

Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal

Volume 5 | Issue 2

Article 19

January 2006

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Recommended Citation

Colbert, Jaimee Wriston (2006) "Excerpt from the Novel Shark Girls," *Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal*: Vol. 5: Iss. 2, Article 19.

Available at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate/vol5/iss2/19>

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EXCERPT FROM THE NOVEL *SHARK GIRLS*

Jaimee Wriston Colbert

We were herding ducks just a week before it happened, *the tragedy at the seat of our lives*, Willi Beever attacked by the shark. Nuuanu stream, that cold river green, Father, Willi and me (who knows where Robbie was, was he even then becoming the underexposed negative, part of the photo where not enough light gets in, shape rimmed in fuzziness, our shadow sibling?). We're bringing these ducks from Honolulu home to our mother, three little yellow baby ducks and their big white mama duck in a wire mesh duck cage, back seat of the Plymouth, quacking their little duck heads off. Hush up! Willi orders them, demanding little Willi, pretty fair-haired Willi, gets to sit next to them, did she never question then that the world would always listen? The mother duck, alarmed little pebble duck eyes, squawks and squawks.

Up then over the Old Pali Road, around the Windy Corner, cars shaking like the hand of God's playing jacks with them, shak'em up, splat! To this day if you take pork in your car over the Pali at midnight your car will tremble and rock so hard it won't move forward, and it's not the hand of God, it's ghosts—vengeful Hawaiian soldier spirits, you can hear their yelling in the wind, clashing of their wooden spears and clubs, fierce *mano* shark teeth fastened on the ends of these—warriors Kamehameha the Great pushed off the Pali in 1795, Battle of Nuuanu. They're not keen on pork being schlepped, it's *kapu*! But that's another story. Quite a ride back with a car full of ducks, a *commitment*, and Father decides we can't make it all the way out to Kailua after all, over the Pali these quacking ducks, that they need a bit of a dip first, get their clipped little duck wings wet, clipped so they can't fly away. But they can swim! Father said, A chance to be ducks, Father said.

Four of them paddling dizzily about that stream, ecstatic and confused in their sudden freedom, not exactly in a line, not

exactly little soldiers these ducks—what's that expression, have your ducks in a row? No row, these ducks are all over the place, yellow and white feathers twirling and drifting like clouds, little dartings of yellow, here, there, *everywhere!* And the noises they make, never mind the quack quack, more of a sick and throaty squaaaaawk, like we had been trying to murder the things and at long last they've escaped.

And just what the heck Father was thinking, buying those ducks in the first place I'll never know. Did he get it in his head that having a family of ducks in the itty bitty pond he built for our mother off the lanai (a wishing well, he told Jaycee) in our Kailua yard might inspire family tendencies among us, Father, Jaycee, Robbie, Willi and me? Did he think the example they set, sated duck mom and her obedient little ducklings might make it such that Jaycee wouldn't want to slip out to the Base, haole-hula for the hard shaven marines? Their particular mostly vegetarian duck diets might make her want to eat a healthy breakfast, stop guzzling quite so many gin and tonics, become the sober generous housewife only he could dream her to be? Our mother loved Willi best and that's a thing we all understand now, even better than she loved our father. Do ducks prefer one over the next just because she looks more like the mother duck? Loving the mirror image to love yourself? Gazing at me Jaycee would announce: Willi favors me, but you . . . and she'd ponder this a bit, her slender hand resting under that perfectly pointed chin, staring at the knobby little swells of my own stubby knuckles, my ridiculously long and twisted *Marfanish* fingers; You must take after *someone*, Scat, I was there when you were born after all, hah hah hah! Even the tinkling of their laughs were the same, back when Willi still remembered how to laugh. Mine's more horsey, neigh, neigh, though not Father's either. How could it be? Father rarely laughed.

So we're all flapping around in the cold dark water, ducks, Beevers, the muck, slippery rounds of rocks at the bottom, rock surrounds covered with moss, algae, grimy, slimy stuff. These darn ducks are leading us on a wild goose chase! says Father.

Is he making a joke? Willi gets a look in her eyes, little Beaver sister's silvery eyeballing glint she gets in the wake of a joke she would never be the brunt of and she lunges out, grabbing one of the squawking baby ducks by one paddling orange leg, and lifting it upside down out of the black water she whips around, tossing it at me. I see a blur of yellow, the terrified squaaaaawk and before we know it I'm butt down in the cold shallow water, legs splayed, me and the duck, a flutter in my arms.

You look ridiculous! Father exclaims. Get up, Scat, and for heaven's sake hold onto that duckling! We haven't got all day. Why can I not count on you, Scat? I need to be able to depend on *someone*.

I try to do this, I do, try to please my father but the slippery, sloppy, grungy feeling of the moss between my toes on the underwater rocks is so *gross* as I attempt to stand, that down I go again and up goes the duck and my head slides under water for just a second, eyes popping open in the murky green. I see the baby duck feet paddling away from me, fast as they can go. I don't take hold.

Instead I sit there, that slimy rock, and I grab onto the St. Christopher medal hanging by a cheap chain around my neck, close my eyes and think. My mother was outraged when I first started wearing this a couple months ago. It's a fad, Jaycee insisted to my father, I'm sitting right there in the living room as well; She's trying to be *with it*. A Catholic thing, and she's not even Catholic. Oh for crying out loud! Jaycee shrilled, when my father said nothing. Bloody hell, what you probably don't realize, Scat, is medals have to be blessed in order to be *holy as holy*, in order to make any difference at all. Yours is unblessed, so what good can it be? Only Catholic girls get to have their medals blessed.

Thinking about this now I wonder what made my mother so uneasy? Probably that others could believe in it, Catholicism, believe in something beyond themselves. But what did I know? This necklace was one more thing about me that irritated her, that was outside her control.

I clutch the unblessed medal in my tingling wet hand. I know

a *real* blessing: if you go steady with someone you exchange your medal with his and everyone sees his medal around your neck so this is proof that someone likes you. And I also know the St. Christopher story, because Kathy Connely is Catholic and she told me. He was a giant of a man and he made his living ferrying people across a fierce and mighty stream on his huge shoulders so they'd be safe. So one day he carries such a heavy child he thinks he'll fall down into the raging water. But the child tells him he's Jesus and the heaviness is caused by the weight of the world on his shoulders.

Rising slowly out of the water I climb up on the bank, duckless, hopeless, *unblessed*, my father glaring angrily at me. Then his face softens, that distracted look he gets and I am young enough at this point, innocent enough, *naive* enough to believe everything is going to be all right, after all. I offer him my elbow, bleeding from where I skritch'd it against a rock. He stares, first at the blood, then at the ducks drifting gracefully away, all in a row now behind the mother duck, down the Nuuanu stream.

It's OK, Scat, my father says wearily, Don't cry. (I wasn't going to, crying got you nowhere in my family; it was merely viewed as someone's last straw, a final indignity, a trip to the bedroom behind a slammed door for the crier.) Look Scat! he says, leaning down closer to my face, pointing. Those ducks' wings were clipped so they couldn't fly free and will you look at that. There they go anyway, by God! My father lifts up my elbow, dabbing gently at the blood with his own wet hand.



Eight years later and everything changed. A memory from a fourth of July, eight years after *it* happened but still in its wake, its fallout, its renegotiating of the family lines, alliances, who does what, who we could be and with whom now that Willi was . . . who? Hadn't been dubbed Shark Girl yet, still hidden from the eyes of the world in that bed, breasts poking up under the sheet, that shock of blond hair, the incredible, unsmiling face.

She was more beautiful than I, no one ever doubted that she would be. She refused to get up out of that bed and the rest of us—at this point we're talking Father and me, Grandma's moved back to Newwwwwengland, and Jaycee? who knows?—we had long since given up coaxing her, urging her, asking Willi if she'd ever get up. Robbie was gone. I was who was there. Just turned eighteen and in my head I too was mostly gone.

I lied, lied, lied about my whereabouts, to my father who did care and Jaycee who pretended to, who became annoyed, anyway, at the things I did, places I went, people I saw. But I don't think she was really all that bothered; if anything, she was amused at the ways I could disappoint my father, my lies lies lies. *Her* daughter, of course, didn't lie . . . didn't speak, didn't move.

It was 1969 and I was *into it* with relish, gusto, what that year had to offer, *heavy man*, drugs. I hadn't developed my taste, my terrible thirst for alcohol yet but I might've guessed its hovering shadow by how readily I took to dope, a duck to water as they say: grass, hashish, opium, LSD, psilocybin, mescaline, speed, uppers, downers, reds, ludes, bennies, poppers, anything that walked, crawled, flew my way, grew in the ground, grubbed onto my tongue by way of a postage stamp, a blotter, folded into a slip of paper, choked, inhaled, snorted, chewed, stuck in my ear, under my arm, needled under my skin—get ripped, mellow out, *blow your mind*—I did it all. Everything except heroin; I had a few principles, after all. Getting high meant not having to think. Not having to try and make sense of things.

So here's the memory. My last summer in Hawai'i before escaping to the West Coast for college and I had a friend. Foxy hapa-haole Meena—one half haole and the other half all kinds of good local stuff, paints your skin that crisp sun-brown, Hawaiian, Chinese, Filipino, etc. etc. All the guys wanted to *ball* her but she was precious and shy and maybe more into chicks anyway. Meena had a much older brother called Rake, for a reason that was never completely clear to me. Rake was a *beautiful cat*, as we said of sexy looking guys then, that olivey-smooth skin, black eyes, shoulder length squiggle of curls, his

rakish smile—this the name? He was also a dealer, a *pusher*, we all knew it and this made him the more visible to me. His up front job building surf boards and catamaran sailboats for a shop off Kailua road called Wind and Fin.

Too old for me, my father proclaimed when one day I caught Rake's eye, smoking dope with his sister on their lanai in my bikini, baby oil slathered skin, legs long and pink as two wet tongues. (Marfans was the still uncertain future, whether I had it or not, but by then I had learned to use my height, gangly arms, legs, general gawkiness to its bone-thin, braless, hippie bare advantage. If my heart *was* in trouble, telltale swelling at the root of the aorta, I was dutifully stunting its further engorgement, my near-religious drug intake.) Rake invited me to a concert, the Jefferson Airplane in the Diamond Head Crater, and this time, bad choice, I didn't lie when I asked my father if I could go.

The camping trip to the Mokulua Islands off the Lanikai coast for the fourth of July was to have been Meena, Rake and me, and so I told my parents I was spending the July 3rd night with Meena. I believed this to be almost true, a half lie, you wouldn't fry quite so hot and if they caught you, you could lie yourself down a different path, plans suddenly changed, a victim in their wake. But when I arrived at their house, my packed hippie-bag, my mother called it, a conglomeration of colorful threads woven from some ancient and well-trod carpet, Meena suddenly couldn't go. And she couldn't look me in the eye telling me this so I knew her brother had got to her in some way, a kind of bribe maybe, baseball cards or a rare shell. Meena had this obsession collecting stuff; back then we never questioned these things, wondered about them, it was just something she *got off on*.

But I saw through it. Rake wanted to get me out on those islands, at night, alone. Loyalties are fickle at just eighteen, easily purchased. I merely nodded at Meena, said yes, I could go. I climbed into Rake's flowers and peace sign decaled van (the war in Vietnam escalating but was I thinking of anything larger than my own heart-hammering night ahead, riding in his van?), filled

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with the food he packed, gear for the boat he borrowed from Wind and Fin, one *he* built, he informed me, that *beautiful cat* grin and off we went. At the least I was anticipating a good high; Rake had some orange sunshine acid. But I knew he had other ideas and this excited me, frightened me, made me ache, jagged breath, unsure. I was more at home with the drugs of the sixties than sex, got stoned way more than I got laid, but I was willing to try anything that would drive me further from my family, release me from the chains of my reassigned future, for however long. Vietnam War. A man on the moon. Equal Rights. Civil Rights. Black Panther Party. Altamonte. The larger, messier world. The Beaver that was left. I was ready.

We sailed out to the bigger island, a whale's hump in the near-dark, purpling sky, slap slap of the water against the boat, slap slap of my heart beat; a bird preserve Rake told me, disturbing the terns and boobies, the *iwa* birds as we dragged the catamaran up onto the sand, all rising in a shadowy bird cloud above us. Frigates, *man-of-war birds*, I stared at his sharp brown shoulders in the dying light, sinewy, hard, shuttling the supplies from the catamaran then spreading a lauhala mat on the sand. It was almost night. There were no other humans nor would there be, on this little rock island. I drummed in a breath, slunk down on the mat and Rake passed me a joint then the orange acid tab, psychedelic chaser.

He lit the fire, greasing up our hamburgers and dumping our canned corn into a rickety handled pan, then suggested I take a swim. I knew what he was getting at. And I wanted to do this for him, I really did, slither out of my clothes like some hippie sea goddess, uninhibited (*Are you experienced!*), dive into the ocean a thrillingly sensual, naked arch so he could stare at me, so he would want me. But this was the *ocean*. Swimming just after the sun went down! We knew what was out there, my family and me, if nobody else remembered. I hesitated, and Rake must've thought it was the naked thing. He shrugged, Did you bring a bathing suit? I could hear the letdown in those words.

Well of course I did, this was to have been a camping trip

after all, but I shook my head.

He shrugged again, said our meal would be ready soon. *I know what's in that water.*

After dinner I was reeling, acid kicked in, stars burst out, night air steaming of salt and wind, sounds of the dark the birds the roiling waves, things immense. The roof of my mouth tingled and Rake was staring hard at me, giving me the up and down and all over, and what I wanted to do was please him, *belong* to him make him *dig* me, glad he went to whatever trouble, whatever deception to get me out here, away from his sister, away from the world for this night anyway. Tomorrow the fourth, fireworks, a celebration. I needed to believe.

Will you swim right beside me if I go in? I asked hoarsely, My sister, you know?

He nodded, though who knows if he did know, most in Hawai'i had forgotten, had stopped caring. Only when the first article suddenly appeared, late seventies or thereabouts, proclaiming *Shark Girl!* some sort of miracle! did some in Hawai'i remember her, claim her as theirs.

Slowly, fingers shaking, working loose the buttons of my shirt, getting only halfway before his fingers were there too, long and quick and certain. And these fingers were unbuttoning my pants, inside my pants, my underpants, me, and I knew I wouldn't have to worry about the swimming part.

He lay me down on the lauhala mat, shifting of the cool sand under us. I could see the shadow of his penis coming down on me, a *kiawe* branch as it poked about between my legs, searching for the *enter*—we were both pretty high and maybe our sonar for this thing was off. For a moment I thought of begging him to stop, sudden panic, choke of fear, what the hell am I doing! And then he's in me and it doesn't hurt and I'm being BALLED, SCREWED, MADE LOVE TO, FUCKED, FUCKING, FUCK! Loving the sound of this word in my brain, rattling about in there like something with teeth, something that could tear through those chains binding me to my family, chew up the metal like masticating nails, spit out the shavings and I'd be

free of this, *the tragedy at the seat of our lives*.

OK, so here comes the bottom line. Honest to God I actually thought this, high out of my skull on LSD, Rake lurching about inside me: I could do what Willi couldn't, stunning Willi, once believed likely to *husband* best, languishing in her bed and I am here GETTING LAID on the beach. When he was done he rolled off of me, sweaty heap, musky sea-smelling air playing down the long cool wet of my body. I shivered, leaned over and stroked the coarse curls on his head, his chest, asked him, holding my breath for his answer, did he come in me? I was thinking even if he did, if I had to have a baby from this it would be OK; I would *experience* it. Acid will do that to you. Makes you damn crazy sometimes.

Rake reached over and scrabbled the top of my head like I was a pet, his child, almost ten years younger than him, after all. Wow babe, he said, You couldn't tell? Wasn't hard enough, the orange sunshine, yeah? Felt good though, huh? You one foxy chick, Scat, he said earnestly, positioning my head into the crook of his shoulder, his delightfully funk-smelling arm pit. We lay like that for the rest of the evening, sleeping occasionally, staring at the billions of stars doing their pulsing LSD-induced star dances, birds like dark angels rising off the rocks here and there, a twit a whoop a sigh; tomorrow was the fourth of July and (foxy chick!) I'd been FUCKED, FUCKED, FUCKED, those hot arms, not another soul for miles, black forever ocean, shush and hush of its waves sweeping then retreating from the shore, our shore. Or so it seemed. Forever was longer in those days, and still with some hope.

I *went with* Rake for the rest of the summer, became with his diligent and regular instruction as nimble in sex as I was with drugs. Lied to my parents for a while about it, then quit lying. What could they do? I was already mostly gone. Wrote him long rambling letters when I went off to college which he rarely answered, nights up on bennies, revelational soul searching naked before him on a tangle of words. Sometimes I'd get back a How are you? I am cool. What you doing? This is what

I'm doing, response, nothing personal, nothing heartfelt. But imagining he might have loved me, that he *did* once love me, having to eventually accept that he would love someone else, that he was loving someone else, making love to someone else. Rake, free spirit of the islands, the times, and I craved that in him. How it ached to finally understand something of myself, not being able to *be* that. A few more years I'd be lost to the bottle, staggered days, nights, one drunk to the next, the dizzying blindness, having to wake up occasionally to a dead black sight then collapse into the next needful drunk. Last summer in Hawai'i, summer of my eighteenth year, the closest I've come yet to something called love.



There are other moments, bits and pieces of memory that float suddenly back the way a dream does, unanchored. Willi before *it* happened, my principle playmate, maybe my only friend. Willi assuming every gift I received into her world, assuming *my* world, my things, thoughts, dreams, who I am as her older sister, to be her world. The Betty Crocker bake set given to me by some auntie, some Christmas. Play oven with the shiny black plastic knobs, painted paper wheels for the stove. The message: Robbie with his cowboys and Indians, who would have guessed he'd become the Indian and disappear? Willi, her baby dolls, the children she would never have. And me? Here is where you belong, this gift spoke, Behind a stove is where you can hope to end up.

Willi, mixing up the grainy floaty white contents from the little bake set packaged play foods—You *can* eat it! the words announced, not that you should eat it or that it's good for you to eat or even that it tastes good. It tastes like glue, gloppy pasty stuff, the consistency of poi with the flavor of chemically sugared paste and I'm shaking my head, *No way!* And Willi, pouting little pink bud lips, teary blue eyes, running (still those two perfect legs!) to tell Jaycee. Play nicely with your sister! Jaycee demands,

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If she fixed you something to eat, you eat it for heaven's sake. Have you no manners? Honestly, Scat, can't you see I've got one of my headaches? Bloody hell. *Do* something, for crying out loud! So of course I do it, so my mother will love me, so her headache will go away, I eat that soggy, gloppy mess to keep Willi quiet, to keep us at peace. I would have eaten my own hand for her.

My father, pulling me into the bathroom with him after closing tight the living room louvers so the Connelys across the street can't see, can't hear, shutting the door on Jaycee in one of her frantic, shattering moods, who had grabbed up eight year old Willi, maybe a month before the shark? wheeling with her around the living room, singing at the top of her voice—*I'm going to wash that man right out of my hair!* over and over, higher and shriller, and I could hear Willi's laughter, her delight to be the one included in this frenzy, the one *always* included in our mother's frenzies, our father called them. And Father, who wouldn't speak of them other than this label—*your* mother's frenzies, as if they were something every mother had, just that these in particular happened to be Jaycee's—calmly removing his tie, taking an aloha shirt off the hook inside the bathroom closet where he's carefully hung it, turning delicately away from me to put it on, his bare back, long and tangled web of freckles on such a loose sagging frame. *Where is the Hawaiian in this?* I'm sitting on the closed toilet seat, peering down at my feet, jerky ridiculous toes, the nails that need clipping. Whoever bothered to clip my nails? Tell me to clip my nails? His back still turned, raw neck, the high wobbly sound of my mother's laughter, higher still Willi's squeals. I can see them even now, my mother holding Willi under her arms and she's swinging her, around and around they wheel, that fast dizzying way makes nothing else in the world matter, spun moments like your own personal wind blowing about you and everything else disappears, these wholly consumed seconds. He asked me: Scat, has your mother explained to you about the facts of life?

I nodded solemnly. After all, wasn't Jaycee always explaining one fact of life or another to me, what I can expect from my

future, what I could expect from her?

Well, he said, hesitating, turning around to gaze at me, that sad, slight smile, the weariness of his too colorful aloha shirt, orange spiky birds of paradise mingling with the lime green finches, wings spread wide like they were flying for the moon maybe, the stars, anywhere just get them out of this shirt! Well, Father began again, The reason I ask, it's dangerous out there in the world. Silvery tinkle of splintering glass, she's raging again, throwing things; earlier Father had brought her back from the Base, hauled her out of the Plymouth, kicking and screaming into the house. I imagine Willi face down on the couch now, plugging her ears with her fingers the way she does if I am not there to rescue her, ferret her away into our room behind our closed locked door. My father sighs, You just never know, Scat, you never know what you're going to get, what hand you'll be dealt. I've tried, God knows, to give you kids a regular childhood. But I don't even know who I am anymore. You understand me? Caution is in order here. You can't always know.



And this. Why, despite everything, I so desperately yearned for, would die for, still do, still would God help me, my mother, Jaycee Anderson Beever. I'm fifteen, sullen and apart. My grandmother's going back to Newwwengland and it wasn't a happy day for any of us. It was a giving up, her leaving, giving up on Willi's recovering, giving up on my mother and my grandmother ever being able to share a life again. Recently we had learned that my grandfather, whom I never knew, had finally died. This too a silence in our house. Over the years the most I picked up, Jaycee's slurred and struggled words when she'd been drinking too much: Got off the bus from third grade, the story would begin, tears drenching her cheeks, Mother always met me. This time she wasn't there. Ambulance lights in our driveway, I run into our house and everything's broken, turned upside down, such a mess like some furious storm battered through.

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We stood there like soldiers my mother and me, either side of the door, not touching you see while they wheeled him out, his hands, arms, shoulders bound in white like they've cemented him, or maybe he's a mummy—I remember thinking that, what did I know?—swathed in bandages. The last time I saw him. My father. *In an institution!* this last part always whispered.

Keep it to yourselves, our own father would admonish us; Nothing you've heard goes outside these walls!

Shame in this, these family secrets, we learned it well. Who knows if our grandmother missed her husband? She never spoke of it. Who knows if she ever visited him after he was institutionalized? Apparently even Jaycee was not allowed to speak it. Her father a silence and now he's gone. Once, years ago, I asked her what he was like and Jaycee got that faraway look, eyes focused somewhere inside, not at me, not at whatever her life had become. Well, Jaycee said, My father was very, very . . . compelling, but difficult, of course, terribly difficult. . . . She could have been talking about herself. We call our Hawai'i State Hospital (*mental* hospital Robbie said, almost got his mouth washed out with soap), we call it the *pupule house*, crazy people's hospital.

My grandmother wasn't well and was afraid to make the trip back to Newwwengland. Maybe more afraid not to. She had gained a lot of weight despite the gourmet jello diet she survived these past five years. Her limbs were swollen and immovable with *the arthritis*, she called it. Perhaps she was grieving her husband too, whatever small window of possibility she might've kept cracked open, now shut. Who would know? Gone so many years, might there yet have been hope? Brain sick! my mother shrieked once, one of her frenzies, gin bottle pitched against the dining room wall; Brain sick brain sick brain sick! That's what they said about him and bloody hell! nobody even questioned it.

How much denial can we bear? How drunk must we get to silence the silence?

My father was on the mainland, Robbie already gone and Willi, of course, in bed. So it was I who was forced to accompany

them to the airport instead of who knows what I would've rather been doing, just about anything. And of course I let my mother know this. Bloody hell! Jaycee snapped, Your own grandmother and God knows if you'll ever see her again. You can act decent for once, Scat, it's about The Family.

I hung back from them at the airport, dragging Grandma's suitcase behind, embarrassed by them, the old woman in her drab grey NeeeeewwEngland coat and matching hat, despite (to spite?) the grand and sunny tropical afternoon, her swollen, lunging gait; Jaycee, her arm held gallantly out so her mother could clutch onto it, all made up and dressed in a white linen suit like this was some sort of occasion. All the Other Mothers at the airport with their local families, aloha wear, slippers and smiles. My mother in her painted scarlet lips, her *haole* perfumy airs.

Where she'd be leaving from was part of the old airport, the new one still in the process of being built, open air decks and steps that led down to the tarmac, more steps leading up into the planes. Grandma was concerned about the steps, kept saying she would fall, she just knew she would fall. We sat on a bench in the yellow sunlight, breezy trade winds, sky the blue of the sea and the heady scent of pikake from the nearby lei stands. Hibiscus in the planters behind us, royal reds and yellow.

My mother dug her spiky painted fingernails into her lauhala bag, emerging with two plastic lei bags, an orchid lei for me to give to my grandmother and a red carnation from Jaycee. I rose up off the bench where I was crunched as far from them as I could get, placed the lavender lei around my grandmother's meaty neck, knocking to the side her little old lady's pill box hat in the process. I kissed her rouged cheek whispering the requisite *Aloha*, and slunk back down to the other end of the bench, eying the people around us to see who saw, who I would care if they saw.

Then it was Jaycee's turn. She fussed with Grandma's little grey hat first, righting it, clucking gently like Grandma was a child who had somehow managed to mess herself, pinning it into place, then she smoothed out Grandma's crinkly foil-colored

curls beneath the hat. Such love at times in those fingertips, that patient, consuming care. She really was capable of this, you could see it, this caring, the heartbreaking gentleness—how I hungered for its touch! Grandma whimpered a bit, murmured something about the steps, she was scared of those steps. I watched from where I sat, scowling down into myself, and I felt a lump of something so needful, so *wanting* rise up in my throat.

When she put the carnation lei around my grandmother's neck, gently placing it on Grandma's stooped and fleshy shoulders, Jaycee kissed her mother on her mother's mouth then held onto her, not letting go. Her mother, my grandmother, those blue clawed hands, held on back. Jaycee rocking them both, humming a bit; I could hear her whispering to Grandma, her tender voice, the voice that really must believe, after all, in *some* sort of redemption, telling her everything was going to be OK. Everything was going to be just fine.