Just Like Vietnam

by Kirby Wright

During sophomore year at Punahou High, my big brother Barry got his driver's license after passing both the written and the on-road test on his first try. He was one of the first students in our class to do so, but that was because he was older and had reached the legal age to drive. He'd been held back for scoring low on the entrance exam. My father said he wished Barry would apply the same hard work and determination when it came to schoolwork.

Barry took advantage of his license right away. He asked Monica the Cheerleader out on movie dates and they drove to Waikiki in my mother's Barracuda. Barry bragged that the dates turned into torrid make out sessions at Lover's Lookout, a stone's throw from the Diamond Head Lighthouse. He bought Old Spice Cologne and shaved his face and neck with my father's razor. After three dates, Monica told my brother she was going back to the groundskeeper at Honolulu Zoo. Barry didn't reveal much about what had happened but I was sure it had something to do with his inability to share anything meaningful about himself. I knew his conversations with the fairer sex were one-sided because I listened in on the extension. He'd ask a barrage of questions to avoid awkward silences—it sounded like he was interrogating the girl. If she asked Barry questions about himself, he responded with simple "yes" or "no" answers and continued on with the third degree. I knew Barry was using the questions to hide who he was because our father had eroded his confidence and self-worth.

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A few weeks after his breakup, Barry went cruising in the Barracuda with his pal Chuck Marsland. Chuck didn't have his license so he loved tagging along. Barry said driving down Kalakaua Avenue at night reminded him of the movie American Graffiti. He never invited me. He said he got the car up to 90 miles an hour around Diamond Head Road because locals in a '57 Chevy were chasing them and the Portuguese driver stuck his head out and spit at the Barracuda.

"Twah," Barry said, "twah! That's what it sounded like."

You mean the Chevy?" I asked.

"No, dickweed," he replied, "that's the sound of the fuckin' Portagee spitting."

"Did you clean the spit off the Barracuda?"

"It flew back and hit the Chevy," he claimed.

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Barry went gun crazy. Whether it was in reaction to losing Monica or getting spit at I didn't know. He took the triggering mechanism apart on his .22 rifle and began filing down the firing pin. Instead of studying in his room at night, he filed. He sounded like a convict filing away at prison bars. My father thought Barry was spending his time studying and he told me to buckle down like my brother. Barry's rifle went from semi-automatic to fully automatic and all he had to do was hold the trigger and the gun could fire a fifteen-round burst. He made a crude silencer out of surfboard foam one afternoon after school and attached it to the end of the barrel—it still made a noise when he shot, but it sounded more like a cap gun than a .22. The neighbors never complained. My kid sister Julie had quit using her swings because she was scared Barry might shoot her instead of the birds. But she came out with me after Barry fired a burst into the lawn. We watched him use a knuckle buster knife he'd bought at Big 88 Surplus to dig out the slugs.

"Why dig them up?" I asked.

"Forensics." He held a handful of mushroomed metal up to Julie's face. "Imagine these in your skull?"

She cringed. "No."

"You'd have a Swiss cheese brain, lil monkey."

"Leave her alone," I said.

"Shut up, dickweed."

Julie retreated to her favorite swing. She rocked back and forth on it but kept her feet on the ground.

I watched Barry build a pyramid of slugs on the grass. "If you'd had a gun in the car when that guy spit," I said, "would you have shot him?"

He held up a slug and sniffed it. "Dead Portagee."

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Barry dressed in fatigues and a camouflage hat every day after school. He camped on a lounge chair in the backyard after scattering breadcrumbs over the lawn. There were so many crumbs it looked like snow. He shot pigeons, doves,

and mynah birds before my father got home at five. If he wasn't holding the rifle he was rubbing the blade of his knuckle buster against a sharpening stone; it had a double-edged blade and there were slots in its handle for fingers. It was like having a knife and brass knuckles at the same time. I knew something evil was festering in my brother. Maybe he wanted to inflict pain and cause death to feel better about himself and to vent over his failed relationship. There was no limit to the birds he killed and no remorse when he stood over their beating wings. He liked it when they were wounded so he could end their lives at point blank.

"That's so cruel," I told him.

"They'll die someday anyway," he said.

“So will we, but you don’t go around shooting people.”

You never know,” he said.

I knew if he treated helpless creatures this way he could kill me too, if I got him mad enough. When the pigeons, doves, and mynas began avoiding our yard, Barry bought .22 birdshot to increase his chances of killing smaller birds like finches and sparrows. He loved it when he hit two or more birds with a single shot. "Birdbrains," he'd say as he studied their carcasses. Instead of burying the bodies, he grabbed them by their claws and flung them in the direction of neighboring pools. When no birds were in sight, he took pot shots at kites, helicopters, and low flying planes.

"Wanna take a shot?" he asked me as a helicopter flew toward us from Diamond Head.

"At what?"

"The KGMB traffic helicopter."

"You're pupule, Barry."

"And you're a kua'aina." He put the binoculars down and raised his rifle. The foam silencer was attached to the end of the barrel and he fired a burst. The chopper veered off.

"I think you hit it!" I said.

"Just like Vietnam," he answered.

"Who are you, the Vietcong?"

Barry pulled his camouflage hat down over his face and darted under the breadfruit tree. "Don't be gawkin' like a fuckin’ stupe," he called from the shadows, "they might see you."

"Does that mean I can't play basketball in the driveway?"

"Yeah," he said, "it's a game for dopes anyway."

I went into the house to express my concerns about Barry to my mother. She hummed along as Andy Williams sang "Moon River" on a 45 in the living room. She saw me and smiled. My mother had on her blonde bouffant wig and pink cocktail dress. She started singing with Andy and, when their duet was over, she heard me out. She decided Barry was going through a phase and would snap out of it sooner or later. I could tell my mother was secretly pleased that Barry had broken up with his girlfriend by the way she pretended to look concerned whenever I mentioned Monica's name. She'd always frown whenever Barry was on the phone with a girl.

"Barry's crazy for that gun," my mother said.

"He could kill someone."

"He only shoots those poor birds."

"Not always. He just blasted a helicopter."

"Oh, I'm sure it was too far away," she replied. "I wish your brother would take up a different hobby."

"It'd be different if we ate the birds."

"Yes, but those birds could have diseases."

"Gramma shot doves all the time. Doves are good eating."

"I won't eat anything with a bullet in it," she replied and told me how horrible it was to spit out a hunk of lead from a lamb chop she'd ordered at Durghan Park in her hometown of Boston.

"Can you guess what he does with the bodies?" I asked.

My mother nodded. "Mrs. Gulickson's getting tired of cleaning feathers out of her pool. You know, they clog up all of her drains."

"You told her it was Barry?"

"I did no such thing," she said.

My father came home from work early one day and caught Barry shooting. He took away the gun and locked it in the trunk of his Olds. Barry kept his fatigues on and pulled out a bamboo blowgun. He kept himself occupied by shooting needle nose darts at chameleons and geckos out in the garden.

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Barry got a crush on Princess Caroline of Monaco. She was a cover girl in LOOK Magazine and he kept that issue on the bookshelf above his bed. My mother told me Barry's dream was to become a racecar driver, win the Grand Prix of Monaco, and marry the princess. Barry was certain it would be love at first sight if Caroline saw him. My brother's fantasies weren't completely delusional. He was probably the best looking teenager in Kahala. He was tall, blond, and muscular. His muscles came from bodysurfing Pipeline on days when waves exceeded ten feet. He wore fiberglass fins on his hands and rubber fins on his feet and he competed with board surfers for the best waves. Talent scouts for commercials and print work had approached him. When we were on the beach at the Outrigger Canoe Club, the blonde widow of the founder of Trader Vic's asked him out for a drink.

"You oughta light that chick's fire," I told Barry.

He frowned. "She looks like an old prune with dyed hair."

"Just be a gigolo and score some cash."

"You go fuck the prune for kala," he replied.

My father wanted Barry to be a scholar athlete. It was an ideal my father had fashioned for himself growing up hanai in Kaimuki. Since he'd been class president and captain of the swim team at Saint Louis High School, he projected that ideal on his oldest. My father had no designs for me because he considered the second born cowardly and weak, like his younger brother Bobby. My role was to serve as Barry's foil by playing a checks-and-balances brother who occasionally exerted himself to keep the older brother in line. Achieving my father's ideal was impossible for Barry not because he lacked either brains or ambition, but because our father had undermined his self-worth. From the times he'd made Barry cry for not running the bases correctly in Little League to leather belt beatings for everything from breaking louvers to drinking chocolate milk without permission, my father had systematically destroyed his confidence. Barry was a basket case of unresolved hurts and insecurities.

"How come you never praise Barry?" my mother asked my father.

"Because he does nothing to make me proud."

"There must be something."

Can you think of one thing?"

"Last week he washed my Barracuda."

"That doesn't count."

My brother's loss of confidence twisted his sense of justice and his capacity to forgive. He would stockpile little hurts until he demoted a friend to the status of acquaintance and, if the hurts continued, the friend became a foe. The only exceptions were the Bad Boys he hung out with at Punahou School. You were either for Barry or against him. He'd deduct points for not returning a call promptly or not agreeing with everything he said. If a friend challenged him, he was quick to punish and slow to make up. Even if Barry was wrong, the friend would have to do the making up or the friendship was over. Breaking a promise to him was a sin. A friend's personal achievement could be grounds for banishment from the Kingdom of Barry. Chuck made the varsity volleyball team and Barry said, "What a kiss ass mahu."

Barry delighted in the suffering of others. He smirked when our starting fullback blew out his knee. When a fellow sophomore nearly lost his leg water skiing, Barry said in two years he'd have to hobble up to the stage on a peg leg like Captain Hook to get his diploma. The Punahou Carnival became my brother's personal playground for chicanery and chaos. He teamed up with Mike Bradley and together they used long wide straws to shoot needle-nosed darts at helium balloons; when the balloons popped, they dropped their straws into big cups and pretended to be drinking. Barry loved it when the balloon belonged to a little kid and the kid started howling. He told me one of Mike's darts missed a balloon and hit a girl in the eye.

Is she all right?" I asked.

Barry snickered. "We didn't stick around to find out."

When they got bored shooting darts, Barry and Mike snuck into the White Elephant tent and drew beards and mustaches on seniors in old yearbooks. At the Haunted House, Barry spit at a vampire while Mike peed in a coffin. They threw play money off the Ferris Wheel and laughed watching people scramble below for the falling bills. I worked at the Saimin Booth and they expected me to sneak them bowl after bowl of free saimin. Barry made friends out of tough guys in the crowd by promising free noodles.

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Barry sent away for a book on isometrics and went on a self-improvement kick the day the book arrived. He did exercises out in the backyard while I shadowboxed my reflection in the glass doors. He bought a weight bench and got serious about lifting. He filled buckets with sand and used them for laterals. My father gave Barry a lecture on the pitfalls of weightlifting, things like developing bursitis and rupturing discs.

"You're no doctor," Barry said.

“You'll be sorry later in life," my father replied.

"I'll die young."

The more my father criticized, the more he inspired Barry to lift. Barry's swung the fifty-pound buckets skyward, one in each hand. The sweat poured down his face and he grunted with each lift. His green eyes were fierce with defiance.

"Here comes the bursitis," I joked.

He grimaced. "Nice."

"You're getting as big as the football players."

"Good."

In reaction to Barry's efforts at improving his body, my father bought New Balance running shoes and jogged after work around Hunakai Park. He jogged alone. If I asked to go he resented it because I'd turn the jogs into contests and lap him after a mile. He was hapa haole but tried keeping that a secret because of the stereotype that all Hawaiians were dumb and lazy. He looked more white than local, but his eyes slanted. His eyes were the color of coal. He’d fought the Japanese during World War II and had a footlocker stuffed with medals and ribbon bars. I wondered how my father felt seeing his sons getting stronger and stronger. Mrs. Murphy had told my mother that she thought he was jealous of me and Barry because we were better looking. If he was jealous, I think it was more because he hated us for having the things he never had as a kid. He’d been born a bastard and was raised by his kanaka maoli grandmother and a trio of ne’er-do-well uncles. He used chores to reaffirm his authority over Barry and me. He’d criticize our work with comments such as "You've got zero stamina," and "When I was your age I could go all day." If Julie were out on her swings when he started criticizing she’d quit swinging and run to her room. My father assigned Herculean tasks like sodding the front and back lawns over the weekend and repairing pipes caught in the roots of 200-foot coconut trees. When it came to personal hygiene, my father got mad when he discovered I'd used shaving cream on my first shave. He said I was wasting money and that I should use soap like him.

"But Uncle Bobby uses shaving cream," I said.

My father grimaced. “And how do you know that?”

"He left it behind in the bathroom on Moloka'i."

"Bobby's a goddamn spendthrift,” he replied, “and that's where

you're heading."

My father called Barry a mahu for using shampoo and conditioner. When Barry bought a blow dryer, he referred to him as "Liberace's boyfriend."

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My mother prayed for my father to be less critical. She said Novenas, lit Offertory candles and visited the Stations of the Cross. When he only got worse, she continued to consult clairvoyants and kahunas. Most figured she wanted a prediction of his demise. She taped a kahuna who read tarot cards and played it one night after my father went to bed.

"Yo' husband stay Pisces," the kahuna said.

"Scorpio," my mother replied.

"He git da Fool's card."

"Isn't that interesting."

"Dat buggah goin' die da kine Fool's death."

"Well," my mother said, "he does take those little planes over to Moloka'i."

"Dat's it! Plane crash, into da channel."

"Isn't that awful," my mother said on the tape.

My mother pulled out a second tape and popped it into the recorder. A clairvoyant known as Checkers came on and said my mother was in store for some big changes and new opportunities. He talked about my mother meeting up with an old flame.

My mother stopped the tape. "Checkers wears an opihi necklace."

"So?" I asked.

"He says it gives him psychic powers."

"Who's the old flame?"

"Checkers couldn't see the face, but he said the man has lots of money and that he's always loved me."

"Could it be Fletcher?"

"That's just what I was thinking."

"How much did you pay Checkers?"

"Promise not to tell?"

"I promise." The "I promises" were increasing as my mother's obsession with psychics took hold. They were her way of insuring I wouldn't tell my father because she didn't want him accusing her of spending all his hard-earned money on witchcraft.

"I gave Checkers one hundred dollars," admitted my mother.

"No!"

She nodded. "That's what they all charge. Checkers usually wants two hundred and doesn't allow you to tape him. But, because I know Mrs. Murphy, I got a good deal."

My mother was so preoccupied with excavating death in the future she'd forgotten about her children. As long as we looked okay from the outside she figured we were doing fine. If we were melancholy, it was just a phase. If we complained about our father she'd say, "Oh, don't I know it." She'd find a way of turning the conversation around to make us feel sorry for her. She made it clear she was the martyr in the family—she wanted credit for sticking it out with a miserable man. She took turns luring Barry and me into conversations about our father, dialogues beginning with a promise never to tell what she was about to reveal. Then she'd play the tapes.

One night, my father walked in unexpectedly in his pjs when I was huddled around the dining room table with my mother and Barry. Barry and I looked up sheepishly.

My mother pressed the STOP button. "Well, hello, Dear."

"What's all this whispering?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing."

"We whisper so we don't wake you," Barry said.

My father frowned. "Isn't it about time you all got to bed?"

"We're discussing Father's Day," I told him.

"Bullshit."

My mother stood up and kissed him. It reminded me of Judas in the olive garden. After he blew his nose and disappeared down the hallway, my mother said she only stayed married because he was paying for Punahou. When Barry told her that her happiness was more important, she said she'd remain at his side because she pitied him.

"Pity's the first cousin of hate," I said.

"We all have our crosses to bear," my mother told us solemnly, "and your father's mine." She strolled into the kitchen and turned on the burner for the teakettle. She drank lots of tea and snuck chocolate at night so she wouldn't get tired and have to go to bed.

"I know the way to end Mom's suffering," Barry whispered.

"How?"

He smirked. "Easy," he said. "Just aim and pull a trigger."

Notes

hanai: raised by extended family, usually the grandparents

hapa haole: part Hawaiian and part white

kahuna: psychic

kala: money

kanaka maoli: having at least 50% Hawaiian blood

kua'aina: idiot, country bumpkin

mahu: gay

opihi: limpet attached to shoreline stones

pupule: crazy

Kirby Wright was born and raised in Honolulu, Hawaii. He is a graduate of Punahou School in Honolulu and the University of California at San Diego. He received his MFA in Creative Writing from San Francisco State University. Wright has been nominated for two Pushcart Prizes and is a past recipient of the Jodi Stutz Memorial Prize in Poetry, the Ann Fields Poetry Prize, the Academy of American Poets Award, the Robert Browning Award for Dramatic Monologue, and Arts Council Silicon Valley Fellowships in Poetry and The Novel. BEFORE THE CITY, his first poetry collection, took First Place at the 2003 San Diego Book Awards. Wright is also the author of the companion novels PUNAHOU BLUES and MOLOKA'I NUI AHINA, both set in Hawaii. He was a Visiting Fellow at the 2009 International Writers Conference in Hong Kong, where he represented the Pacific Rim region of Hawaii. He was also a Visiting Writer at the 2010 Martha's Vineyard Residency in Edgartown, Mass., and the 2011 Artist in Residence at Milkwood International, Czech Republic.