



Short Stories

By
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Photo source unknown

3 a.m.

(A true story)

But the Lord God called to the man and said, “Where are you?” The man answered, “I heard you walking in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid.”
Genesis 3:9-10

Somebody's written this scripture in black ink on the wooden bus stop where I'm sitting. I stare at the words for a minute before looking back toward the deserted street. It's been raining off and on all day, but now it's only windy. Purple and red neon signs spill color over the sidewalk and disappear into the black street. I focus on the exotic effect and try to remember why I'm sitting at a bus stop at three in the morning. I want to believe it's because I'm sixteen and homeless. It seems easier that way. But I know that's not the real reason. I think I'm searching for something. Maybe love. I'm not really sure and the Bible passage someone wrote on the bus stop keeps flashing into my mind. While thinking about this I notice a woman walking slowly towards me. She's dragging her feet, drifting from the middle of the sidewalk to the edge then back to the middle again. I wonder what she's searching for? I'm sure she's drunk and she's wearing a black dress that's wrinkled really

badly—dirty. On top of her dress is some sort of pink vest and it's ripped—the pink color is faded. I decide it's late and I'm probably not going to see anybody else this night so I'll make eye contact with her.

She walks up and stops right in front of me. I can see her clearly because of the reflection of colored lights on the watery sidewalk. I think she's in her sixties. I'm sure she probably smells, but it's windy so I can't really tell. I notice how ugly she is. And for some reason, I don't know why, I wonder whose daughter she is, and then I wonder if she's a mom, or somebody's sister. She's looking at her shoes that are held together with old duct tape. They look clumsy, awkward.

“Sir, do you have any spare change?” Maybe she's somebody's wife. She doesn't look at me. I have some money in my front pocket and I'm trying to remember how much, but I don't want to pull it out and start counting it in front of her, but it's important that I get it right because I need to keep enough to get drunk later on. Then I remember I've got twenty dollars in my back pocket. And I'm so relieved by this that I forget to count the money in my front pocket and just hand it all to her. She takes the money from my hand without looking at me. She stares at the crumpled wad of ones in her hand for a minute. Then really quickly she looks me over like she's deciding something important.

“Would you like a trick? For five dollars more I'll take you behind the gas station.” She looks down the empty street then at her old shoes again before finishing, “I haven't done a trick in a long time.” And she mutters this last sentence while staring at her feet. I look down at my shoes. No duct tape. Searching for love?

I stare past her at the empty street. I'm not sure what to say, and I'm surprised how long it takes me to answer her.

"You don't have to have sex with me," I whisper and I give her the money from my back pocket. She looks at the twenty-dollar bill that I placed on top of the ones and for the first time she looks me in the eyes.

"Thank you," then more quietly "so much." And she stumbles away. I watch her drift away and then for some reason I remember a girl I liked in third grade. I remember holding her hand and I start crying, but not because of the memories or because she said thank you, or because for a brief moment I actually thought about having sex with her, or because I can't shake the feeling, she might be my guardian angel. But because I feel misplaced. Lost.

"Where are you?"

"I heard you walking in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid."

Rejecting Cain

“The region between the Tigris and the Euphrates demonstrated excellent base flow—usable water resources...oaks, Tamarisk trees—immense topography. High-grade pasturing...mountain ranges extending through the east and north, desert regions to the south and west—it was there the summer heat could be extreme—a dry heat in which young men were lethargic. That is where I decided to develop.”

Silence.

“Where were you sleeping before then?”

“I was sleeping in creeks.”

“Creeks?”

Silence.

“I needed relief...the ambivalence of what happened was...devastating to my resolve. When I close my eyes...the things I see,” silence. “The methods are perfect...we created a provincial waters board...there was increasing need for protocol regarding the organization and administration of cultivation—of drainage, storage capacities, irrigation containment, salinity reduction, crop production—original estimates of crop loss due to water logging were a major cause of concern. There were trends in the water: median

flow...my thoughts...my mind continually moves in violent spheres...I ask myself if anything is real...if I really have meaning, or only the illusion of meaning.”

Silence.

“Tell me about the creeks.”

Silence.

“I keep thinking I’ll wake up...I’ll wake up from this unrelenting emptiness.”

“Why didn’t you stay near Eden?”

“—I was cast forth.”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“I was the last one to see him.”

“Him?”

“Yes...him—Abel—come on, what the fuck are we doing here? Can you hear that?”

Silence.

“Hear what?”

Silence.

“His blood cries out from the ground.”

Silence.

“I don’t hear anything.”

“Yes...you do. You are just ignoring it.”

“Tell me about him.”

Silence.

“What can I say? I couldn’t let go—couldn’t seem to comprehend the malice that was crushing me—his teeth disintegrated in the first hit,” silence, “I was the first born, I was the oldest...I should have been treated with more respect—I worked the ground with my *hands*...I obeyed the rules—my contribution was given in *obedience*, if not in love. But it was rejected,” silence, “the blood was gushing out of his mouth...he looked stunned. I was so zeroed in—focused—I hit him again and he passed out...it was really hot. You can’t imagine the heat. I was screaming at him, smashing the stone against his head.”

Silence.

“What were you screaming at him?”

“—I was thirsty. I walked to the river and drank deeply. It was cold...I’ll never forget that—how cold it was. I was sweating from the heat...I took my clothes off and floated in the river until evening, the sound of the water around my ears.”

Silence.

“What were you screaming at him?”

Silence.

“...You’re nobody.”

Silence.

“You were sleeping in creeks after this?”

Silence.

“—I was sent away...I urbanized the region to the south. Do you have any idea what the average cost of irrigation development is?” Silence. “The city fostered a sophisticated ideology that best suited our needs—a climate that was advantageous to the

culture. We were a vast sprawl of urban development—we established rural farming locations—but it was the city that demonstrated the power of our reasoning...we didn't need God. We didn't want God. It was my son who made the flute and harp," silence.

"The music in the city would withdraw me—elevate me over the city streets, hot winds...the stale condition of my mind...the boredom...the violent thoughts no longer had a desultory effect on me. It was there that I tasted most exactly the emotional rush of my existence—the knowledge I was a ruinous mind, a mind gone."

In The Valley of Sugarcane

“From a deep dream I woke and swear:
The world is deep
Deeper than the day had been aware
Deep is its woe.”
—Nietzsche

In the newspaper this morning, I read a story about two guys who kidnapped a small boy from the Southside of the valley. They duct taped his mouth shut and turned him face down on his stomach then took turns sodomizing him. He died of suffocation. I tried to forget about the story, but I couldn't help wondering what the boy was thinking while he was being raped. Later, after reading the story, I cried in the bathroom. And even though I'm only nineteen, I stood in the hot shower for a long time and wondered why I was ever born. And that's how it's been for me these last few months—crying almost every day.

I walk down the hall and into the small living room. Benjamin, my six-year-old little brother, is watching Pinocchio. Again.

“Don't you get tired of that movie?” I ask calmly. He doesn't answer me. He doesn't even move, just keeps watching the movie. I stare at him sitting on the floor in front of the television. His legs stretched out before him. His hands are in his lap, his

back perfectly straight. He's wearing only khaki shorts that blend with his tan skin and make him look completely naked. I stare at his blonde hair. It's blonde like Joseph's. Our father. They both wear it short on the sides and parted to the side on the top. It's beautiful hair. Benjamin is beautiful. He's a beautiful kid. He'll probably grow up to be handsome like Joseph. Not me though, I take after Heather, our mother. Ugly.

"Where's Joseph?" I ask, even though I already know the answer. He doesn't answer me. He stares at the screen, mesmerized. I walk into the kitchen. The door that leads to the side of the house is open. A song by the Rolling Stones drifts in. The kitchen is clean. It's always clean. The whole house is clean. She does a good job; I say to myself. It makes her happy, you know? Maybe you should help. She's been getting sicker, you know. She works hard even though she's sick. I open the refrigerator, but I'm not really hungry so I walk out the side door. The sky is clear. Blue. How does it get so blue? I don't know, maybe it's God that turns it so blue. Now you sound like her. You don't believe her? Maybe not. Though I sometimes want to.

"Did you see the horizon?" Joseph asks. I turn and look down the driveway at him. The garage door is up. He's just inside, in the shade, leaning against the wall, smoking a cigarette. A fresh bottle of Jack Daniels is in his large hand. He takes a drag from the cigarette. He is looking at the mountains in the distance. I turn away and look out at the valley, past the sugarcane fields, into the distant Westside Mountains. High above them are heavy dark clouds. I walk over to the garage. The pack of cigarettes is on the ground next to the small portable radio. I take one out and light it.

"Where is she?" I ask, and look at the bottle in his hand.

"Church...doing something." The Rolling Stones are screaming. I nod.

“There’s more talk about shutting the cane plantations,” he says still looking at the mountains. I drag the cigarette quietly and stare at the liquid. I like the way the dark whiskey looks.

“Mostly money, I guess. The sugarcane burn is in a couple of days. The people get nervous. They always talk about shutting down the plantations during the burning,” he continues. The song ends and he looks over at me and drags hard from his cigarette. Why does he look at me like that? It’s weird, it’s like he doesn’t even see me. Maybe he doesn’t. Maybe he doesn’t see anything anymore. I look away, at my feet, the ground. A new song comes on and I know it pretty well and this makes me feel stronger.

“Can I take the truck? I was thinking about going into Honolulu,” I say, then add, “I need a little money...okay?” I look up at him and he’s taking money out of his wallet. He hands it to me. I put it in my pocket without counting it. He’s never cared about money. Not like her, I tell myself.

“Jeremy, I’m leaving,” he says after a while, and looks at me so long that I actually blush and start sweating. I look back at the ground. His eyes are beautiful. I wish I had good eyes. He hands me the bottle, and I drink long; Jesus, that’s good. Don’t blaspheme. I tell myself. Just don’t blaspheme. It hurts her, that kind of talk.

“You understand? I’m leaving to the mainland for a while.”

“Why,” I ask. There is a long silence, then, “I just need to see I guess,” he says.

“See?” I drink again. He doesn’t answer me. He’s looking back at the mountains now. “She’s sick,” I say.

“She’s okay. She told me she’s okay. She’ll be fine.”

“When?” The Jack Daniels is warm in my stomach and the song is good and I feel

something ebbing into my chest. What is that? Nervousness? No. Something else.

Apprehension. I drink again from the bottle.

“After the burning. Probably a couple of weeks from now.”

“Does she know?” I ask. He doesn’t answer me. We are both quiet and listen as a few more songs play. We smoke more cigarettes. The silence is easy. It’s always been easy. Finally, I take some cigarettes and put them in my shirt pocket then head back inside to get the keys off the kitchen counter and when I pull out of the driveway, onto the road, he’s still looking into the mountains.

The dirt road is long and straight, and runs along the green cane fields for six miles. Red dirt. It’s soft on the eyes. I roll down the window and hot air rushes in. It feels good. I turn on the radio and light one of the cigarettes. I didn’t ask for the bottle in the garage, but that doesn’t worry me because I can buy more in Honolulu. That’s one good thing about being ugly. Nobody questions your age.

The dirt road connects to highway 83. If I turn left, I can take the 83 to the 82 and reach Honolulu in about forty-five minutes. It’s quicker that way, but the traffic is usually bad. I turn right. In this direction the highway travels the back of the Eastside Koolau Mountains. It takes about an hour longer, but the drive is more peaceful. Smooth. The ocean on my left is clear. Blue. Clean. Steep dark mountains are on my right. As the scenery passes by, I am able to see young tan girls lying on the white sand. A few boys are boogie boarding. The Pacific horizon beyond the beach is long. Wide. The sky just above it is light blue. Higher up it turns darker and darker. I watch the people, the ocean, the horizon, the blue sky, the green mountains, pass by my windows. I smoke my

cigarette and listen to the radio. A man on the radio is singing about disconnectedness in humanity. And as the landscape passes by, I think I know what he means.

In Honolulu, I leave the truck in the Aloha liquor store parking lot, near the beachfront. The store is painted light green with dark blue trim. And although it's now almost noon on a Saturday, there are only three other cars in the parking lot. I walk into the Aloha. Behind the counter, in a white dress with big red flowers, is an old woman reading a newspaper. She's white, not a real Hawaiian, in the Polynesian sense. She looks up at me briefly, and then returns to her paper. I walk over to the counter. The hard liquor is shelved behind the counter. The old woman looks up at me.

"Aloha," she says bored.

"Hi." I say, not really paying attention at first, but then I notice her thick eye shadow, clumpy in spots. Her lipstick is bright red and runs a little over the natural outline of her mouth. Some kind of pity squeezes my chest. I sigh, smile, and then say, "Aloha." She smiles back. Aloha—love? No...Aloha farewell.

"I'd like a pint of Jack Daniels."

"I.D.?" she asks, but it sounds more like a threat.

"Are you serious?" I ask. She stares at me. Later, down the road, I find a homeless man, and give him enough money for a pint of Jack Daniels and something for himself. He comes back with two pints and change. I take my pint and tell him to keep the change. He offers for me to stay awhile. He's also old, but unlike the woman, he's a true Hawaiian. And I guess I like that. Why? Maybe because he's the real thing, a drunk yes, and probably a bastard, but at least...he's the real thing, some people can't even say that

much. Like me? Yes, like me. Now I'm just feeling sorry for myself. I tell him I can't stay and walk away.

The beaches along the South Shore are busy most of the year but today the white sands are mostly empty. I sit under a tree and take my flip-flops off. The sand is warm. I push my feet into it. I put the bottle between my legs, so if anybody walks by they won't be able to see it clearly. Not that it really matters. Nobody will say anything as long as you don't make a terrific ass out of yourself. I smoke a cigarette and sip the whiskey and try to think about something else.

The warmth of the liquor is familiar and I almost say hello to it out loud. This makes me smile, and smiling, I stare into heavy dark clouds that are beginning to form just out past the beach. The sun disappears behind them briefly casting long cool shadows across the pale-blue ocean and sand. A couple is walking up the beach, in my direction. I watch them. When they get close, I put the bottle back between my legs and look down at the sand. I look down at the sand because I know how easily people can be shattered if you look at them or their partner. I try to avoid eye contact. I don't want to shatter anybody. It hurts. I'm shattered all the time. When I'm sure they've passed, I look up and out into the horizon. Far out, the sea is so calm it looks solid. I drink from the bottle until my eyes start burning and watering. I look at the sea. I think I could walk on it. I wish I could walk on it. If I could, I would walk away...disappear forever. Why can't you? Why shouldn't you be allowed to walk away? Because. Because why? That would be too good; too easy...that's why.

I sip the whiskey again. An overwhelming urge to cry washes over me and a breeze comes in from the ocean. It blows across the beach, over my body, fading into the

city streets behind me. The urge to cry passes. Hawaiian music drifts onto the beach from one of the large hotels behind me. A woman laughs. I sigh. I should have brought my Walkman with me. Oh well...it's good to be quiet sometimes. I wish I didn't have to think though. But I am glad the beaches are so empty...it would be nice to talk with somebody. What would we say? We would probably try to capture the moment by talking about how beautiful it is. How perfect it is. That would only ruin it. Some things shouldn't be described. Only lived or felt or breathed.

My brain is hot and there's a soft ringing in my ears. I feel dizzy. Stoned. Warm. Relaxed. I stretch out and close my eyes. The waves crash against the shore. Another breeze comes across the beach, crashes over me. The Hawaiian music has stopped. As I fall asleep, I tell myself it's okay to fall asleep. It's safe here. And I think about my father, cutting the cane, sweat dripping down his face, looking up at me as I sit on a swing in the small playground watching the men work. The C & H company put in the playground for parents who couldn't afford a babysitter or daycare. I think about my little brother watching Pinocchio. Then I think about her in church, praying to Jesus. I think about a girl they found in the Eastside of the valley, floating face down in a stream. Her body fat and bloated...caught up in debris. Suicide, the newspaper said. I think about Jesus again. I think about all she's read to me from the Bible, when I was younger. And just before I fall asleep, I wonder if Jesus were with me now, if he'd talk and try to capture the moment or if he'd just sit with me, and listen to the ocean, feel the warm breeze. Maybe he would sigh, but never utter a single word.

When I wake up, the sun is almost gone. The sky is on fire in places. Dark heavy clouds bright pink and red are now over the city. I sit up. I'm not really alarmed by how

long I was asleep. I've done it before. Orange, yellow, and white hotel lights line the beach, growing brighter in the fading sunlight. The South Shore is empty. Windy. Warm. Everything is pink from the sunset. Everything.

I decide to walk through downtown Honolulu for a while. Most locals are gathered in clubs or bars or just out walking around. I end up on Kapiolani Blvd, smoking a cigarette. A lot of dance clubs are on Kapiolani; a lot of strip clubs too. Shouts are coming from a strip club down the street. I throw the cigarette into the street and walk towards the club. I pass the front door without going in, and then turn down the alley next to the club. In the back of the strip club, by the dumpsters, is a glass door that's tinted so you can't see in. But that only works during the day. At night it's easy to see through. This part of the building is hidden from view so people walking down the street can't see me. I watch the fully nude girl's dance. Mesmerized. The easy flow of their movements, their form, a terrible beauty that overthrows men. I wonder if the girls and I would have been friends in school. Is this how it's supposed be? Is there more than craving? Can the love...can intimacy with the daughters of Eve really save the sons of Adam? I imagine dancing with the girls, leading them by the hand, celebrating their femininity. The thoughts are rapid and I think about masturbating while watching the girls dance.

Later, during the drive home, I listen to music and think about all the terrible things I've read in the newspaper; how three girls tried to kill a classmate by poisoning her juice. And how a body was found somewhere in the valley in a doorway, stabbed to death. And some woman shot and killed a co-worker for being a gossip and spreading lies about her. And some guy has been pretending to be a cop and raping women on the mainland. And all this fills me with fear. And I'm pretty sure someone, somewhere in the

valley, hates me. And I can hardly stand to look at myself in the mirror anymore. And I don't even know why. Is this place really paradise?

My mouth is dry when I wake up the next morning. I walk down the hall to the bathroom and shut the door behind me. I turn on the sink water and stare at my face in the mirror. My brown hair is greasy. Dirty. And my eyes are red and hollow. Sunken. Tired. Ugly. I'm ugly. I rinse my mouth with cold water, then make a cup with my hand and drink for a long time. The cold water feels clean going over my tongue and down my throat. It tastes sweet first thing in the morning, especially after drinking liquor. I shower and afterwards, back in my bedroom, I put on brown corduroy pants, an old but clean t-shirt, and tennis shoes. I stare out my bedroom window. Outside the clouds are grey. Heavy. Billowing. The sound of coughing passes through the wall and into my bedroom. I feel a disconnect in my mind. Without alarm or nervousness or any feeling at all, I sense myself drifting out of my room and down the hall to her bedroom. I stand in the open doorway. A cool valley breeze comes through the big window in her bedroom, tenderly lifting the white curtains. She is sitting in front of a small vanity mirror gently moving a wooden brush through her hair, deep brown hair. She has dark brown eyes that...in certain light...look black. She has pale white skin and eyebrows that are softly arched. Plain face. Simple face...plain, simple, ugly face that blends easily in a crowd. She coughs suddenly, violently. She takes the hanky off the vanity and coughs into it for a minute. She notices me standing in the doorway. My expression stops her. She follows my gaze to the slightly bloody hanky. She quickly folds it and tucks it into the cuff of her long-sleeve shirt. She looks down at the floor. Silence. Finally, she starts brushing her hair again.

“Sit down, Jeremy,” she says softly, her voice calm. Soothing. Reassuring. And I sit down in a soft arm chair in the corner of the room. “It’s almost time for the burning. Are you excited?” she offers. I nod. She looks at me in the mirror. I look out the window. The sky is darker. “Are you going to the celebration afterwards this year?” She asks.

“Probably...for a little bit anyway,” I say, still looking into the shadowy sky. A large bird, high above, is sailing in a wide circle.

“I love you, Jeremy,” she says quietly. Suddenly. I turn from the window and look in the mirror at her. Say I love you too, I tell myself. I can’t...I can’t. Why? I don’t know... I just can’t—

“I love you too,” I blurt too quickly, then, “Where’s Joseph?” She stops brushing her hair, turns around and looks at me, then past me, into the green valley and dark sky.

“What’s wrong?” she asks distantly. I need a cigarette. A drink. Good song. I sigh. She looks at me now. Her brown eyes are so clear.

“He’s going,” I say and I’m surprised to hear my voice crack a little.

“Yes...he’s going to the mainland to look for better work—”

“I’m not six,” I say sharply. Pain slams my chest and my throat dries. “I’m sorry,” I mumble. I watch the bird, black bird sailing. I could sail. I could sail away. She sets down the brush and looks at me, then out the window and then back at me.

“Some people...have to...need to...look back. It’s how they stay alive...it’s how they numb the pain...it’s how they breathe and maybe, if they’re lucky, quiet the voices,” she says slowly, evenly. And for some reason this brings a memory to my mind. A memory of me and my father sitting in the shade of a tree next to the surgarcane fields. I remember the way his cigarette smoke looked in the wind and the sound of the cane

swaying in the gusts. Far off in the distance a part of the sunlight had broken through the clouds and cast a bright, focused light into the cane fields. There was a vibrantly colored butterfly sitting on one of the cane's long green leaves, flexing its black and orange wings. And for some reason the memory of the butterfly makes me think of bright pink clouds and of bubble gum and my girlfriend from last summer—her perfume like cotton candy; lip-gloss, eyebrows that looked forever sad over light brown eyes; simple body, uncomplicated face. But it ended somehow...and I can't remember why. And this makes me think of the pink clouds for a long time in complete silence. Another breeze comes through my mother's window and the memories suddenly fade and I think I'm going to choke, but instead I start crying uncontrollably. She comes over to me and puts her arms around me.

“You'll get numb Jeremy, don't worry. We all get numb,” she says. Then more to herself, “You always turn a little insane when you start to see how it really is. That's okay. Then you grow older and turn numb. That's okay. That's how it is.” A few minutes pass and I finally stop crying. Her voice is still peaceful and fills my world again, “I see him, in my thoughts, when we were young,” she says. And I'm able to see my father in my mind, the image of him slowly walking away from me. He climbs out the window and just walks away. I want to call to him but I don't, because it's okay, because her voice is there to comfort me, “He was happier then,” she says, then more slowly, “I can't bring myself to ruin what little happiness he has left now...just so I can keep him. How do you tell someone who's heart is dying that there's hope...when they can't even see they're dying...won't see...refuse to see? Or maybe they can see...see too clearly and it's this that destroys them. I don't know what to do. I hold his hand and when he cries at night I hold

his body, but...I can never really reach him. Do you understand what I mean by that? He keeps his heart away from me. He keeps it hidden in memories," she finishes. For a long time, we sit looking out the window. Inside me, something is giving way to anger...fear, fear is caving in and I almost scream, "No, you're the one dying. You're dying. Not him. You. You. You. What the fuck am I going to do? Why can't he just stay...what's happening to us? Am I crazy? I can't breathe. I can't think. What about Benjamin?" But instead, I say, "The sky is grey. How does it get so grey?"

They started the burn the next day. Vast cane fields on fire. I sit on my bed listening to music. I'm able to see the smoke outside my bedroom window. Dark smoke from the burning fields drifting up into the sky. I can hear them arguing in the next room. And afterwards, an absolute stillness, always afterwards, and then the crying begins. She'll cry and then scream into her pillow, sometimes cussing. Sometimes cussing at God. And even though I mostly can't hear it...there are moments words escape from the pillow and damn near suffocate me; almost bringing me to insanity.

Joseph left two weeks after the sugarcane burn. A month later, she was put in the hospital. Benjamin made me walk with him all over the Eastside Mountains, searching for Pinocchio's village. He wanted to find the fairy, hoping it could make our mother well again. When we couldn't find it, he cried himself to sleep. I carried him home. Four days later she died.

Benjamin and I still live in the house. Since I'm nineteen they don't bother us. I think they're trying to find our father, to let him know what happened.

Sometimes when I'm sitting on the swings, I'll think about the last days we were all together. I remember the festivity, just after the burn...locals gathered together in

celebration of the harvest...the old people coming to dance and play games with young people. I sat and watched the old, wondering what memories my eyes will have when I become such an age, such a tired age. I drank liquor mixed with sweet water. Sweet water made from the cane. What a celebration; the harvest, the burning fields; a world on fire. And music. That band, what a noise! A rhythm that crawls along the floor and into my feet, up my legs, through my stomach and tests the youth of my heart. A test, I waste no time taking. Soon her sweet voice calls my name, a name she gave me, a name she knows me by. And I respond to her voice. I laugh and stroll my youth in her direction, hoping her eyes...the sugar of her soul...notice me; comfort me. Sweet affection.

These memories, I sometimes think about when I'm at the swings, only sometimes though. But sometimes, when the wind is cold and the liquor has lost its prize, I'll stand looking into the horizon and cry. In the valley, the children are still a little insane when they first see. In the valley I stand, among the quietest sunsets and I look and look and look to where the cane fields are swallowed up in the mouth of a heavy cloud crouching at the horizon.

*This short story is based on the time I lived with my brother in Hawaii. We were 21 at the time. He was in the Navy and stationed at Pearl Harbor. We, along with his buddies from the Navy, would sometimes walk along large pineapple fields and drink.

God's Graffiti

“There's many a boy here today who looks on war as all glory, but, boys...it is all hell.”

— Gen. William T. Sherman, Address, 1880

It was so hot the day I saw her. My squad was walking alongside a large rice paddy. There were a few Vietnamese men and women working the fields. I stopped to drink some water from my canteen, and watch them work.

“Well?” The squad leader asked quietly. Rowick, a young corpsman, shook his head once, and leaned towards the squad leader, “He popped a land mine,” he whispered, then, “I gave him morphine, but there is nothing I can do. We called in a med-vac, but that won't save him...just try to comfort him...he's in shock.” They both sat still momentarily before the medic finally got up to help the other wounded Marine. The squad leader looked down at Bell, who was lying in the blackened dirt.

“Bell?” The squad leader asked, mouthing the words dramatically so Bell could read his lips; the explosion had blown his eardrums.

“Why can't I hear?” Bell asked, worried.

“What are you holding, Bell?” the squad leader asked, pointing to a piece of bloody paper in Bell's hand.

“I can’t hear you!” Bell screamed.

“I know. I know. Look my lips, Bell, read my lips...what are you holding?”

Silence. Then, “A poem.” More silence.

“What’s the name of the poem, Bell?” he asked. Bell watched his mouth carefully.

“Graffiti,” Bell murmured.

“Graffiti? Why you calling it that?”

“It’s graffiti. It’s derogatory.”

“I don’t understand, Bell. It’s a poem.”

“It’s graffiti,” Bell moaned quietly to himself. “Why can’t I hear?”

“It’s not graffiti, Bell. It’s a poem,” the squad leader said, trying to smile. Bell licked his chapped lips tiredly.

“Am I a coward? A dove?” Bell whispered. The squad leader stared at him quietly.

“Why you calling it graffiti?” The squad leader asked.

I can still see her. She was young and standing in a rice paddy, a couple of yards away from me. She peered up at me from underneath her large hat. I smiled at her.

“Why you calling it graffiti, Bell?” the squad leader asked.

“Because, because I’m a coward. A dove. That’s why,” he said quietly.

“But it’s poem, Bell.”

Silence.

“Words of peace, on war paper...” Bell said, whispering now. Tired. He is resting his face on the cool earth. His eyes searched the dirt.

She tried to smile back at me, but could only look away. Her young delicate face was tired looking. I watched her work for a moment. My squad was slowly drifting farther

down the dusty road. But I didn't really care. I don't know why I didn't care. She was wearing black peasant pants that she rolled up past her muddy knees and a red shirt of some kind.

“What’s the poem about?” the squad leader asked, gently turning Bell’s face away from the dirt.

“We were misplaced. God made a mistake,” Bell says softly.

“Is that what the poem is about?”

“Am I a dove?”

Silence.

“Is that what the poem is about, Bell?”

“Her... the Vietnamese girl. The poem’s to her.”

“A girl? That’s not so bad. That doesn’t make you a coward” he says.

“We’re not supposed to complain about the way it should have been, only accept the way it is,” Bell said, his voice so quiet the squad leader had to lean in to hear him.

“It’s just a poem, Bell. Just a poem to a Vietnamese girl.” Bell looked back at the dirt. He closed his eyes.

“Bell, it’s just a poem.” The squad leader said, more to himself.

It didn't seem so natural to me anymore: people living under war. I guess looking at her made me a little crazy.

“We don't belong here.” I said to her. She stopped working and looked at me. She didn't say anything, just watched me. I don't know why I kept talking to her. I mean, I knew she didn't understand me. I looked at two men close by who had stopped working to see why I was talking to her.

“She doesn’t belong here with you.” I said to them. They kept looking at me like I was about to shoot them or something. They probably thought I wanted to rape her. But I didn’t. I didn’t want to shoot anybody either. I didn’t want to walk anymore. I didn’t want to fight anymore. I looked back at the girl, “We don’t belong here,” I said motioning towards the rice paddies and the jungle beyond. “We were misplaced. God made a mistake. We were misplaced. Don’t you want to leave? Don’t you?” I asked. She didn’t move. Didn’t saying anything. Just quietly watched me.

“We could run for it, you know. Do you want to run away with me? Would it be so bad if...if maybe in another time, another place, we were together? You know? I’m a coward for talking this way. I’m a dove. A protester. Do you think God loves cowards like me? You think Christ will understand—I don’t want to drink from the cup of war anymore. I’m tired. Tired.”

“Bell?” The squad leader asked squeezing Bell’s hand.

“Maybe it’s okay to write it down.” Bell said, his eyes still closed, exhausted. Then, “Maybe it’s okay to write graffiti,” Bell said, opening his eyes. He looked past the squad leader, past the distant treetops, into the blue sky.

“She was a kind of graffiti—God spray painted her on the wall of war.”

*This short story is based on one of the group home counselors I knew when I was 14. He was a tunnel rat in the Vietnam war. He had one of his legs blown off when someone near him stepped on a land mine.