

If You Want to View Paradise

by Drew Palmore, '02

Cane Fire

When the sugar cane burned a thick pillar of black smoke twisted and grew up from the fields. The beanstalk of cloud was seen from anywhere on the island and for an afternoon everyone stopped their chores, their cars, their machines to exhale at the desecrating monster. The fire lifted soil, plant debris, worker's gloves and t-shirts forgotten in the fields, insects and rats, children forgotten in the fields, all charred to ash, into the air, stirred it up and threw it back to earth to be interpreted by a more creative voodoo. Cane ash cycloned up in the pillar and blew onto nearby communities with the tradewinds. Curled black ash rained down on my brother and me playing basketball in the driveway. The ash, light, tossed in the wind, collected curled in corners like loose pubic hair.

The farmers burned the cane purposefully. They followed the flame, directing it to burn row after row. Late into the night they followed the fire in a semi-circle on the upwind side wearing Hula Bowl t-shirts around their faces like bandits to filter the smoke. Train robbers trying to control the steam locomotive with shovels. Trains have a tendency to run away. The fire husked the cane for them and though it burned a portion of the precious sugar it also burned the glass hairs along the stalk that itched skin and throats for days.

The cane fields spread in rows like radio waves echoing out from the base of the Waianai mountain range. On these mountains, closer the peaks at the topmost corner, was a preserve, a deathbed for the last pristine area on the island. Here the rarities mingled in an elite cocktail party for the terminally ill. The Ohia Lehua rooted shallow on the cliffsides, its wood trunk dry like beach wood and its blossoms a blood red exploding out like firecrackers from light green dime shaped leaves. Ala ala wai nui crawled out of holes in boulders. It is called a succulent, its leaves absorb water and are thick and peach fuzzed for it. It is strong enough to break rocks but can not conquer a field of pili grass. The Manono's leaves come out two at a time, opposite each other on the same node. They look like cho cho lips, fat lips, puckering up. They are not plants that grow together supporting and encouraging one another to grow. The rarities grow in their own little niches and their loneliness make them beautiful.

Sometimes the cane flame isn't so controlled and the fire travels through the cane roots, underground, into the preserve. The pagers of military firefighters and resource managers buzz as chopper blades revolve faster and faster.

Today Ulu is on top of the mountain. She had a last name but the overwhelming gourd shape of her first seemed to capture whatever substance the name had and stored it away. She has a Safeway plastic bag in her cross-legged lap with lunch: a pound bag of poi, half-pound of dried aku, and capri-sun luau punch. She has the weed-wacker harness still strapped across her chest, across the glittery pink hibiscus design on her skin tight yellow top. It says "North Shore Girlz" under the flower in bubbly cursive. Her hair is pulled back painfully tight in a bun allowing no strand freedom in the windy heights. There's a slight tint of makeup on her cheeks, eyes delicately shadowed, lips vibrantly glossed. That's the top half. On the bottom thick canvas cargo fatigues are caked in mud and grass shrapnel. Leather Gore-tex hiking boots are laced painstakingly all the way up her ankles. Her pager buzzes and she notices the smoke creeping eerily close to her mountain.

(Sweet Sweet) Progress

Progress engages in the production of high quality corners. The sharper the better. The tight intersection of two lines signaling a definite change in direction. Things get lost in corners, sometimes purposefully tucked away for later, sometime by accident, blown there by the tradewinds.

They are the people born of sugar. It brought them here to the corner of the island and in turn they make sweetness for the world in teaspoon sized packets. Their skin is the color of molasses baked in by twelve hour bouts in the Haleiwa sun. Their skin is thick, scarred like tapa by the cane's bladed leaves. Their skin smells of sugared smoke from the harvest's fire. As the cane was washed the Chinese arrived, 46,000 in all. It was chopped into small bite-sized bits by revolving knives and the 180,000 Japanese came in large overcrowded boats. The chopped bits were crushed by tremendous grooved rolling mills three times over, the first for the Filipinos, the second for the Portuguese, and third for the Puerto Ricans, all 66,000 living in their respective corners of the plantation.

The cane is planted in rows and grows four two twelve feet. I imagine the laborer's sons must have run through the rows at dusk playing hide and seek. Not much of a challenge for a hider because the rows ran so high and were planted so close together they made walls that separated children. It is easy to hide in consistency. The repetition of the stalks must have been dizzying running so quickly through them. The motion of the stalks must have reversed direction as their frequency was surpassed like the wheels of a tire that appear to be moving slowly in the opposite direction. The laborer's son must have hid himself too well and died there trapped in the cane. So much sameness there in the sugar. The sugar breeds sameness and kills with it, leaving children like silk-screened t-shirts to be burned with yesterday's trends. Can't you taste it there on the tip of your tongue? The drug of sugar, the drug of happy sweet utopia. It's paradise's drug. Hide your bitterness in our cultural sugar. This is our shared history. Shower your face in the waterfall of her hair and smell only the fragrance of woman. At the bottom of the mountain the rows are the same.

Druthers

I thought of making him a black man. Having hands that could grip the moon, pluck it from the early evening sky and bring it down for a bite of heaven. Lips heavy with raw red meat that stretch ear to ear like on faces made of play dough.

Eyes sunk deep in crimson caves, a workman's eyes shaded from the sun that peer out passionately with the width of ripe dates. The presence of an oversized jaw, cheekbones jutting out, the foundations of a man, visible from the outside. The height, eagle-like limbs, the lean ebony muscle that made Othello king of the Moors. To have skin saturated with history as opposed to vaguely tinted and reeking of hesitation. I thought of tearing out his tongue. Finally an excuse not to say a word, an excuse for silence. Virtue doesn't matter, it's the way we talk, how well we converse that decides compatibility and chemistry. She looks at his eyes, imagines a heavier meaning in them as though voices murmur from behind marble brown bars. She has to watch his face now for expression, notice his features, and he can place a kiss in lieu of a verbal thank you.

I thought of blurring the edges. Wearing glasses and appearing more intelligent. Allowing myself a Du Boisian double consciousness, the dichotomy between the abstract and the real. Perhaps this way I could see his characters as myself, I could live through my own creations. My pen, like the pillar, would burn a path through worlds and lay it bare for my own hero. Does a writer write characters that echo his own experience or does he write what he hopes to be? Perhaps a little of both. After the fires die away may he resurrect himself, choosing either the mountain or the field? Bambi's mother was shot on the meadow. Ted Kazinski lived in a cabin on the mountain.

In creating a new me the first decision is whether . . . The character may go either of two directions . . . I can let him develop in the fields of sameness, providing on the outset someone to confide in, relate to, the workingman-everyman. Or, I can water him on the mount of the unique, cultivate a new leader, a new inspiration. In the same way I choose between a common history or the creation of a whole new world. With a history readers find their bearings in a shared past. With a created world bearings are found in common experience, common emotion, made evident in a foreign land.

I take the bus down to the Chinatown meatmarket to buy the muscle for a new me. Flesh hangs by the ankles, the undipped weakness, skinned and roasted. The butcher with his heavy oxidizing knife swinging overhead through bone and marrow. He passes me two pounds of duck in a plastic bag.

Progress (Continued)

Animals die in nature preserves. If you're a conservationist all you need is a two day class to get a rifle license. You can start shooting things that afternoon. Pristine areas are never one hundred percent pristine. There are threats to the rarities. Tiger claw passion vines that spiral up one hundred year old trees. They have claws grasping out of nodes along their length that grips the bark. They take the trees down. Waiwi, the sweet tasting strawberry guava, poisons the soil so only their kind can proliferate. Its bark peels off like paper and sheds often so the native mosses can't grow on it and share the rain. Wild pigs make mud pools that make erosion and attract malaria bearing flies that make birds dead. White tailed axle deer trample the undergrowth with razor sharp hooves. The invaders came off missionary boats to a colony of weakened rarities. They ran up through the rows of cane like reversed sunshine and extinguished.

Evolution made the rarities on the preserve. Seeds and insects, nestled in the feathers of sea faring birds, the first discoverers of these islands, held tight in the soil. The isolation weakened them. Birds grew picky and kissed only the nectars of the flowers they themselves had brought over. Insects and plants, drunk on paradisaical sugar, forgot how to defend themselves. Survival on this Galapagos hinged on the compatibility of the rarities. If we admit that Darwinian evolution created the island's uniqueness then why can't we let evolution destroy it? The hunters intervene with double barrel buck shots for the sake of the underdog. There is something in the uniqueness, in weakness that humans wish to hold on to, are unwilling to let die.

The animal rights people stopped letting hunters snare the deer or shoot them from helicopters. The hunters do it for free, for the meat that they put in fifty gallon igloo coolers, the kind for Sunday beach potlucks, or strap them like Jesus to the hoods of big trucks.

Presence

I told someone once that she could be anyone she wanted to be one night when her hand was caught in a social box. "It's not that easy," she said. "When you read a book or watch a movie don't you want to be them?" "I want their lives but I don't want to be them."

I asked Kevin once, "If you talk slower do you think you could be a nicer person?" "What the hell are you talking about?" "You know, wouldn't you have more time to plan out what you're going to say if you talked slower?" "So you want me to talk slower?" "No, I saying in general." "So we should all talk slower?" "No, not necessarily, I'm just wondering if it would prevent us from saying stupid mean things." "Maybe." "Like, for example, Shaleigh and Mel both talk slowly and they're both really nice." "Shaleigh doesn't talk slowly, she talks softly and Mel isn't that nice all the time."

Aftermath

On a hairpin turn on the Old Trading Trail a tree had fallen. The trunk crossed the path where low-impact hikers expected no trouble. Out of a knot in the koa wood honey bees emerged to protect their tree fallen on the wayside. The bees weren't stinging the trail's guests but they hummed uncomfortably close to human ears. It could be said that they chaperoned hikers through their particular section of the forest, a singing escort in tuxedo black and yellow. David Whitman the bee hunter came in his Subaru station wagon. He had plastic suits, netted headraces, a hand axe and smelled like wet wood. We hiked the trail to where the tree crossed the way. Dave put his nose frightfully close to the knot in the tree where the bees emerged. "Here they are!" he exclaimed and we sure nodded our heads violently as though our affirmation would draw him away from the trunk. We took an hour duct taping the holes in our clothes shut so the bees couldn't get in. I brought three long sleeve shirts that day because I was more afraid of stings than anything. There's something about stings, something about poison. A bite's just a cut but a sting changes the chemistry of things, inspires. Richard Attenborough always talks about bees and they way they form a utopian community, each with their

own roles and duties all to protect the queen. He always talks about the strength of the collective. I don't care much for the collective. I've only been stung one bee at a time and every time it hurt. I'd like to sting things. We duct taped Dave the most because he was charging straight into the fray and then we stood away, nearly out of sight, around the corner of the hairpin turn. Dave hacked at that tree with his axe for a good two hours. The bees swarmed around him. Hundreds. Some made it through the tape and were then caught in his beard. Some made it through and stung his neck but they did little to thwart his hacking. One bee, just one, came to where I was sitting and watching. It sounded angry and I stood still and it complained into my ear but I didn't move because that's what Dave said to do. It landed on my shoe and stung it, through the leather, and got stuck there and died.

The fire burned long into the evening weeks before the bees died. The helicopters flew back and fourth from the ocean to the preserve with buckets with trap doors in the bottom attached to long ropes. They dropped gallons of ocean water on the fire and the firefighters. The firefighters dug ditches around the fire near the preserve with hoes deep enough to cut the roots that carried the fire. Ulu was there in her army fatigues working long into the night to save her mountain. They tried to sever the connection between the fields and the preserve, the hidden bond revealing that they are both part of the same small island.

After Dave had collected the honeycomb from out of the tree trunk and put the pieces in a cooler we hiked back down to the trucks. The fire's damage was there. When a fire in the preserve is extinguished the weeds are the first to grow back. They claim the land quickly and the soil is lost for the slow and delicate natives. But even the weeds take a week or so and for that week the land settles, moist, an empty page. There in that week of charred barrenness I walked down from the mountains with a handful of seeds I collected while waiting for Dave to open the tree.