

## My House the Atoll

The sunrise on the other side of the fingerprint-smudged window broke into my view with its musty, tainted rays. Although I couldn't see it through the glass, I knew the light was pouring onto the mountain grass like a starburst. I counted the cows we passed—they were one of the only easy things to see through the haze.

“Kaholo,” said my brother.

I continued staring out the window: *Four*, I counted.

“You pay better attention than this when you're at work, lōlō,” he added, shoving my head to get me to look at him. “Lōlō, you listening? You better not lose your job, they'll have a Haole in there to take your place before you can say ‘colonize.’ Don't mess this up.” Then he went back to scanning the horizon, and I went back to counting cows.

I'm Kaholo, I'm seventeen, I work for Volcano National Park in my homeland of Big Island, Hawai'i, and this is an essay I have to write for school. Miss Okulani, you told me to write the truth. To write what concerns me. I think, if I'm honest, I'm most concerned about my worry, and I'm most worried about my concern, and I wonder if either will ever come to anything in real life. This essay, more than just an assignment you told me to do, is my attempt at understanding my own thoughts.

My ohana's not special. At least, we're no different than any other. My brother Aka and I were raised under the guidance of both our parents and our grandparents, and also the nosy neighbors and church members. We learned the legends, the words, the phrases, the ideas. We learned to swim before we learned to walk. We like Spam, and we

don't turn up our noses at any food that finds its way to our table. Our father trained us to keep our heads down, our mouths shut, and our hands busy. And outside the odd interaction, we avoid white people. No one in my family has ever married a Haole. You don't mind that I use that word for them, right? Everyone does. I have one cousin who owns an espresso machine, but that's as close as any of us come to the culture of the white people.

But now that I think of it, maybe *I'm* the one who comes the closest to their culture. Every afternoon for the past two years, Aka, the cousins, or anyone with an open seat or truck-bed has driven me to work at Volcano Park. I know the only reason I have my job is because I'm a native. Sometimes being the minority has its privileges, I guess. Sometimes. And yet the managers thought they couldn't put me in control of something as valuable and complicated as a cash register. They didn't even give me the math test; they just immediately handed me a trash picker and a safety vest and pushed me out the back door before anyone could see the mud and red dirt plastered all over me from my ride in the pickup. I'm bad for the business side of things, I guess. But I'm good at cleaning up after Haoles, so they keep me around.

And I don't mind it, really. The work, I mean. Volcano Park lives inside my head, in a way. My lungs are used to the altitude; if the hair of my arms does raise up at the cold, mountain air, I don't notice it; and I'm small and quick on my feet. *Kaholo*: light-footed. Funny, right?

Anyway, all things considered, I enjoy my job. I enjoy the view, I like being outside rain or shine, and I especially like bringing home extra money.

But like I said— I have concerns, and I have worries.

You see, I don't personally *love* the white people, but I don't hate them either— especially not as much as my family does. What I hate is the *way* they are, if that makes sense. I mean, I hate the way they walk, for example. It's not even like a normal way to walk— it's like a possessive saunter, which I didn't even know was possible to do. It's like when they walk, they think *they're* the ones blazing the trail under their feet, a trail which has already been cut down for their convenience for years.

And their clothes. I hate their clothes, how they either dress like they're going to the gym or like they plan on going to a tourist-trap luau after a nice hike across sacred land. They remind me of the colorful lizards that are all over the islands— generally harmless but present enough to be a nuisance.

But what I hate the most, what keeps me awake at night, turning over and over in my bed, making Aka grumble and cuss at me as the springs of my mattress squeak, are the footprints.

Footprints: they're like thumbprints, but more arrogant. I find them everywhere in Volcano Park. Everyday, I stare at the thousands of impressions made by their shoes in the volcanic soil. This print here is made up of close-knit hourglass shapes— someone with those white-people strap sandals, which they wear with socks for some reason. Those prints there are tiny— probably made by a toddler, a tiny creature with just as much power as an adult to smush the earth farther down into itself.

So I guess I don't really have a problem with white people— I have a problem with their feet. But I never complain about the footprints to anyone. I can't complain, or I would lose my job. The customers' feet are always right, too, ya?

But it does upset me. I look at the thousands of imprints in the dirt, along the rocks, among the plants, and I remember sitting in my grandparents' living room, listening to Pa Kupuna tell me the legend of how the islands and the whole earth were created by the moon and sun; how the ocean came into being and washed into its place; and how the anger of the gods, broiling beneath the surface like soup left on the stove for too long, caused the volcanoes to rise out of the sea. As I make my rounds, picking up garbage, I think of Pele— the goddess of the volcano— and how her anger bubbles and sloshes down the mountainsides when she's upset. Her anger would look so beautiful if it wasn't so deadly. Mostly though, I think of how Pa Kupuna said that one day, the islands will return to the sea from whence they came, and I think of that a lot as I follow my trash route. Picking up little kid trinkets and plastic lids that've popped off tourists' sunscreen bottles, I can't help but also look at the footprints that wear down the trails over time, and I swear— everyday the top of the island seems a little bit closer to the ocean, just as Pa Kupuna predicted.

There was one day when I stooped to pick up the sixteenth cigarette on my trail, and my butt accidentally blocked the way of this white family trying to walk past me. I put my head down and stepped out of the way, but I didn't apologize (I was taught to keep my mouth shut). The white family paid me no mind, except for the little girl. She was probably like three years old, cause her head was a third of the size of her body, and

she had on a pair of those jelly sandals that light up when she walks. She looked up at me.

The eyes of white people always startle me. What right do they have to have eyes the color of the sea, or the open sky? They kill the coral with their name-brand sunscreens and then they harness the blues and greens of the oceans to put in their eyes.

Anyway, the girl looked up at me with her stolen-blue eyes and blinked— and then, instantly, she seemed to forget me, and hopped away, jumping from one rock step to the next.

*Hop. Light.*

*Hop. Light.*

*Hop. Light.*

And in that moment, I could imagine it: Pa Kupuna stretched out in his chair, his cancer-discolored skin bronzing in the sun as his chair floats across the ocean to another island, if another island exists at that point; I imagined Aka, cussing with every word in the book and grappling for something to float on; I imagined that cute wahini from my church— the girl who never says a word— swimming to my open arms as we both go down into the wild blackness of the ocean depths. Imagine the suction of an entire nation being swallowed by the sea— the creation story in reverse: Pele, the goddess who gave birth to these lands, finally gives in to the centuries upon centuries of footsteps, groaning in pain as she returns to the depths with every bit of her body, taking all of us with her and leaving behind nothing but a torrent of bubbles and socks that have been ripped off our feet by the undercurrents. A de-creation story.

And the devil, in this story? A toddler in light-up, jelly sandals.

Last night after work, I climbed into the truck, all my worries outnumbering the reassurances I could come up with for them.

“You get your check?” Aka asked, and I nodded. He pulled away from the visitor center and asked, “You talk to anybody?”

Usually I would’ve just shaken my head, but something about my vision of the island sinking, had untangled my tongue: “I never talk to anybody,” I replied.

Aka started a little at the sound of my voice, but he nodded and replied, “Good. That’s good, bruddah. Keep ya mouth shut and everything stay good.”

I wanted to look at my brother after he said that. I wanted him to let me look at him, into his eyes that he gets from Ma Kupuna. I wanted to ask him so many questions that I thought he must have the answers to, because he’s older than me: Why are white people treated as so important to the islands if so many of us hate them? Aren’t there any other ways for the islanders to make a living, other than handing over the trees and the fields and the cliffs and the coral and the whales and the lizards and the sunshine? Where will the white people be when the abyss comes to eat us? Are we *all* going to sink, or will help come for the Haoles?

I wanted to ask all these things of Aka, but I didn’t. I kept my head down. I kept my mouth shut. I kept my hands busy, pulling at the fraying threads of my jeans with my fingers. Looking at them, I realize I’ve been so distracted with work and homework and the idea of our imminent plunge into the sea, I’ve forgotten to keep my nails trimmed.

I thrum my fingers on top of that door panel thing that all cars have on the inside. As Aka drives us home, I don't try to count cows. They'll be in their barns by now. I wonder if they know they're gonna drown with the rest of us. If they knew, would they care enough to worry, as I do?

Well, cows, if you *are* worried: keep ya mouth shut. And everything stay good.