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Something More

Brandy Dobson

English 413 (Form and Theory of Fiction)
Mentor: Dr. Subramanian Shankar

Artist Statement

I wrote the fictional short story “Something More” to engage the topics of domestic violence and childhood abuse within a Hawai‘i setting. I use a third-person limited narrator to convey the possible life-altering effects a person may endure throughout his or her life as a result of traumatic experiences. I also want to highlight the ways in which individuals or communities can either ignore or interact with people and families in need of outside support.

This piece transformed over several drafts during the semester. I gained new ways to create and evaluate my work through the tools taught in class. Through our workshops, Dr. Shankar and my peers provided tremendous insight that I employed to strengthen my story. Studying and applying the form and theory of fiction demystified many of the aspects of the process of writing literary fiction.

In addition, my short story is a “distant cousin” of my work for my Honors thesis, which is a memoir that focuses on both my personal experiences of childhood abuse growing up in Hawai‘i and the complicated struggle of coping with trauma.

At first Fred Mendoza welcomed the constant deluge from Heaven. The flooding, destroying, ruining of earth—proved all was wrong in the world. Sometimes, when the rain had been especially agitated, and before his Aunty Lucy arrived home from work with her fragile, quiver-lipped, “How was your day?” and baggage-heavy eyes that didn’t pretend to hide her pity for him, Fred would sit in the middle of the cold, water-logged backyard in Hilo so his tears could add to the vengeful rainstorm undetected. There, lost in the free-falling sea he would find her again. He felt her hand run her fingers through his hair; kiss his forehead, holding him as he cried. He should have been comforting her. He should have been there. He should have stood up to him. When the water-induced images brought his father’s fists, beer bottles, and white sheets instead of his mother’s soft embrace, he started hating the rain.

Fred squinted at the house across the street. Though his vision was faint he kept his vigilant guard. He was embarrassed at himself for being slow and dull—confusing

Since the seventh grade, I knew I wanted to write and study English. After a long academic detour, and with my husband and five children in tow, I graduated in May with a Bachelors in English. This is my first short story. I wrote it during my English 413 fiction workshop class with Dr. Subramanian Shankar. It is a story based in a real experience of my childhood on the Big Island. One of the many valuable things I learned was to use the revision process as a creative playground for different perspectives, character development, and new ideas. Hopefully, “Something More” is the beginning of many more stories to come.
the yelling and crying with a howling wind months after his new neighbors had arrived. Then overcome with shame for turning off his hearing aids when the upsetting sounds became a nightly routine. He wondered if perhaps sixty years of happiness was just long enough for a man to forget a life's worth of sadness.

Fred was eighty-four. He kept his full, silver mustache neat, and combed what was left of his hair every morning. Although he never saw it, he knew he had been attractive in his youth. Days after his curious mid-freshman year arrival at Hilo High School, he had become aware of the turning heads and batting eyelashes in the halls. Despite his palpable brooding, he had many friends, but he longed to see Tommy and beat him in basketball again. It was only until his late fifties that his father's face faded from the mirror and he could almost stand the sight of himself.

Lynn Correa had been one of the few girls who hadn't fallen for the forlorn, handsome stranger from the city. She poured herself into her studies wary of the looming future her parents had assigned her as the next generation of Correa Nursery. Fred met Lynn after graduation when Mr. Correa, an old friend of Aunty Lucy, offered Fred a job. By then the whole town had whispered parts of his tragic story that were strewn together to form a legend of grief. Fred knew the community kindness was because he was the poor boy whose father had murdered his mother. He developed the habit of looking at the bridges of noses as to avoid the soul-searching stares and glassy eyes that hungered for details straight from the source. People didn't ask. He didn't talk.

That is until Fred asked Lynn if she still liked flowers after working there her whole life. She smiled and for the first time in years, Fred didn't feel like the “poor boy.” They started talking and continued a conversation that lasted sixty years. For two decades the only thing he didn't talk about was his father, but then a letter arrived through Aunty Lucy’s address.

A worried and hunched Aunty Lucy placed the letter from Fred's father in Fred's calloused hands. “You don't have to open it.” Fred hugged her and said he'd let her know once he'd decided. He was grateful for her protective love. He was more often grateful that she looked nothing like his mother. She had a darker complexion with larger eyes and fuller lips but the voice was almost identical that sometimes it gave Fred the chills. A few weeks after their wedding, Fred and Lynn shared Sunday night dinners at Aunty Lucy’s. All were overjoyed when Tiffany came along and started to call Aunty Lucy, “Grammy,” an association carried over from Lynn's mom's house. Aunty Lucy had been his guardian angel up until she took her last breath with Fred at her bedside.

On the way home, Fred debated if he should show it to Lynn first. His heart raced as he pulled into the driveway. It had started to drizzle and Fred went mindlessly into the backyard. He stood under the old avocado tree and opened the envelope.

Dear Fred,

I think of you every day and wonder if I will ever see you again. I know I don't deserve to. I don't know how to tell you that I'm sorry for what I did to your mother and to you. I know that you must hate me. I hate myself. Maybe one day you will find it in your heart to forgive me and maybe come and visit me.

Love,
Dad

Fred stared at the words “Love, Dad” until the drizzle turned into drops. The water made its way onto the handwritten paper smearing the ink, distorting “Love.” Still staring at the letter, Fred sat on the wet grass. Lynn was frantic when she walked past the screen door in the living room and saw her husband sitting drenched in the pouring rain. “Oh God. Fred? Honey? Fred?” He sat unphased by his wife shaking him. Lynn started to cry but sat next to Fred. She wrapped her arms around him and held on. He returned to his senses when Lynn put her fingers in his saturated hair and pulled his head to hers to whisper, “Please come back to me.”

Later, Fred called Aunty Lucy and told her about the letter but that he'd decided he would not be visiting his father in jail, ever.

It was the summer of 1942 when fourteen-year-old Fred scored the winning shot over his best friend, Tommy Kimura. The boys were in the habit of running to the basketball court at Kaimuki Park after school until either their appetites or the first reaches of moonlight forced them home. Fred was grateful for the temporary break the weekday afternoons provided. But most of all he was grateful Tommy never asked him about his parents or his feelings even though they both knew Fred lived in chronic fear of his father.

Before their births, a month apart, their parents were new neighbors. The expectant women exchanged recipes and the men evaluated the other's handiwork around the
house. Their budding friendship wilted after the boys went off to grade school. Fred's father had trouble finding steady construction work and needed his wife to work part-time at Diamond Bakery. Tommy’s father bought a second car from his growing dental practice and his wife was pregnant with their second child. Later when Fred's mother blamed her perpetual clumsiness for the mysterious bruises that she couldn’t hide under long sleeves and ankle-length dresses, the Kimuras pretended not to see or hear anything out of the ordinary.

On their slow walk home, Tommy saw the ambulance first and stopped in the middle of the street. Fred concentrated on his dribbling and looked back at his frozen friend. “What?” Tommy pointed. Fred turned to see a stretcher exiting his front door, a body under a white sheet. His father handcuffed in the back of a police car. Fred pushed himself to run. “Mom! Mom! Mom!” Two men closed the door to the ambulance and one placed his hand on Fred's shoulder. “I'm sorry, son.”

The Kimuras arranged to have Fred stay over until his family arrived. Fred's mother had one sister, Lucy, who would visit during Christmas and summer breaks before she was no longer invited. Fred's mother's parents had died before his birth. Fred's father was an only child, estranged from his family. Aunty Lucy would arrive the next morning to bring Fred to live with her in Hilo.

The next morning, Mrs. Kimura peeked into Tommy's room to wake Fred but was startled to find he was still awake. She informed him that his Aunty would be arriving soon. Tommy stirred and sat up. The two boys waited until the other found the words to speak. Mr. Kimura entered into the silence and offered wishes that he could have done something more and assured him things would be okay. Fred didn't look back at the yellow one-story house when Aunty Lucy came to take him to the airport. Right before Fred closed the car door, Tommy called out, “Fred!” Fred looked up. Tommy held out his hand and waved a tearful goodbye.

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It was four years since Lynn had passed. Their daughter Tiffany had moved to Washington with her naval officer husband and their four children. Tiffany wrote often, sending pictures and called on Fred's birthday and holidays. Fred thought about how old couples usually go shortly after the other, and he wondered why he had survived so long after his wife's death. Although it was painful to stand for too long, he would observe the remnants of a well-tended garden on the lush, hilly, one-acre property every morning before tending to his wife's orchids and bringing in the newspaper.

As Fred walked to the mailbox, he noticed a moving truck across the street. He didn't know the Miyashiros had found new tenants. In his younger days, Fred, or rather Lynn, would take a welcome basket of fruit across the street but he didn't trust his old bones to make the trip and back. He watched for a few minutes as a clean-cut, tanned, fit man in his late twenties transported boxes into the house with a petite woman and three children. Weeks passed without an official meeting, although, the men would wave and smile if they were both outside their houses, raking or collecting the mail. Fred never saw the woman outside. After he understood what was happening he took to watching the house from his picture window.

At about 2:50 in the afternoon the school bus would drop the children at the entrance of the short dead-end street. They were abnormally quiet. He remembered how Tiffany would fill every molecule of space in the house with noise from the moment she was born. Sometimes he would see but not hear them doing chores around the house before the man came home. The oldest would hang laundry on the line in the open garage with the youngest by her side reaching into a basket half her size to pass the next wet article of clothing. The boy would sweep the driveway and straighten the shoes on the shoe rack. He could see them mouth words to one another in a silent language. Sometimes the three would be kneeling for hours, rain or shine, weeding whatever microscopic weeds were growing in the front yard that was entirely landscaped in river rocks.

He wanted to go and talk to them but didn't want to scare them.

One night Fred was jostled out of his sleep by a loud crash. He put on his hearing aids and heard the woman cry, “Please, No!” Fred picked up the phone and called the police.

“911, what's your emergency?”

“My neighbor is attacking his wife. She needs help, please send someone quick.”

“What do you see? Does he have a weapon?”

“Ah...no, I...I don't know. I can't see. They're in the house. He's yelling and hitting her.” He hesitated, “this is not the first time.”

“I have your address. I'm sending an officer now.”

“Hurry.”

Blue light streamed into the living room and Fred steadied himself as he stood up and returned to his look-
out. He opened the curtain wide, stood, and watched. The officer knocked on his neighbor’s door.

The petite, fair-skinned woman with long black hair opened the door slightly.

“Ma’am, there was a report of an assault happening at this residence. Is everything alright?” asked the officer.

“Yes. Nothing’s happening,” she said starting to close the door.

The officer stopped the door, “Sorry, ma’am, if you don’t mind, I’d like to take a look around.”

The woman hesitated, glanced behind her, then let the officer in, leaving the door open. Fred could see the three children huddled together on the floor looking at the ground, their arms hugging their knees. The oldest girl looked about thirteen, the boy ten or eleven, and the youngest girl six or seven.

Fred was disappointed that the officer left without the man in handcuffs. The rain drowned out any other noise that night.

The next morning he called the station and asked why nothing more was being done for the family. Since the woman was unwilling to press charges, there was nothing the officer could do. He felt a knot in his stomach and wondered if his neighbors had called the police on his father, would his mother have pressed charges? He thought about his old friend, Tommy. Fred had once driven to Tommy’s house when he went to O‘ahu on a business trip for the nursery to see if he was still there. Tommy’s family had moved and the new family knew nothing of the Kimuras. After that initial trip to Honolulu, Fred requested the responsibility be given to someone else. No one questioned him.

The overcast morning turned into a cloudless afternoon. Fred took a basket into the backyard and picked a few of the fresh fallen avocados. He plucked the ripe Ka‘ū oranges that were within his reach and placed them on top of the avocados in the basket. He untangled parts of the liliko‘i vines and found a couple softball-sized fruits to add to the bounty. Last, he put a few of the apple bananas he’d bought at the store recently. He went back into the house and set the basket on the kitchen table. After Fred made himself a half of a turkey sandwich and took his medication, he went into his bedroom closet and pulled out an old, dusty shoebox. Fred opened it and rummaged through the pile of unopened envelopes from his father. He pulled out the tattered, ink-splattered paper. There were no intelligible words but Fred remembered which particular blots once read, “Love, Dad.” He set the letter on the bed and took out the letters one by one, organizing them by date.

Fred’s hands shook as he opened the first envelope. He read all seventy-seven letters. The first few were more of the same message of the original letter. Then it seemed as though his father knew he’d never see his son again and he started to write down his own story. Fred read about his father’s upbringing on the sugar plantation, his grandfather’s gambling and drinking problems, the happier times his father shared with his mother. Fred replaced the letters in the shoebox and returned it to the closet. He went into the kitchen and grabbed the basket of fruits.

Fred felt himself shrinking as he limped across the street. He was fourteen again by the time he reached the door. He stood for a few labored breaths to regain his footing and adjust the basket against his hip. He reached the door and saw his mother’s face, then Aunty Lucy, Lynn, and finally his father. He straightened up, took a deep breath and knocked at the door.