

## **Man and Bird and Beast**

*In December of 2015, three boys from my high school murdered a colony of albatrosses living in the Kaena Point Wildlife Sanctuary where I conducted research.*

The Midway Atoll is going under. Sea levels are on the rise and the world's largest albatross colony is about to lose its home. In an effort to save the species, Dr. Young and her team of conservationists have begun translocating chicks to higher ground within the Campbell Wildlife Reserve on O'ahu.

Most of the chicks made it. One ate a Kiawe twig, whose thorns punctured his stomach and killed him. I spend part of the day at the reserve combing through the area for Kiawe and ripping it out of the ground. By the end of a couple hours, I've piled up a small mountain of uprooted plants. I look over at the fledglings toddling around the enclosure, and think that today, there is one less thing that can hurt them.

The chicks must be translocated before they turn one month old. After that, the electromagnetic signature of wherever they are is imprinted on them, and that location becomes the one they migrate back to every breeding season. The birds at Campbell spend most of the day preening themselves in the little wooden huts built for them. The adventurous ones wander around the open field within the fence. I watch one nibble on the wires of the sound system that plays the adult birds' calls, and another one nestle at the feet of the two plastic albatross decoys that stand watch over the colony from the top of their hill.

I wonder about the fledglings' parents, back in the doomed Midway colony. I wonder if they felt anything when their chicks were taken away from them. I wonder if it was anything like what the Kaena Point albatrosses felt that one winter when they returned from their foraging trip to the wreckage of their nests, filled with fragments of their smashed eggs picked clean white by the rats and ants.

Dr. Young asks me if we still talk about it on campus. I want to say yes, so she knows that we care. That we have not forgotten the atrocity that took place in December of 2015, that it matters to us. So she knows that we as a school still wear the weight of what national headlines called, "one of the most horrific wildlife crimes in history" like an albatross around our neck.

But we don't talk about it. Is it because we've forgotten? Or because we never knew? We've all seen the photos of mutilated carcasses on the news, but how many people realize the ecological consequences behind the slaughtering of the 17 Laysan albatrosses? How many know that 10% of the breeding population was eliminated that night, or understand the way that continues to devastate the surrounding biome?

Maybe we don't talk about it because no one was ever willing to start the conversation. After hearing about the killings on the radio while driving to school in the morning, I kept waiting for it to come up in assembly, in chapel, or in some email home. It never did. Punahou's failure to take accountability for the actions of its students made it feel like someone else's crime, and sent a message to all of us that it is far easier to disown members of our community than it is to address our own faults. The school refused to acknowledge that it—to some

extent—shaped those three boys into the people they were on the day they decided to drive to the North Shore and murder endangered seabirds. In the statement issued by Punahou’s communications director, Laurel Husain, we don’t even apologize.

*“We were dismayed by the senseless destruction of the albatross nests in the Kaena Point Natural Area Reserve. This important nesting area and the surrounding reserve are wonderful educational resources for students in Hawaii. It is disturbing to hear that teenagers with ties to Punahou, possibly one current student, may have been involved in the incident. This deplorable act contradicts the values of the School and the respect of our community and the environment that we protect. The school is fully cooperating with the various agency investigations as they gather facts about who was actually involved.”*

It doesn’t matter whether this, “deplorable act contradicts the values of the school.” It’s still a reflection of it. There’s no escaping that, and it’s more shameful than anything else to even attempt to. We can’t expect anyone to believe our claims that we respect the community and protect the environment until we’re willing to put aside our reputation and finally claim responsibility for something we’re not proud of. The worst part is that, in the statement, the words, “we are sorry” never come up.

I suppose that’s my personal connection to this project. I am a part of this school, just as much a reflection of it as the accused, and I am sorry.

I know that one day of syringing fish oil into little beaks and pulling weeds is not enough to deserve forgiveness from the birds, from the state of Hawaii, from the earth itself, and nothing ever will be. Nonetheless, we have got to begin somewhere. There is nothing more unforgivable than doing nothing and letting felony theft and 15 counts of animal cruelty get swept under the rug with the rest of Punahou’s problems. I tell myself that perhaps today, I am inching toward amnesty.

In the afternoon, I go hunting for this strange red fruit growing from vines along the edges of the enclosure. Dr. Young calls it Mousefruit, since it attracts mice small enough to crawl through the predator-proof fence. Sure enough, each fruit has a couple of bites taken out of it. She says that the mice aren’t dangerous, yet, but in other colonies they’ve observed that as soon as one mouse eats a chick, all of them seem to acquire a taste for albatross. It’s like they’ve developed hive mind, she tells me.

She believes that Carter is the only one that doesn’t deserve to go to prison. “The other two are another story,” she says. “But he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong people. Some kids will go along with anything when they’re desperate to fit in with the crowd. Punahou can do that to you. That’s part of the reason I don’t teach there anymore.”

I suppose we’ve got our own hive mind here.

I try and remember what those three boys were like, before all of this. I think I was friends with Carter, but after everything that happened, it’s hard to pretend that I knew him. All I know is that I loved driving with him. He had this massive SUV with the worst mileage and the best subs. He picked me up from my house a couple of times and we’d drive with the music so

loud that it shook the cars around us on the highway. With the volume high enough, you didn't have to think about anything.

They say he was just the getaway car. I wonder if his subs were blaring so loud that night that he couldn't think straight, couldn't see what he was doing.

Does he know now what he's done? The past 14 years of Dr. Young's research on the migration patterns and reproductive behaviors of Hawaii's albatrosses have been obliterated. She says that the part of the population lost that night may never be recovered. As we sit in the grass eating our sandwiches I think about how today, on the other side of the island, Christian is standing in a court room downtown. And whether he pleads guilty or not, whether he gets a prison sentence or a slap on the wrist (as Punahou kids have grown too accustomed to) there will come a day when he's done his time, his community service, or whatever the court deems a just punishment. Someday, he'll move to some other town where he's known as something other than the Albatross Murderer. And if he can learn to live with the guilt of his crime, his life can return to the way it was before that night.

The Kaena Point colony can't say the same.

I am walking back to the car when I hear the frenzied flapping of wings. A bird leaps out from the ground beneath me and flies away, fleeing the burrow I nearly stepped on. She leaves behind two chicks, each the size of my big toe.

"They're franklins," Dr. Young tells me. "They're invasive. They compete with the albatrosses for resources. We're supposed to kill them."

The franklin chicks are so tiny and puffy and golden brown like tater tots. I try to understand how they could be dangerous to the albatrosses that everyone here has worked so hard to protect. They do not look like killers, but to them I must. If this is any better than the massacre carried out by baseball bat, it does not feel like it.

"That's how it is with biology," she says. "Sometimes you have to kill a species so another can live."

I wonder how alive Raymond felt that night. I wonder if he felt more or less human as he took a machete to the birds' legs, if it sparked in him some feeling of invincibility that the drugs couldn't.

I can't do it. On the ride home, I cup one chick in each palm and hold them against my chest to keep them warm.