FICTION

"THE TREES AND THEIR BOY"

"The Trees and Their Boy" is a short story I wrote as part of a series of fiction all taking place in Hawaii, my home. This story was published in *The Oakland Review*, and received first prize for prose. It also took third place for fiction at the prestigious Adamson Awards, hosted by the Carnegie Mellon English Department. The story, which contains elements of magical realism, follows a young woman, Ku'uipo, as she prepares for the birth of her son. She visits a kapuna who instructs her to plant a tree which will instill in her son its properties. If she plants a tree known for its strength her son will grow up to be strong, a tree known for its height her son will be tall, etc. Ku'uipo tries to outsmart the kapuna and plants three trees instead of just one. The story reveals how Ku'uipo's decisions affect her son as he grows up.

By the time Ku'uipo Marquez was twenty-five she had already had three miscarriages. When she found out she was pregnant a fourth time, she was worried she would lose the baby. Her doctors worried too. They told her that she had to be put on bed rest immediately, if she wanted to keep the baby. Ku'uipo was afraid, but she also knew that she had something to do before she would be trapped in a bed for nine months.

So without telling her husband Manuel, Ku'uipo went to see the kapuna, whom she believed could help her save the child. The kapuna lived in an ordinary looking plantation house in one of the older neighborhoods in Kaneohe. The house was only four rooms: a small living room that lead off to a smaller bedroom, an even smaller kitchen, and a bathroom that would have been more suited on an airplane. Ku'uipo sat on the old brown leather couch in the living room, which was patched with duct tape so old it had begun to match the leather. As she waited for the kapuna to finish making her tea, it began to rain. The rain pinged musically on the rusty tin roof of the home, and it reminded Ku'uipo of her grandmother's house. Delighted, she turned around and knelt on the old brown couch to look out the glass jalousies behind her like a child. She could see the rain bounce off the waxy leaves of the pink and red torch ginger just outside the window. It was then that the kapuna returned from the kitchen.

The kapuna was an older women with a long tangle of white hair that flowed down to her waist. She had a permanent tan from all of the years she had spent working in the sun in her garden, and her feet and hands were gnarled like ginger roots. She wore a short thin cotton mu'umu'u and her bare feet gently swept against the homemade wooden floor as she walked. She smiled at Ku'uipo with small even white teeth, and handed her the cup of tea. Ku'uipo drank delicately, and held the cup tight, as if for warmth.

The kapuna had come from a family of kapunas, back when *mana* was still done openly in the days of old Hawai'i. Back then people knew which neighborhoods to stay away from at night, and when to shut their blinds and turn their attention to other things. Back then people spoke in hurried whispers about wars between kapuna families, of gifts of chicken bones and bloodied feathers that spoke when you held it, of fireballs that seemed to follow people at night as if to spy, before falling with a loud explosion into the welcoming sea. Back then, who did not believe in the ancient power, when all you had to do was open your window on the right night and see the evidence for yourself? But that was in the old days. Now the kapuna spent most of her time tending her orchids outside, cooking for her grandchildren, and blessing homes to cast out unwanted spirits.

Still, it was not unusual to ease the fears of young women, or to help with the bearing of children. The kapuna liked Ku'uipo, who reminded her of her own daughter. She wanted to help.

"If you want to keep this child," the kapuna said, "you must plant a tree in your yard as soon as you can. The tree will grow with the child and watch over him and keep him safe. They will be closer than brothers; they will share the same thoughts, the same pain, the same spirit. You understand, yes? The tree will perform this function regardless of what kind you choose, but choose wisely, because your son will inherit the qualities of the tree, as the tree will inherit the qualities of your son."

Ku'uipo sipped her tea thoughtfully, and the kapuna thought that this meant that she had heard and understood. Ku'uipo looked down at her belly, still flat, and thought incredulously, "A son!"

Ku'uipo left the kapuna's tin-roofed house with a new smile. It was broad and showed her top and bottom teeth and stretched her cheeks until they hurt. Her baby would live and she and Manuel would finally have a son! At the thought of Manuel Ku'uipo's smile fell a little. Manuel, who was still at work at King Intermediate where he was an 8th grade science teacher, did not believe in *mana*. He would not understand why Ku'uipo felt the need to talk to the kapuna when he was spending a fortune to get the best doctors at Kapiolani to speak with her. He would think she was foolish, and he would be worried that she would believe the kapuna's words wholeheartedly, when she should be no more than cautiously optimistic. Manuel was a good earthly man, but that was the kind of man he was. The miscarriages had changed him, and now his smile always came with an ounce of pain around the eyes. *No*, Ku'uipo thought, *Manuel would not understand*. She would tell him later, after their son was born and safe, and they would laugh about it together. Later, when Manuel's smile no longer held that ounce of pain.

Ku'uipo drove to the tree nursery on her way back home, to pick out the qualities of her son.

The man working at the nursery was very helpful, and explained to her all the different qualities of the trees to her. There was the mango tree, which provided sweet and delicious fruit. It would grow tall and strong, with thick branches for climbing and deep roots and plenty of shade. But it was a "rubbish tree" the man warned, and you would have to rake up the leaves regularly. There was the lehua ohia tree. It was short with dark gnarled branches but beautiful red feathery blossoms. It was a hardy tree, a pioneer, the first to grow on rocky volcanic ground. Bamboo was a good choice, if you wanted a fast growing tree. It was strong too, in its own way. It was so flexible it would never snap in the wind.

Ku'uipo couldn't decide so she bought all three. She took them home, and planted them in a circle in the furthermost corner of her backyard. The trees were really no more than sticks at this point, the size of golf clubs. But still Ku'uipo struggled. Though she came from generations of proud warriors, courageous explorers, and hard-working plantation workers, Ku'uipo was afraid—afraid of looking foolish, afraid for her unborn son, but most of all afraid of failure. Still, she put her faith in these trees that were now no more than sticks, that they would be the answers to her prayers. Ku'uipo threw her full weight on the blade of the shovel, making large holes in the backyard. A mynah bird watched with a sharp eye from the chain link fence, and complained loudly and indignantly at her workmanship. She ignored him, and wiped the sweat from her hands on her blouse. She placed each tree delicately in the wide holes, watching the roots fall into place. Then she patted the dirt in the hole by hand, covering the roots with nutrients and holding them in place with hope.

She looked at the three young trees she had planted to save her son. They stood out among the hibiscus bushes and crab grass. When Manuel got home he looked out the back window and saw the three small silhouettes, like three women huddled and conspiring secrets in the furthermost corner of his yard. He did not understand, but he did not ask any questions either. Something in his wife's face begged him not to.

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Manuel was starting to think that his wife was not listening to the expensive doctors he had paid to give them advice. "Bed rest," the doctors told the couple. "Immediately."

By the time Manuel would come home at night his wife was dutifully in bed, watching *Jeopardy!* and he would give her a soft kiss on the forehead and tell her about his day. But

there was always fresh dirt on the back porch, tracks that ended at Ku'uipo's rubber slippers. And a suspiciously rectangular patch of grass was dying in the center of the circle of those three young trees that had popped up in their backyard, as if placed by some mischievous group of *menehune*. Manuel wanted to confront his young wife, whose folly would surely lead to harm.

The miscarriages were hard on him too, after all. Ku'uipo did not know about all of the mornings he had sat in his car in the intermediate school parking lot, nearly late to open the classroom, because endless tears would fall uncontrollably down his face. He would wipe them angrily away, ashamed at his weakness. He was supposed to be the caretaker, the provider. He was supposed to know what to do. He certainly wasn't supposed to sob weakly in his green Honda Accord, staring at the blank concrete wall of the administrative offices.

About four months into the pregnancy Manuel came home early once. It was one of those rare half-days of school that the DOE insisted on giving students, even though it created a giant mess for the syllabus and made sure that at least one of the periods was behind, if they weren't already. Somehow he had forgotten to mention it to his wife.

He did not think anything of it until he had come home, and found their bed vacant, the sheets cold and tossed aside. Manuel panicked. He went to the kitchen and snatched the phone from the wall. He started to dial Ku'uipo's cell number when his eye happened to catch a flicker of movement in the backyard. It was his wife, sitting on a quilt in the middle of those small trees reading aloud from an oversized book. Manuel suddenly felt a complete and inexplicable anger towards his wife. It was as he suspected all along. She didn't care how these miscarriages were tearing him apart. She was foolish and negligent and a danger to their child. How could she do something this stupid?

Manuel got as far as putting his hand on the doorknob. Then he saw the book Ku'uipo was reading from, propped up in her lap. He couldn't read the title from the French doors, but he had seen that worn green cover often enough to recognize it from this distance. It was his favorite childhood story, and he had purchased that copy for her when they found out they were pregnant the first time. Ku'uipo was reading *The Giving Tree*, a story about a tree who cares and sacrifices for a boy as he grows.

Just as quickly as it appeared, his anger dissipated. He sighed. He could not yell at her, not now. She did care, and it was foolish to think otherwise. The miscarriages had broken both their hearts, but whereas Ku'uipo was brave enough to throw all her hopes back in the ring, Manuel was still too scared, the wound was still too fresh. He would have to confront her about it, later. He went back to his car, and drove aimlessly around Kaneohe town for a while, passing Windward Mall, stopping at Jamba Juice, driving as far as the 'opihi stand in Kahaluu before it was time to head back. He arrived home just in time to catch "Double Jeopardy."

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Over the next few months, Ku'uipo's belly grew as Manuel's fear grew. His wife's body seemed so delicate, so precious and precarious. Some day's he was overcome with joy, and other times he had worried that they would lose the baby again, that somehow if he allowed himself to be happy he would be punished for it. "Cautiously optimistic," he told everyone with a smile. They all thought it was a shame that he no longer had the carefree joy that a new father should have, but so much tragedy so young could do that: steal the bravado from a young man.

Sometimes Manuel would dream that he would wake up in the night and the baby would be gone, his wife's belly flat and deflated. The dreams were so vivid he would wake up with tears streaming down his face. He turned over then, so his wife would not see. Once he

dreamt that he came home from work and the baby had already been born, his wife waiting for him by the front door, holding the bundle of blankets in her arms. "Look," she cooed. "Look, he has your eyes."

But when he unwrapped the bundle there was just a large ripe mango in it. "That's not the baby. What have you done with my son?" Manuel demanded. But when he looked back his wife had become an old hag whose mouth seemed too wide for her face as she laughed and laughed and laughed.

Manuel did not tell his wife about this dream either.

By the sixth month, the baby was becoming real, and Ku'uipo swore that she could sense his personality. The trees were starting to grow, too, no longer merely sticks in the ground, but starting to shape and form. They hinted as to what they would become: the bamboo already towering above the other two, the mango already sprouting leaves—the leaves that would need to be raked often, and the lehua already had one perfect delicate feathery blossom. She wondered how their attributes would help her son. Every day, without fail, she would take an old quilt and sit out with the trees, talking to them and her son, even as it became more and more difficult to sit and stand from the ground. She wanted her son to bond with the trees, the trees the kapuna promised would be closer than brothers. She hoped the trees would serve her son well.

By the third trimester, Manuel kept his cell phone on and with him all the time, and jumped every time it rang. He wasn't sure what he was more scared of: his wife's voice sharp with news that the baby was being born, or tearful, with news that the baby had been lost while he was away. It turns out that Manuel didn't have to wait for the dreaded phone call at all. His was with his wife when she went into labor.

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The first memory Ikaika Marquez could recall was looking up at the trees. His second memory was resting in their shade. His third memory was his mother sitting with him on a blanket in their protective circle. His fourth memory was climbing the trees and being held in their branches. His fifth memory was of his father, yelling in a high panicky voice and running from their back porch. Ikaika did not remember being startled by his father's reaction, or falling from the branches, or seeing the ground move sickeningly towards him, but he did remembered admiring his black eye in the mirror later.

In kindergarten, Ikaika was tall for his age. By third grade he was a full head and shoulders above his classmates. By sixth grade he a foot-and-a-half taller than his teacher, and everyone in school called him "the Moke," the brute. It didn't help that his skin was very dark, as dark as the bark of the lehua tree, and his hands and feet were large and gnarled. He was strong too, very strong for his age, and there was already talk of recruiting him for the different private school football teams.

Ikaika was a shy boy though, and really he only ever felt comfortable talking to his trees. No matter how tall he got, they always towered over him, and he could always climb and sit in their branches to talk and think, not like other trees which whined and threatened to buckle under his growing weight. Ikaika was a shy boy, but no one knew it. His mouth seemed to have a mind of its own, and words would fall from his mouth like leaves, even when he didn't intend them to.

His mother would sometimes gently remind him, "Ikaika, what is it you mean to say?"

It was then that he would notice that he had been talking again, and abruptly shut his mouth.

His mother loved him very much though, that was clear. She told him that his father loved him too, and he supposed it was true, but Ikaika was never that close with his father.

His father seemed to always be angry. In fact, that was what brought Ikaika to the protective circle of the trees today. His father was mad because some of the high schoolers down the street challenged Ikaika to an impromptu wrestling match on the soccer field, and Ikaika had accepted. A teacher had broken up the fight, and the principal had called Ikaika's father, even though Ikaika was not technically a student at Castle High School. The principal had threatened to call the police, which was much much worse, so Ikaika had given him his father's number instead.

"It would have been better to deal with the police," Ikaika said solemnly to the mango tree he was straddling a branch on.

The mango tree's leaves rustled sympathetically in response.

"I just wish I wasn't like this, you know? So big and ugly and strong. I wish I was like the other kids, sometimes."

The bamboo tree bowed in the wind, and the lehua shed a precious red blossom. It stood out like a drop of blood against the dirt for a while, and then was covered in a shower of sharp mango leaves.

Ikaika lay down for a while in silence.

While he was out in the trees, Ikaika's parents had a remarkably similar discussion inside.

"You know what he said he was doing?" Manuel said with something close to disbelief. "He told me he was wrestling. Like it was the most natural thing in the world. 'They asked me to wrestle, Dad,' he said, like he had to say yes. Does he realize how stupid that sounds? Those were seniors. He could have been hurt! He could have been stabbed, or beaten, or killed!"

"From what the principal said, the other boys were in worse shape than Ikaika," Ku'uipo said helpfully.

"And does that make it alright for him to fight? Jesus! I never got into fights in elementary school. What was he thinking?"

"He probably wasn't thinking at the time," Ku'uipo said truthfully. "You know how sometimes his words get away from him."

"I know, I know. It's just sometimes I wish . . ."

"What, you wish he hadn't been born?" Ku'uipo's voice sounded shrill, even to her own ears.

"No! God, no. It's just sometimes I wish he was a little different. And I feel awful saying that. Ku'uipo, that's not what I meant. I just wish . . . I wish I was a better father. I wish I was better equipped to teach him and provide for him and take care of him and keep him safe."

Ku'uipo did not say anything, but she thought about when she could visit the kapuna again.

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The kapuna's house looked much as it had over a decade ago. The tin roof was perhaps a bit more rusty, the paint a bit more chipped. The kapuna also was unchanged, and if Ku'uipo hadn't known better, she would have sworn the kapuna was wearing the very same mu'umu'u she had when they had met the first time.

Ku'uipo sat on the same ratty couch and explained her problem.

"I did what you told me to, but something is wrong. Ikaika is not like the other children. I had hoped it would be something he would grow out of, but it hasn't. Of course, I love him very much, and I wouldn't change anything about him, but his father is worried, and I just want what's best for my son." Ku'uipo paused, out of words.

The kapuna sat still for a moment.

"No," she said sadly.

"No?"

"You did not do what I told you to."

"No, I did! I followed every detail. I planted the tree—"

"The tree, the tree! Not *trees*. You selfish girl." The kapuna said the last bit without any acidity. It was not an accusation; it was a statement of fact.

With that Ku'uipo began to wail. "So it is my fault! I'm so sorry. I just wanted him to be perfect. He is our only son and I wanted him to be perfect."

She took a deep breath.

"What do I do now?"

"What can you do? You must tell me everything, from the beginning."

So Ku'uipo explained how she picked the trees, and how Ikaika seemed to pick up on all the wrong traits. She wanted him to be strong and flexible like bamboo, but instead he wouldn't stop growing. She wanted him to be brave, a pioneer like the lehua, but instead he had inherited its dark tough skin and gnarled extremities. She wanted him to be productive and useful like a mango tree, but instead his mouth was full of rubbish he could not contain.

The kapuna sat a while in thought. "It is not as bad as you think," she said finally. "You tried to outwit the trees, but in return they gave you a gift. Before I explain, let me ask, have you ever eaten the fruit from your mango tree?"

Ku'uipo blinked. "Yes, we eat its fruit all the time."

"And is it sweet?"

"It's very sweet. It's the sweetest mangoes I've ever tasted."

"And the lehua tree, what do the blossoms look like?"

"They're beautiful. They're red and feathery, and rich and full."

"And the bamboo, is it tall?"

"It's very tall. It almost bends over the mango tree with its weight."

"Those trees love your son. And he deserves their love. While you might question is outward appearance, what you've told me confirms what I suspected: your son will be a great man. His soul is sweet and beautiful and tall. And it will continue to grow, under the nurturing watch of the trees. While we admire the trees for their fruit, the blossoms, and their height, the trees value different elements—the toughness of their bark, the number of leaves their branches can carry, the strength of their fibers. The trees have bestowed all of the elements they value most to your son, and likewise, he has gifted them with sweetness and beauty and height. Don't you see?"

"But his outward appearance is what is causing all of these problems. He is not happy in his own skin. What if I could fix just one thing for him. Like his height. I know that he hates being taller than even his teachers. What if we could just cut down the bamboo and that way he would stop growing—"

The kapuna shook her head. "He will stop growing when he needs to stop growing. But I must warn you, I meant it when I said that the trees and this boy are closer than brothers. Their lives are irreversibly tied. If you cut down one of those trees, part of your son will die too."

Ku'uipo's face paled.

"It's a gift, not a curse," the kapuna said, as if she had read Ku'uipo's mind.

Ku'uipo went home, and watched her son dangling his long legs from the branches of the mango tree and talking seriously with the trees, his brothers. She thought that she had much to learn about wishes and *mana*. She and her husband had much to learn about love and listening, too. If what the kapuna said was true, maybe those trees and their boy were the ones to teach them.