapa Project includes some who do), to me hapa speaks to a particular conception of mixed-ness and a particular set of issues around mixed-ness that has developed in Hawai‘i.

Hapa literature, which is related to, or perhaps a subset of, mixed-race literature, seems to be primarily defined by the poet’s identifying as hapa or mixed-race, and writing on the topic of this mixed heritage (Lee). I do identify as hapa (my mother is Japanese, my father is “white”) but I have rarely had an urge to write on this topic, perhaps because being hapa is a relatively less confusing and abnormal thing in Hawai‘i than it is for hapas on the U.S. mainland, and it is certainly less significant and trying of a heritage than for example that of a person of mixed African and European descent. I think I also share James McBride’s worry that “parsing multiracial identity was quickly becoming a preoccupation of the well off” (Lee). Besides this, there is something vaguely uncomfortable about the interest hapas and non-hapas alike take in visually dissecting ethnic heritage. Fulbeck’s portraits of volunteer hapas in “The Hapa Project” are on the one hand empowering for hapas who have not been able to see themselves represented positively in cultural productions, but on the other hand they offer viewers a pleasure in gazing at mixed faces, and a power in being able to discuss component parts, which troubles me.

What I do find useful in the term is the way that, though it does carry vague racial affiliations, it describes more a state of being than any specific ethnic heritage. Wilson, in his descriptions of experimental poetry in the Pacific uses the term “mongrel”

in a way that seems similar to my own use of “hapa.” He writes that we need “. . . sites wherein inflows and outflows can lead to more mongrel innovation and push language beyond tired colonizing dynamics of white/other . . .” (33). To be hapa is to know intuitively that the “dynamics of white/other” is constructed, and to grow up knowing yourself to be composed of disparate parts that still somehow form a whole, which is a valuable lesson for poets, and people in general. What I would hope to add to hapa literature with my poetry is first, that hapas can and should write about more than their ethnic heritage. Hapas have had to make space for others to understand them, and in the same way, hapa poetry, if I can call my own poetry that, has to make space for our own understandings of the world, perhaps through “mongrel innovation,” and without recourse to one side or another, through the work of poetic perception and the assumption that seeming contradictions will be found in unities everywhere.

Another thing that worries me about hapa obsession is the way that it often fixates on young children. The hapa is always known as the offspring of its parents, and so is infantilized. This brings me to another identity-based consideration for my politics and poetics—my age. As I write this, I am 23, and after many false starts, American popular culture seems to have decided on the term “millennials” as the appropriate label for my generation. Although millennials are undoubtedly engaged in a panoply of artistic movements and endeavors, one that might be relevant to my own work is the New Sincerity. According to A. D. Jameson, the New Sincerity is a loosely- and ill-defined movement of younger writers who have responded to the feeling that “abstraction and theory and postmodernist allusion—and, yes, *irony*—had run their course.” Instead, these writers re-value sentiment and, as a Wikipedia contributor wrote, “treat of plain old

untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction,” and are “willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile . . .” (Jameson). Jameson also describes the New Sincerity as “a resurgence of interest in preciousness, sentiment, & twee in both cinema and indie rock—Wes Anderson, Sufjan Stevens, the Danielson Famile, the Decemberists, the Arcade Fire, Joanna Newsom” and notes that “it’s not hard, if you want to, to trace out a few connections between the NS of literature and the older NS of alternative rock and indie pop.”

I find these passages relevant to my own poetry because they relate to my rejection of the “abstraction and theory” of postmodernism A, and my commitment to writing experiential poems, which turn out to be filled with quite “plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life.” I’ve been focused on my difference from people in Hawai‘i with more urgent collective troubles, and perhaps the New Sincerity writers are not as concerned with those troubles as I am, or maybe they are. But my choice to limit myself to my own experiences, risking being boring, naive, or irrelevant, seems to align with choices made by other writers who Jameson links to the New Sincerity. Furthermore, the connection between the New Sincerity and indie cinema, alternative rock, and indie pop, characterizes my poetry as well. Asked about my poetic influences, I’ve often felt it would be more relevant for me to cite the lyrics of songs by Cat Power, The Shins, Frightened Rabbit, or Lady Gaga before mentioning any actual poets.

Jameson also discusses how in his own work, which he feels might have been subject to the same cultural influences that created the New Sincerity, he looks for “some way to recreate the sincere excitement and passion we felt as children reading comics (re-

viewed, now, through our new adult perspectives). Or something like that?" I mention this not because comics are essential to either the New Sincerity or my poetry, but because I have often felt that poetic perception requires something like a remembering of what it was like to be a child. As I recall, when I was a child I encountered things in the world with complete focus and with senses that were unencumbered with cultural associations. If the thing under examination turned out to be good, there was also great excitement, and even passion. Rather than being erudite, hip, and contemporary, which are nice things to be sometimes, I would rather be childlike, one of "those who want to find some way to make the writing feel less mediated ("writing about something"), vs. those who would rather foreground their writing's artificiality ("writing about itself")" (Jameson).

I'm also a woman, and as a final consideration I'd like to pay attention to that fact. In some of my poems I've been aware of a peculiarly female voice that emerges, and a certain preoccupation with being female, and reproductively capable. "Seduction" strikes me as unusually performative, for me, of a type of femininity that turns destructive, while "Blood" and "Morning Metropolis" deal with vulnerability and insecurities that circle around being subject to applied definitions of what it is to be a woman. There might be a connection here to what Arielle Greenburg has called "Gurlesque":

. . . the poetry regularly incorporates and rejects confession, lyricism, fragmentation, humor, and beauty . . . each of these women was veering away from traditional narrative, and each employed a postmodern sense of humor,

invoking brand names and cultural ephemera. . . . what struck me was a tone that was tender and emotionally vulnerable but also tough, with a frank attitude towards sexuality and a deep, lush interest in the corporeal, and that this came through in poems that were "dolled up" in a specifically girly kitsch: this work seems to share an interest in the "femme" side of feminism.

Greenburg locates Gurlesque as a phenomenon of her own generation of women, who grew up experiencing the contradictions of the feminist movement in the sixties and seventies. I'd be interested to hear what she thinks of younger artists and writers who exhibit similar tendencies. (Lana del Rey and Sloane Crosley come to mind as two examples from contemporary pop culture.) Although my own poetry doesn't exhibit all of the qualities listed above, and though I have not been consciously writing about feminist topics, it's possible that the cultural forces which shaped Gurlesque poetry have shaped my own attitudes toward being female, and perhaps colored how those attitudes show through in some of the more personal of my poems.

In summary then, I have tried to style myself as a settler poet, taking lessons from the idea, if not the current practice, of hapa poetry, and in the process creating work that possibly jives with the New Sincerity and Gurlesque poetry. I've been concerned with using poetic perception to write personal, experiential poems that delve into the settler's desire for guidance and connection, as well as honor the anxieties and the sense of unease that characterize life under globalization. I doubt that I have fully succeeded; if I have managed to connect the personal to the political, I've done it only quietly—more so in what I choose not to say than in what I say. But in a world where our feelings and desires

are mediated by vast unseen powers and collective identities alike, perhaps there is something political in celebrating our ability to experience as fully as possible the mundane emotions that characterize a life, and notice the moments of connection to other people and things that make us feel fully alive.

I see this commitment to unmediated, truthful, personal experience as the ultimate goal of my poetry, yet it's difficult to find the language to talk about it. The problem stems from a few factors—one being that the thinkers and writers who have informed my ideas about this experiential, connective, and almost mystical poetic function don't (as far as I know) constitute a named movement. They do not use the same terminology as each other, and perhaps because of the genre of their works, they don't take time to write literature reviews that would help place them within a current academic or artistic conversation.

A second problem is that the terms that come easily to mind to describe the goals of poetry in this milieu are terms that I and other scholars rightfully mistrust. Jane Hirshfield puts it succinctly when she explains, “however much we may come to believe that ‘the real’ is subjective and construed, we still feel art is a path not just to beauty, but to truth . . .” (5). To write about experiential knowledge is to seek truth and explore beauty, but at worst, terms like “beauty” and “truth” have historically been used in the service of unjust and destructive systems of power (as in the beauty of foot-binding, or the truth of White Supremacy). At best these terms have been reduced to invoking frivolity and platitudes. Cultural studies and postmodernism in general have provided a healthy reminder of the subjectivity of such terms, but we are left with no words for the goals of poetry.

Ironically, this situation—the tension between words spoken because we have to say *something*, and imperfect words that are then in circulation and thus vulnerable to misuse—is a microcosm of poetry itself as well as the basic outline of my own conflicts as a writer in Hawai‘i. To me, poetry comes from an urge to talk about things for which words may very well be ultimately inadequate, and my awareness of this inadequacy has shaped my choices as a writer, making me cautious. But I still believe that poets must risk misunderstanding and exposure to our own inadequacies as we attempt to tell things that are true. True poetry, whether it is the truth of a settler or a Kanaka Maoli or anyone, becomes mystical.

What I mean to describe with the word “mystical” is the way good poetry is the result of poetic perception that succeeds in catching an emotional resonance that, somehow, transcends identity and creates an experience or feeling of connection with something vital, whether it is another person, a community, humanity, ka ‘āina, god, the universe, or simply “truth.” Poetic perception is the key to this, and it is currently undervalued in society because it resists dependence on intellectual logic. Instead, it’s attentive to different facets of intelligence and knowledge. For example Manulani Aluli Meyer outlines the way feeling and thinking are much more integrated in what she calls the Hawaiian worldview. She writes, “Indeed, intelligence and knowledge were embedded at the core of our bodies—the stomach or na‘au. The na‘au for Native Hawaiians is the site for both feeling and thinking. Wisdom, na‘auao, also translates as heart, emotion, and intelligence” (223). In Meyer’s framing Hawaiian knowledge, and all real knowledge, is accessed through, among other things, a union of body, mind and spirit. Poetic perception requires something like this union.

The Chinese poet and scholar Lu Chi describes poetic perception in terms of studying nature, seeing the “inner-connectedness of things,” and then sighing. In a section of *Wen Fu* entitled “The Early Motion,” he writes:

The poet stands at the center
of a universe,
contemplating the enigma,
drawing sustenance
from masterpieces of the past.

Studying the four seasons as they pass,
we sigh;
seeing the inner-connectedness of things,
we learn
the innumerable ways of the world.

Hirschfield describes poetic perception as concentration, saying, “In the wholeheartedness of concentration, world and self begin to cohere. With that state comes an enlarging: of what may be known, what may be felt, what may be done” (4). Robert Bringhurst writes, “When you think intensely and beautifully, something happens. That something is called poetry. If you think that way and speak at the same time, poetry gets in your mouth” (143). All of these thinkers and writers seem to agree that there is a specific and unusual type of perception that must take place before good poetry can be

written. As important as this is, for writers writing in and about Hawai‘i, it may be *especially* important in order to penetrate the layers of interested cultural and colonial representations that cloud our view.

Poetic perception seems to be predicated on a curiosity about the world, and the ability to see and be shocked by the truly startling intricacies of everyday experience. I find it useful to think of poetry as an act, in that it is the process of seeing, feeling/understanding, and then describing, that is the central concern, rather than the words that form the end result. “Poetry, like science, is a way of finding out—by trying to state perceptively and clearly—what exists and what is going on” (Bringhurst 144-145). When a poet is successful, that is, when a poet does in some measure find out what is going on, the written poem produced possesses a captivating emotional resonance.

This emotional resonance is what originally drew me to poetry; I’ve been fascinated by the way good poets express the emotional and psychological, as well as physical, aspects of their subject matter in a way that brings readers into closer contact with the thing under examination, or even allows them to discover it. This is no easy feat. In everyday language, and in bad poetry, words and phrases are allowed to stand in for a feeling or quality without actually evoking that feeling or quality. Poets must resort to unusual means to shock readers into encountering a thing instead of its sign. An example that I often think of is Robert Creeley’s poem, “The Birds,” which begins, “I’ll miss the small birds that come / for the sugar you put out / and the bread crumbs.” From here the speaker goes on to describe the birds he’s seen and the experiences he’s had while staying at what must be a quiet seaside town, perhaps on the east coast of America. Then he concludes:

. . . The birds,
no matter they're not of our kind,
seem most like us here. I want

to go where they go, in a way, if
a small and common one. I want
to ride that air which makes the sea

seem down there, not the element
in which one thrashes to come up.
I love water, I *love* water—

but I also love air, and fire.

(146-147)

In my own interpretation, this poem is about the speaker's ambivalence about leaving the seaside town, and moving on to whatever life holds next for him. What is startling and to me noteworthy about this poem is the way that Creeley, after a seeming digression into bird watching, suddenly draws us back to the speaker's ambivalence about leaving, and does so in a way that causes us to reflect on ephemerality and human caprice in general. Creeley does this in the last two lines with language that is startlingly simple, yet elemental and powerful. As readers we are able to understand his state of mind, but

beyond that, we are able to palpably feel his regret (“*I love water—*”) and latent excitement (“and fire”) about leaving.

In my own poems I attempt to catch emotional resonances as best I can. For example, in the poem “Makiki in March” I try to invoke in readers the feeling of “spring fever” that was the inspiration for the poem. Whether a poet’s attempts at emotional clarity are effective for all readers, and whether they are so resounding as to amount to “truth” of some kind, I hesitate to say. The controversial mythologist Joseph Campbell is not so hesitant. He says, “The real artist is the one who has learned to recognize and to render what Joyce has called the ‘radiance’ of all things, as an epiphany or showing forth of their truth” (205). Taken together, these instances of radiant truth-telling form a conglomerate of stories and insights that might be called a mythology, making it appropriate to compare artists and poets to shamans, as Campbell does, saying, “. . . the shaman’s powers are symbolized in his own familiars, deities of his own personal experience. His authority comes out of a psychological experience, not a social ordination” (122-123). Poetic moments of emotional resonance are not just good writing, but serve a purpose similar to the purpose of a shamanic vision or a myth.

To function as a shaman today, that is, to tell a new and relevant myth that addresses the complexities of globalization, requires the political engagement that poets in Hawai‘i demand of themselves. As a settler poet I use poetic perception to try to understand what it is to live as a human settler in Hawai‘i today. My hope is that this emotional understanding can help to balance the theoretical understandings we have already begun to produce, and will ultimately contribute positively to a modern mythology.

Impossible Scatter

Return

being here is a struggle
what is it about monkey pod trees?
like my mother
who is beautiful and couldn't be otherwise
I know these trees so well
they are unremarkable and gorgeous
it's strange

I used to spend so much time
in a car seat watching power lines go by
I have a theory
being a baby is like being high

(remember,
this is me looking happy to be here)

I used to spend so much time
making sense of beauty marks
impossible scatter
what are they?
my mother has them so I figured
they must be ok
what a comfort to memorize

I know that bird sound
I know its feeling
I haven't woken up this early
in a long time

Mililani, very late

the air turns cold
through the windows
it come from the gulch
what lurks there

I think of things
I can't control
how I shiver when I'm nervous
how I'm up late again

I wish to read the atmosphere
understand pressures—

I need to become a cipher
I need to tell you about
my goose bumps
my clenched shoulders

I need you to listen
I don't want to seem disorganized

I present to you
my demands:

teach me how to wrestle
a child again
red cheeked
nose dripping
chasing playmates in the cold

This

so much shared
so much hidden
what am I to you?
a pillow
a place to lay your head

that would not be
entirely objectionable—I just wonder
how you refract me
how these things have
staying power

and—
what does “desire”
have to do with this?
I want to be warm in the blankets with you
I want a full stomach
I desire the precariousness of
very thin limbs

what is direction?
cardinal
mauka
makai

when we hiked Olomana
so much salt came out of me
I learned then
that I desire water

Seduction

You don't want this business

I am getting fat from all these corndogs
(these capitalists' corndogs!)
all that pizza we ordered for friends who
never showed up
I am expanding, always
an unsustainable model of growth

I say to you, stay away
I am a poet so you had better stay away
because creative people are always crazy
those hippie dippies in redwood trees
those sad gray punk rockers
they are wrong in the head, they have ADD
or smoked too much weed
For your own good, please! stay away

I am a person of great prejudice
I am a racist!
I am a bigot!
I think I am smarter than you
and I judge you for it
I JUDGE
do not come forward and be weighed by me
my eyesight is perfect

By all that is holy I beg you stay away
I will turn on you
in a moment of panic I will attack
I will wound

Stop!
Stop it right there!
My mother is a feminist

I have responsibilities
you would make woman a monster
destroy! destroy!
like my baby sister
thick-legged and drooling
stomping through my toy farmer's fields
kicking plastic cows
growling, roaring her own name
run fast, O farmer!
as your barn and silo crash down
because you would not stay away

departure

Pouring your old tea down the drain and there is
granola everywhere.

I'm wearing a hoodie today.

The dishes in the sink have all
given themselves up to soapy sorrow.

Water rouses itself to a boil,
all in good time.

The kettle moans.

You've left cups everywhere and
I'm considering getting a sandwich
at the deli
alone

because you are freshly gone from
this place
and it has gotten so cold.

condo hunting in Pālolo

They circled each other in that dingy condo
for hours before I arrived
and when I got there I was pissy

“Come out on the balcony” they say
“You can look at the mountains”
“Feel inspired”
“Write poetry”

My family has learned that like a plant
I require certain conditions:
sunlight, air currents, temperature, humidity
and unlike a plant
I do not wilt quietly

They recite their inventory:
the possible couch placements
kitchen islands, cabinet upgrades
the shelving dad could build me
the obvious need for ceiling fans
Then they look to me

If this were a perfect world my mouth
would spool a slip of paper
cut neatly at the end
And they would read it together
the answer, at last!
which we are all seeking:

*That the sun will shine through a fine valley rain
because this is love we have
and it is structurally sound,
beyond simple well-meaning*

But as things stand, I can only nod

and agree:
put in a new carpet and
this place will have definite possibilities

Pillow Thief

I sleep each night next to a pillow thief
we communicate by grunts and squawks
sometimes there are shrugs,
luxurious whines, dramatic sighs

He would have me write limericks
though he ought to write them himself
and I would have him return all those
stolen blankets, borrowed slippers, lost time

And that is the way of things these days
him nesting among his pillows
me growling and smearing and thinking
the sooner I fall asleep, the sooner I wake

The world rolls cumbrously onto its side;
we adjust ourselves accordingly, and wait

opening shift, Kaimukī City Mill

7 am

morning is bright

facing a firing squad of flashlights

CFL, halogen, cool white

what a perverse

scrutiny

closing shift, Kaimukī City Mill

bus stop

moon

orange light

what will become of me?

such humid thoughts

as cars pass by earnestly

I am feeling the air on my

greased forehead

waving at coworkers

bidding goodnight

City Mill & the cave

the break room is full of cockroaches
I pull my legs up and
sit sipping cold coffee in a styrofoam cup
everything here is part of a fine dust
soaked in a thin grime
there have been too many bodies
too many exchanges of coins
mold is growing in the vending machines
a little useless fan marks time

no one loves this place but rather
like a brothel, here we satiate, we feed
in 15- or 30-minute intervals, anonymously
the brave ones make conversation
but they too must always rush off

well, some civil soul has stacked the newspapers at least
someone has taken out the recycling
the TV is still on, playing *Yu-gi-oh!* softly
the fluorescent lights do their jobs
(they will not do more)
as for me, I daydream, I rest my tired feet
while the AC loses fluids into two oversize garbage bins
I can see how the manager/madame
might love this place
“It’s a wreck,” she thinks, “but it’s all mine.”

cats of City Mill

night.

off.

My ride is waiting,
with headlights on
at the far end of the parking lot.

Around the car and
on the wall,
more than a dozen cats
sit erect, like statues.

O aberrations,
what will we do with you?

Boyfriend is looking
anxious.

rainy day at City Mill

the ceiling drips
into buckets
seeps through
asbestos, spiders
concrete dust
moist mongoose
onto us—
the living

the automatic doors hiss open
to water that creeps
with footfalls and reaching arms
the people, roused and fumbling
with plastic bag ponchos
angry gutters
sandbag emergencies

aaron is excited—
he's my boss
no joke:
a 35-year-old, tattooed
easy to read
ex local punk rock star

he's thinking of
turbulence
like storms were made for him
he wants to go crashing off again
into some epic
corrugated night

customer dissatisfaction at City Mill and its aftermath

when I'm angry I think—
you don't know me

you don't know how I was
breathing heavy
on the trail
in Makiki with my
thighs and my rage and my
humor and hopelessness

you are mistaken if
you think you know anything
at all about me

and when I am in my better nature
that is to say—
when I am peaceful
and compassionate—
I think that I know you

I think that I know you
and we are inside each other
mingled and vulnerable

Dry Season, or studying abroad in Ghana

I've not dealt in words of late
except those in the dust of the roadside:
cough and choke and gasp
words beaten underfoot
rising in a feeble rebellion
against the oppression of the daily,
lackluster words like pebbles
indented in a skeleton path
worn against the lost goodwill of the grass

Mānoa storm

this is the moment
 pregnant with something
 I am not in the mood to go walking in the rain
 I stand huddled beneath a tree
 strike me universe if you dare
 this is so tiring

I am ready to surrender
 there's been enough of all these
 awkward confrontations
 dithering through our parts
 each day a new playwright's problem
 the crisis of human contact
 everyone is saying the rain and the lightening
 are beautiful

let me rest, god
 or else make me tame
 you know you've made me fragile
 an unjust construction

sometimes I feel like the mountains are my brothers
 sometimes I feel like my friends are my brothers
 I have no brothers really
 though I have cousins
 heritage must account for some things
 but what and
 in which order?

there is a little dead plant on wilder street
 carried off by an impromptu stream in the gutter
 and I feel for this tree planted with good intentions
 it did not expect the square of grass it got for home
 and I feel for the grass
 deeply

Granite

My mother took home rocks from Alaska—
said they had an excess of it there.

The mountain
and the stream
spit it out in torrents,
which is what had brought
me and the Corps
to Seward.

It is a beautiful place.
A long bay surrounded by snowy peaks—
the gulls are huge,
life is large and spacious.
I walked the length of town as an outsider
imagining a curious, cold
type of freedom.

At night—
the bright evenings, eating halibut
with engineers and military men.
So much fleece and denim—
the vowels and voices secure in
the business and real things
that are known.

My mother among them is a queer creature;
she will not be going out for drinks later.
She will stay in—
fiddling with seating charts
telling me how the future is
India and Southeast Asia—
or how Seward was built on a floodplain
and would not be
without the Corps.

Then, on the fourth day
they are gone.
The weather holds up.
I drink coffee and read—
Leaving Resurrection.
I am sad to go.

At security in Anchorage
they search my mother's bag
two laughing TSA agents—
pulling little bits of slate and quartz
out of socks.
A jolly ensemble—
my mother talking of mica flecks.

TSA let us through,
but it could be we are cursed.
The rocks have been displaced.
I've heard this is "superstition";
this is Hawaiian epistemology, non-applicable
in Alaska? But maybe—

I do not know if we will pay
or are paying
for her part in this mundane construction—
the building of military homes
of flight lines,
commissaries and exchanges,
the damming of waters.

She said she'd thought
the pinnacle of her career
would be a bridge—
an elegant and mathematical thing
balanced with arching lines—
a feat
a female thing, with poise.

Bridges bring together or
hold together maybe or
mark things as apart.

I wonder about connections.
I wonder about these, our desires.
But my mother is more certain.
My mother is a rock.

Maybe she is breathing heavy these days
because of the way dams creak and groan.
Too much pressure—
a constant erosion or a
moving in geological terms,
which is slow yes,
but building.

In Seward I read about *Two Old Women*
Athabaskans—
abandoned by their tribe
who found a way to live.
They set traps and caught animals.
They drank meat soups,
and hiked for days in the snow.

My mother is strong like them,
but not as tested.
My mother is round and solid and certain.
She sits heavily
where she was dropped.
It causes a strain.

I do not know if I'll be like her,
if I will calcify or dissolve
squeeze into diamonds or melt or
grow moss.

It seems silly to talk about intentions,
when you're a stone—
rolling, as they say.

I'd like to visit Seward again,
in the summer, with hot dogs
and barbecues, and a big fat
American trailer.

I want to camp and fish and
wear windbreakers—

and then I want, despite myself,
to find something ancient and crucial
a grotto
a spirit animal
a wise wolf

in short, all the usual yearning—
which makes me wonder

if the rocks call out to go home
that much more
than the rest of us.

task

I push words
through a little french press
inexplicably spinning
at the center of the dark universe

cosmos

tripping on the brown couch all afternoon
sweaty and uncertain
we step outside—

two figures
struck dumb & blind
by the clouds rushing around
in the sky above Kaimukī
bright white and
gregarious

love in cold weather

walking along the Hudson River
on the New Jersey side
thinking of
ice, heart, city, water

I'm talking about
with windows aglow
with city lights

frozen into coats
white girls of the north

a part of it is
the gusts of wind
in doors
to christmas homes that aren't mine
to Virgin Megastores

cold love
wool love
love with boots and socks
traipsing love
love that splashes in slush
crunches over salt scatter

I mean at the level of
cold dry air in pink nostrils
breath in puffs
imploring
watery eyes

that cold love is what I'm talking about
that foreign creature
very obviously shivering alive

I had that once
it hurt so much

like blood in the fingers
it tingled in my frozen thighs
it burned my windblown cheeks

I couldn't figure out
if we were living or mimicking
or if there is real magic out there
fluttering through the grey sky

well, I am warm again now

we came in from the cold, eventually
we hung up our winter coats

I flew home to humidity
I couldn't understand
such a clothed way of life

At the Union Square farmer's market, NYC

I am just still tripping about:
how much freedom there is
in long walks
in busy streets

no one told this to simple
children with
bright red round love stories

the yellows and greens
the pale and subtle seeds
in the too warm sun
dusty from the fields still
pulsating practically

conflicting colors
in the groin and the heart
and the stomach

“growing up local” in Mililani, a pineapple field turned All-American City

my childhood:

backyard banana trees

slapping slippers

little musubis

pikos and okoles

ching chings and ding dings

hanabada and mekuso

puka panties

—disgusting

all my life I’ve felt

nostalgia lurking everywhere

but I’m getting over it

grow up kid

nowdays not like before:

I swam at the rec center

I was *The Little Mermaid*

hair floating underwater

I wondered about love

I wondered how in all the world

you ever find your husband

it seemed impossible, at least, unlikely

I wore thick headbands

the children were the future

it was the early 90s

people said I had such big eyes

I went to hula lessons

I went to ballet lessons

I got carsick going to lessons

my grandma sang oriental lullabies
as I napped in the hot yellow afternoons

I loved eating salty korean nori
at lunch with the neighbor kids
I cried when they didn't invite me

my haole dad made me sandwiches
he told me sternly
these neighborhood kids
were not being good friends

body parts

your white body makes about as much sense to me
as a strawberry bush
and you don't seem to mind my brambles

thank god I made the cut
half asian—to satisfy your
taste for small, dark women

my last boyfriend was easy, he was all about the hapa girls
(a local japanese/okinawan)

and in new york there was this “puerto rican”
 (indian) guy from new jersey—
after me he claimed he always liked halfies

then one day on the brown couch
you call me ‘ehu girl
and I don't know what it means

Although I teach English I won't correct your grammar

O articulate pidgin man
speak on forever
it gives me pleasure

I'm not from California
like you think
I understand
(mostly)

For Haunani-Kay Trask

when women are betrayed
they become ghosts
or monsters
and there is work to do
from that hidden point
of guilty terror

I get that
but you still
scare me

Blood

I need to develop a strategy for this
 how can my nausea be productive?
 how can I turn this thickness to
 brilliant exposure

You don't know how embarrassed I am
 I don't usually play
 drinking games or make wagers—
 such squeamish *agency*

I have a problem with execution
 I wish sometimes to be a gangster or a man
 one who makes war
 a player
 a piece
 a protagonist

yes I know, I know

once I rode a bus through wyoming
 listening to all the songs I had
 with those mournful guitars that seem to bloom
 then wilt so suddenly
it's all over now
baby blue

wyoming has fireworks
 and pornography

I was quiet
 I was thick and fecund
 I had blood lining on the walls
 I had it saved up inside of me

someone needs to get me to breathe deeply

make me lift bags of concrete
until I sweat and surge
dusty

we are all responsible
for my happiness
after all
we are all contributing reportage
to this story

ache

you are eyes open in the dark
awake for once
subsumed and subsuming

(words are breaking)

I don't know what to do
in the face of you

seeing nothing

throbbing

after

I have been so empty lately
and so full all the time

this is not like a car ride
my legs are working
my shadow is slim

I heard that dreams are
an attempt at organization
we can't remember
we make up stories to understand

what worries me is:
my house & car have been a mess lately
underwear and towels everywhere
food in plastic bags
sand in book bindings
clumps of tangled hair

walking, I settle these things—they are *all right*
I will go to bed, tired and
sort it out in the morning
during some silent moment
with a candle maybe, or a joint—

something smoking gently
something solitary, and alight

my man is an island

ranges like spines
I would run my finger down
and the earth would tickle
and tremble at my touch
reclining
breathing
slumbering even

this mountain!
draped in his blankets
with his vapors
dreams lapping
at the sandy edges of consciousness

what sludge there is in the deep
what terror and what ecstasy
and above I do not know—
one has to wait
for him to wake

another rainy day

finishing a novel at home alone
I've got rain sounds
I've got hand-me-down sweaters
I've got little colorful carrots to skin
red potatoes to dice
I will make
a stew on the oily stove

the boys have gone out into the rain to play soccer and
this whole decrepit house is
so endearingly standing

I have thoughts of my lover—
I have a lover!
I have sly smiles
I have tender discontents

still hanging above the bar I have
christmas lights like haphazard vines
I've got taro rolls and butter

what a mess is this cozy little place!
what a mournful novel I had been reading!
before the boys went out the door
and the rain came back
and I thought of the socks and carrots and
other things, like lovers
that I have

I have these things in excess, to share
these fruits from the yard strewn with beer bottles
this disconsolate rain

the start of something

sunshine in Mānoa valley

in the morning

cars, birds, passersby

who am I without you?

the end of something

the rain used to fall
on the tī leaves
outside the window
in the cold afternoon

for a while it was as if
I had a home with you

devastation and reform

everything is lava fields
unwelcoming and strange

how did they live?
little gardens
in crevices
in the rocks

holes bored into the hard earth for piko
skin rubbing full of forlorn longing
against roughness like the surface
of the moon
like the surface
of your face
which I know too well
is tender

sad place

the wind screeched
through the windows & doorways
last night
natalie woke up

(she is in love with somebody
without even trying)

I thought I was making progress:
the radishes sprouted
the potatoes are planted
but I know
and I told you
we'd make a sad baby

the questions become easier—
logistics instead of love
keeping busy and forgetful

of the beauty god or somebody
gave all to me

morning metropolis

if it all were to stop
the cars on the freeway and the rain—
would I love it less?

it makes you feel like shouting
it makes you feel like
going to bed

the problem, as always
is you
someone marked us out for each other
I want to cause the least damage
your leaves are gentle
it's windy out here
wet and bright

lean out with me
over the balcony
through the bars and
toward the sun

let's scatter manure everywhere
let's reorganize the kitchen

if I had known about
your sad, useless eyes
I might have turned back

what's going on here can be interpreted
you've *hailed* me
and a woman has to be careful
with masculine interpolation

I want your babies
and I want to eat them, too.

let's meet here again in 1,000 years
look out at the star city—
the burly ocean
the basil in its box
the dead peppers—
and start over

the time for globetrotting is over

my new goal:
to make everything dear
whether by looks, or taste, or poverty
like green onion, fried egg, and rice
like nourishment
like an athlete's body

or like a naked acrobat
twirling round a pole in the sky

she transcends
all the chaos
that brought her there

burdens

maybe our ability to love can become taxed
I keep hoping to discover
my own reservoir—
someplace cool and dark with
fresh water,
calm but holding the possibility
or drowning

you say you still love me
which is not a thing I doubt
you talk about being serene
I pray for you

this unresolved question
will drive me to tumult, eventually
this liminal love
always pushing against itself
brutish and banal
my fits, your tantrums

I want to tell you:
never stop believing in me
and I'll always
come back to you
denigrating you
your soft thing
already so
small

buds

I am
dried up
wounded
wind-blown
my branches
turned to twigs

but in my core:
green fibers
my crevices:
quiet buds

Thinking of the Trasks and of my sisters

a son would be
less complicated
than a daughter
to love
so I hope for one

I don't know how to talk
to women
I don't know who I am
to them

is this about how
I never worked out my
feelings toward my
little sister?
an invader or a lover
a ward or a monster, screaming

approaching there is
so much fear:
selfhood vibrating out
of control beyond
simple known games
of sex and power

all this time thinking about
men and I forgot
about sisterhood:
too close
too fumbling
too tender

space

I bought a lucky bamboo plant
at times
on the fourth of july

little shoots
wet feet
golden twist tie

I don't know if
charms
are what we need

to mark our stolen
anniversary

the fix

everything has got so much:
the couch and the ceiling and the carpet
the friends milling around, eating pasta
the green glowing of the plants
the coldness of the ice tray
on the kitchen counter
in the afternoon light
sunny curtains billowing
full of stamina
how lovely I find it all
how blue and tan and grey
is the balcony
and the island
and us

then he's beside me, bright yellow
and I can see beneath his demeanor
under his intellect
behind his groping eyes
where he keeps his lack

and I would reach back there
had I the tools
to tighten some bolt or
solder a stray wire
so he could see the colors
even if
it broke him

Makiki in March

one day soon I'll take the tinsel down
throw out the old brown tree
tuck away two stockings
ornaments
and a star
one day soon I'll pack these things away
neatly
in the back of the closet

spring is coming and yes
spring is a funny concept here
(does anyone know the word
for an anachronism
not in time
in place?)
but waiting outside for my ride
to my little cousin's third birthday party
—where we will smile because we are happy
to see a happy child
and also sad—
it feels like spring

the same waiting and restlessness
the same morning cool
turning warm
smell of evaporating plant
on the dry breeze blowing hair
getting sleepy
thinking there's love out there
having fun without me
O neighborhood people!
walking by
find me, start me
let me turn a corner and
run into friends

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