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DREAM LIVES OF BUTTERFLIES: Haole Girl Blue (Excerpt from)

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Jaimee Wriston Colbert
**EXCERPT FROM DREAM LIVES OF BUTTERFLIES:
Haole Girl Blue**

I'm a white girl, *haole girl* they call me in my neighborhood. It's not like it's a choice. If I were given a choice about this I'd look like my best friend Nalani, who's half Hawaiian. This means she's got more rights to Hawaii than me, Nalani says, when she's mad at me. Which isn't so much. Like I said, we're best friends. Nalani's skin is the stripy tan of buttered toast.

We live in Punaluu, Hawaii where the air is pink and wet, and the mynah birds chatter up such a storm every morning, crack of dawn, you think you'd get lolo from lack of sleep. Lolo means stupid, which I am not. A little slow sometimes, my mama says—But you'll get married, and then you won't need algebra ever again, she says.

My mama's hope is that I'm married before she dies. She wants to know I'll have someone in this world besides her, she says, so then she can rest in peace. Not that marriage is the *be-all-and-end-all*, she reminds me; only if it's to the right guy. The right guy, Mama says, is the one who stays.

She says it could be any time, her dying, but she's been telling me this about as long as I've known her, which is all of my life of course. She's got this disease called Marfans, where she's really long and skinny in her fingers and toes, and her heart's too fragile, her doctor says, to pump to all that needs pumping. Abraham Lincoln had it, but he didn't die from it. She's got arthritis in her hands, fingers twisty and gnarly as twigs, and she wears five copper bracelets that jangle when she moves. It's what the Egyptians did, she told me, wore copper for arthritis. My mama knows things like this because she reads. Reads, reads, reads, all of the time. It's about all there is left for her to do, she says.

Me, I'd rather paint, and not houses like Mama thinks when

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I tell her this. I just can't understand a thing like algebra, and I don't see much use for it either, I tell her. I can't get *vested* (that's a Mama reading word, so sometimes if I ream these words back at her she's impressed enough to actually listen), in what X equals, or what Y equals, or whether, in fact (that's my algebra teacher's way of talking, Mr. Soto), X equals Y. I mean, who cares? It's not like they're even real. No Y's strutting their stuff in low slung pants, no X's in short dresses, some unspeakable need to be part of Y.

I tell Mama I just want to paint walls, and she reminds me we're living in Uncle Ray's house, who's only an uncle by *someone else's marriage*. It's not even our house, she says, Why on earth would you paint it? I doubt he'd pay you, and besides, she says, Uncle Ray keeps threatening to take his house back. He's already got one, he doesn't need *this* house, but people who have money can behave this way and there's not a damn thing the rest of us can do about it, Mama says.

I let her go through all that since it's rude to interrupt, then I tell her I don't mean painting houses. I mean painting *walls*, I say, tunnel walls, construction site walls, the outsides of old buildings, sea walls that keep the ocean from washing up onto the road, those sorts of walls. Pretty much anything but houses. I'm a tagger, or anyways I'm *aspiring* (another Mama word) to be one, a graffiti artist. Nalani already is one. Her tag is a giant cursive A, for akamai, which means smart. Nalani's so smart they skipped her a grade in school, put her in my grade, and still she's the smartest in our class. When we graduate she'll probably be the one to do that, aloha-it's-been-wonderful-be-the-best-we-can-be kind of speech. Nobody gives her any *huhu* about being smart, not Nalani. I figure if the guys let me be one too, a tagger, than my tag will be a giant C, for Creamy. It's what they call me, my nickname, Creamy, since I'm a white girl. That's when Nalani's around, and they like her around, so they let me be too. Otherwise they call me haole girl—Get the

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fuck outahere, haole girl! Tagging is mostly a guy thing.

They don't mean anything by it though. We're identified by what we are in my neighborhood. You're a hapa-haole if you're at least part Hawaiian and part something else too, like Chinese; you're a local if you're a lot Hawaiian and some other things too, but not haole; maybe you're a benny, a Filipino; maybe you're a moke, which is a big Samoan and the tita is the big female Samoan. At the bottom of all this is me, pure haole, a white girl. The way I see it, if I could be a tagger I wouldn't have to be *just* a haole girl. I'd be Creamy with a huge, shining, True Blue (blue's my favorite color) C. I'd be somebody.

My mama though is *horrified*, that's what she says. I'm horrified you'd even consider such a thing, Lucy! Public buildings aren't really for the public, she says, You ought to know that, you can bet someone owns them. There's people who own and people who don't. We're the don't type, she adds, that bitter look in her eyes, her mouth squinched down. But that doesn't mean you just go out and deface what people do own. It's illegal, she says. It's not art, it's vandalism.

Nalani does, I whine. I know this is immature, *Nalani does*, but everyone generally admires what Nalani does. And I can pretty well tell that mentioning how beautiful graffiti art is, all those shapes and letters and colors looping and swirling and blending together, the way it changes a dull plain wall into *something*, wouldn't do it for Mama.

If Nalani jumped off the Pali, would you? Mama asks. It's the old 'if somebody jumps' question that's supposed to make you feel lolo for letting another person lead you around, for not *standing up on your own two feet*, which is the other way my mama puts it.

But honestly, if Nalani jumped off the Pali I'd have to believe there's a pretty good reason for it, or that there's something there to catch her, like a big old sloping banyon on the side of the mountain the rest of us can't see, bending its gnarly

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branches, its air-borne roots just for Nalani. She's that way. But I don't say this. I just give Mama a sour look, lets her know how I feel but doesn't get her red faced or coughing, or something that might *tax* her heart. She's told me about the things that could tax her heart, and most of these have me in a starring role. My mama returns to her reading, as if the subject is all pau.

But the subject is not pau, not finished, not for me. Nalani gives me one of her old paint brushes, says she's into spraying now anyway, that *real* taggers spray, and I take that brush, a bucket of water and some blue food coloring I nab from Mama's spice cabinet, I take these down to the Punuluu sea wall. This is not the kind of lava wall that jets into the ocean, the kind you walk out on, spray from the waves shivering each breath, blue sea, blue sky, and you in the center of it, like being in the heart beat of the world. This one's a concrete wall keeps the ocean from rolling up onto the rich peoples lawns. I'm not so lolo to think food coloring and water's going to make anything lasting on this wall. That's the truth of tagging; you make your mark, often by sneaking out into the night or the early morning so no one can see, then it stays there for everyone to see. If they don't want your mark they have to sand blast it. But I can practice, until the day I save up enough money for my own paints, my own True Blue. Then I'll be real. A big, beautiful C.

How I got that name, Creamy, comes from a long time ago. We were little kids, Nalani and me, and our other, almost best friend Cherise. Cherise would rather be Nalani's best friend than mine, but she likes me OK. One day, like I said we were kids, we were trying out some coffee Cherise's mama left hot in the pot before she tore off to work. Her mama works in the bank, and that's an important kind of work. Important enough to leave almost a whole pot of coffee so as not to be late. *Waste*

not, want not, my own mama would say. We're pouring it into thin little cups with these roses painted on, Cherise calls them *demitasse* or some such word, sipping it down with globs of cream and sugar because we're trying to *like* this coffee. We're pretending we're important too.

Cherise is black, but she isn't really, not like black paint or a night without a moon. She *says* she's black, her mama is black, and we're supposed to call her *a* Black. It's a pride thing, she says. On this day the suns reams down on Cherise's lanai, a wavery pattern of it through the monkey pod growing beside, doves are doing their dove sounds, the air's that sharp sweet trade wind air, not the muggy Kona kind—jewel-like is the way my mama describes this air—I think she got it from some book. It's a really *good* morning, and Nalani tells Cherise her skin looks like the coffee we're drinking.

That's the color, she says, Dark not black.

And she gets away with it, mostly because she's Nalani, but also because it's a good morning.

Cherise says to Nalani, Well your skin *is* coffee, with the sugar dumped in! And she giggles and Nalani does too. Everyone likes Nalani, that's why she gets to be sugar.

Nalani stares at me, says I must be the cream then since I'm a haole girl, and we all laugh like it's the most hilarious thing in the world.

That's how it started, Creamy. It's a better name than Lucy, I think, and since I've got that hopeless haole kind of skin anyway, not really like cream, more splotchy and freckly and all kinds of weird marks on it that announce to the world—Hey look, haole skin! I kind of like it OK. When you're kids you can talk this way. We didn't care. We were friends.

These days Cherise is not interested in tagging and she isn't interested in me, either. The guys are all interested in Cherise though, they say she's *hot*. She tries to get Nalani to go places with her where the guys are, older guys, not the geeky ones at

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our school, she says. She tries to get Nalani to go into town with her, Waikiki, where *real* guys hang out, mainland ones and surfers, and some that go to the University. Even *graduate* students, Cherise tells us outside the Hauula IGA, the afternoon sun blasting down, and she's standing with her hands plastered on her hips, light blazing through her hair she's let snake out all wild-like, like some dangerous Medusa. That's what Mama called her, said—That girl's up to no good these days, you watch, one *dangerous Medusa*.

Cherise turns to me, Creamy! she says, only she pronounces it in a way that doesn't make it sound like such a good name, *Creeeemeeeee...*, I bet you don't even know what a graduate student is!

I tell her, I do too! But I don't and they both know it. Cherise laughs and then Nalani laughs too, but not like it's really so hilarious; mean this time, a different sounding Nalani, more of a Cherise-sounding Nalani who's laughing at me.

And I get this kind of tight, burning feeling in my throat like I swallowed lit coal. It hurts enough to cry, only I'm not going to let them see me do that. Instead, I grab Nalani's lahala paint bag that's leaning against the side of the IGA, it's the closest thing to me so I don't even think about it, and I yank out a can of yellow spray paint—Marigold Yellow, not even my favorite color—and I spray her feet, with her blue slippers on. Blue *is* my favorite color, but I wish to God Nalani wasn't wearing it.

She doesn't grab the can away from me, doesn't even call me *bitch* and spray me back, which I would've preferred. Even in the face, I would've preferred being sprayed in the face to what she does instead, because what she does instead makes me the loneliest person in the world, standing there in the broiling Hawaiian sun, in front of the IGA.

Nalani thrusts her bag at me, says, Here! Take them, baby! I'm not into tagging anymore, anyway. She stares coldly at me,

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a hollow, nothing kind of a stare, like someone who doesn't even know me, wouldn't want to know me, then she seizes the bag back again. On second thought, she says, You don't deserve to be a tagger. You're not smart enough. Then Cherise and Nalani loop their arms together, coffee and coffee with sugar, but no cream, and off they go.



There was this time a couple years back, when I asked my mama about my dad. I never asked before because with her head always stuck in a book and her heart so *sensitive*, you don't want to alarm or surprise Mama with any conversation out of the ordinary. What's for dinner? kind of conversation, is mostly what she can take. But I had been bursting with being curious about it for so long, ever since Nalani, who's got a dad that actually lives in her house, asked me about mine. When I told Nalani I didn't have one, she said, shaking her head at me, that wise, tolerating look she gets, Of course you do, you have to. Whether he lives with you or not, somebody had to get your mom *hapai*, and that person's your dad. Ask her! Nalani said.

Mama said she never married him so it didn't really count. She said if they had been married then maybe they would've tried harder. But as it was, she said, he had the kind of manic-depression that became more and more just a constant depression, and my mama couldn't be with him that way, she said, it was too hard. When he was manic he got it in his head he could be somebody else, and when he was depressed you kept wishing he *was* somebody else. It was like living with somebody waiting to die, she told me.

When I think about this now, it's pretty strange that she said that. Because sometimes I feel like *I'm* waiting for my mother's death, not wanting it to come, but figuring it's going

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to anyway, just reach out and grab her one day. I'll come home from school and her books will be there, alphabetically in her bookshelves the way she likes them, but Mama will be gone.

When I asked her where my dad is, she said he left her and me when I was just a baby, and he moved to an apartment in St. Louis. Because he thought St. Louis was in the middle of the country, she said, and that the middle was the place to get lost from the rest. That's what he told her anyhow, my mama said, and she didn't care enough at that point to wonder if it was true. It's what he wanted, she said, to get lost. Hawaii was too small and set apart, so he probably figured a city that announced itself as the Gateway to the West would do it; it wasn't east and it wasn't west, just somewhere in between.

The thing is, my mama told me, one day she was reading a book about Lewis and Clark that had a map of the USA in it, and she noticed that St. Louis wasn't in the middle at all, it was really almost a good two-thirds of the way east. And furthermore, she said, that whole Westward Expansion business, which is what the Gateway Arch monument was about, meant stealing native peoples lands to do it. Think of it like this, Lucy, Mama said, It's as if they were *renting* and you could just take the land back. Only they weren't. It was theirs to begin with.

I called my father a month after asking my mother about him. It took me a while to get up my courage and a while after that to find his number. Some apartment in St. Louis, I told Information. I tried the three numbers they gave me, of guys who had his same name, then I knew I got him on the third try.

I said, kind of weak-voiced, my heart hammering up through my throat, but I was trying to sound casual, Hey, this is Lucy.

And he said, Lucy!

Just like that. I figured he must have thought I was someone else. He didn't even hesitate when he heard my name, like this was a name he hadn't heard for a while, or even that this

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was a name he wasn't sure he *wanted* to hear. And he was the one who named me. After *I Love Lucy*, my mama said, the one person who could make him laugh. Insisted on watching her every day, sprawled out on the couch like a slug on a sidewalk, laughing at a stupid TV show.

He was just too cheerful sounding on the phone, I decided, for a depressed person waiting to die. So I hung up. Anyhow, he left before I could walk, so chances are he doesn't remember me at all. It's ironical, Mama said, one of her reading words and she sounded pretty satisfied about it too, that he walked out before *I* could walk.

But these days I'm wondering if my dad had stayed around, if he could've taught me about guys, about the way they are, about how to *be* with a guy. Then maybe Nalani and Cherise would be friends with me again. The only guy I sort of like even close to the way Cherise and Nalani seem to like guys, is Brandon Nakamoto. I feel a kind of fluttery thing inside me when I'm near him, like a moth got stuck in my stomach, battling my insides the way they whack against a light bulb on a hot summer night, slamming it again and again.

It's a strange kind of feeling that has to do with Brandon, I know this much. Because I feel it even when I stare at the back of him sometimes, his skinny neck and his arm muscles rolling and pumping, kind of jittery but sweet-like, tagging something with his can of spray, concentrating on it like nothing else in the world matters. Brandon is nice to me when the other taggers aren't around, but when they show up he says, Get the fuck outahere, haole girl! so they won't think he was being nice to me.

If I knew more about guys, then maybe I could be with Nalani again, spend the night at her house, talk about the kinds of things girls who like guys talk about, our hair maybe, make-up, which I don't wear but I would if it could help things; it would be like tagging, only on my eyes and lips instead of a

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wall. I could talk with her about *doing the thing*, which are Cherise's words for *getting laid*—and these are the words I heard Nalani use, whispering to Cherise on The Bus yesterday, her hand cupped around Cherise's ear. I heard though, I was right behind them. Even though they pretended I wasn't.



As it turns out it isn't my mother who suddenly dies. She's the one who tells me about the accident on Monday afternoon, I'm just getting home from school and the only thing on my mind is a snack because I didn't get lunch. I don't go into the cafeteria anymore. I figure Cherise and Nalani will be there, and that's a lonely thing, seeing them eating together, and the guys, the taggers saying, Get the fuck outahere, haole girl! How would I have known that today Cherise and Nalani weren't even there?

It came over the news, Mama says, About a half hour ago. She's got the TV on like she does when she isn't reading, when she's resting her brain; That's what TV's good for, she says, letting it all go empty. I'm sucking in the salt smell of the sea blowing through our screens, big nosefuls of it even though we're a couple streets back from the beach, only rich people get to live right by the beach. And then I think I'm hearing it, the rumble and rush of the waves, the in and out breath of the sea, because I don't want to listen to what my mother is telling me.

She's gone, Mama says, Passed away, *make*. Didn't even make it to the hospital. Thrown from the car, and someone else was too, some University student. Not the one driving, Mama says, He's going to make it OK and so will Cherise. I'm sorry, Mama sighs, picking up her book again, flicking the remote to turn off the TV, I know you and Nalani were friends.

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It seems like all of Punaluu comes out for her funeral, and they're making those speeches about her inside the small modern church—One of those reborn Protestant places, my mother said, You're supposed to feel like you can't get to God without stopping there first—wood and glass and cramped and hot. Speeches about how smart and how beautiful she was; what a good citizen and student and friend and daughter and granddaughter and child of God she was; how we may think it is tragic that this life with all its potential was taken away, but the Lord works in mysterious ways, and maybe He wanted one as precious as her for a reason we cannot, are not meant to, understand. Was she saved? the preacher howled, Do not doubt this! Nalani will go on to her greater glory. Those kinds of speeches.

I steal a glance over at Cherise who's sitting with her mother. She's got a sling on one arm and a stiff medical-type collar about her neck. Her face is scratched and puffed up like a blow fish; I can't tell from the accident or her crying. I know Cherise liked Nalani too, maybe she even liked her as much as I liked her. Lots of people are crying, but not me. I can't seem to, even tried to make myself cry by thinking about really awful things, run-over mongoose, their guts strewn about Kamehameha highway, or drowned kittens washing up on the beach. I wanted a kitten, something to hold on to, that would love me without having to consider first if I'm worth it, but Mama said chasing around after a kitten would tax her heart. Imagining one drowning, even this isn't making me cry.

Cherise doesn't look at me. Nobody looks at me, not even when they talk about how much Nalani's friends will miss her. They look at Cherise, but Cherise just stares straight ahead at the empty space over the preacher's head where there's a high angular window, a stab of dusty light poking through, tears tumbling her cheeks like Sacred Falls. We swam at Sacred Falls, Nalani and I, but nobody here knows that. And I'm beginning to wonder if maybe, just maybe, they're not looking at me

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because *I'm* not really here. Maybe I can't cry, can't really *feel* anything about Nalani's dying because I'm dead myself. I'm just some *hologram*, a Mama reading word, an image of me who's not really me at all.

When I'm back home again Mama, who didn't go to the funeral because she felt too tired, slaps down her book on the scratched mahogany end table beside the sofa, says sternly, Lucy, you have to accept that Nalani's in a better place.

My mother's not religious, but she believes in an after-life, she calls it, a heaven-like place that's not necessarily up in the sky, but more like a prairie, she thinks, grassy and free like the prairies used to be. Before people destroyed the prairies, and now they have to cultivate them and re-seed them and import nursery-born butterflies to pollinate them, she said, to make them wild again. The way Mama sees it, death is a kind of going back to the way things were.

I listen to her like I always do, it would be impolite not to, and anyway I wouldn't want to upset her and then maybe her heart gets *taxed*, and suddenly she's out on that prairie with Nalani and I have nobody. That's the way I would usually think. But, though I start out thinking like this, listening politely to my mama, this time I don't really feel these things behind her words. I don't feel the threat of her dying, coming apart every minute she's on this earth, as Mama once put it; Marfans is a connective tissue disease, she explained, everything slowly disconnecting. But I don't feel anything.

I'm going to go paint! I announce, surprising myself about as much as Mama.

She says, For heaven's sake, Lucy, at a time like this? Is it the rebel you want to be, is that it? You can rebel in ways that don't destroy other peoples property, you know. For instance, you can tell me you're never going to get married, since you know that's what I want for you. Now there's a non-destructive form of rebellion.

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I'm never going to get married, I tell her, *And* I'm going to go paint. It's not about destruction, I add. It occurs to me that sounded pretty smart, like something Nalani might have said.

I still don't have the money to buy my own paint though and this is a problem. Because the urge is firing up inside me so strong now I can feel that True Blue C catapulting through my blood, my muscles, my bones, my organs, *connecting* to my heart like life itself. Like I *am* alive, if I can do this. For a minute I consider going to Nalani's house and asking her folks if I can have her lahala bag. Probably they wouldn't want it, and maybe she still has her paints in it. But I couldn't do that, not while they're grieving so fresh. Maybe they don't believe she's on a prairie somewhere. Maybe they don't even believe their own preacher's version, that God had a reason for taking her to His better place. Maybe they can't accept she's in her greater glory. Maybe they're afraid she's just plain gone.

The burning inside me is too strong and I run into my room, which isn't really my room—Mama always sets me straight on this, it's Uncle Ray's room because he can take his house back at any moment—and I grab up Nalani's old brush she gave me from under my bed where I stuck it, as if I have to hide it, as if I have any real paint for it, and I race back out of the house.

I'm not sure where I'm headed, the most visible wall I can find, I'm thinking; if you make your mark on something visible, then you are visible too. I run up Kamehameha highway, the ocean roaring on one side, the traffic roaring and honking in the street, and I feel like I'm hearing all of this in a dream. Because I pay absolutely no attention to it, not even to the car full of locals that swerves almost up on the grass beside me, pretending like they're going to hit me: Hey, haole girl, you like run from me! I pay them no mind.

Suddenly I know where I'm going, and I head off the road at the Crouching Lion Restaurant, toward the rocky path at the

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side of the hill, leading up the bold bare face of the mountain behind. Nalani said folks should never go up into the Koolaus at this place; It's where the Night Marchers come down, she said, Hawaiian ghosts, the army of the dead. She said I didn't know this because I'm not Hawaiian, not even a small part Hawaiian. But now it's Nalani who is dead. And going to places you shouldn't is what tagging is about, at least that's what Brandon Nakamoto said. None of this matters any more.

I kick off my slippers and begin the climb up the stark rocks, feeling their heat and roughness beneath my bare feet, breathing the ocean, the red smell of the iron earth, and somewhere back in the mountains where it's green, the ripeness of this island, guavas, mangoes, papayas, akala and ohelo berries that stain your teeth when you bite into them, sour as old rain. I tug my brush out of the back pocket of my shorts where I jammed it, up on the highest ledge that faces the sea, where the rocks are giant and become a form—a lion, how the restaurant got its name.

Here it is like a wall, a place where everyone can see. I take my brush without any paint, and I move it across the face of the rock in a big swooping motion, a semi-circle, a half of something that's not quite whole, but it's a half that says *something*. For me, C, for Creamy. I feel the motion of the brush under my hand, dipping and swooping, back and forth, becoming its own movement, spinning over the surface of the sun-warmed rock like the world spinning under my feel, real as that. It could be a L, for Lucy, I realize, it makes no difference what the letter is named. I'm thinking *blue*, a fine, new blue, not Cerulean Blue or Midnight Blue or even True Blue. My blue. And above the blue sky, below the blue sea, and here, on this mountain, me.

HP

*"Haole Girl Blue" originally appeared in F Magazine
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