

AJ Apalla

Honors 380

February 18, 2024

Ornamental

This is a story about love.

I've wondered what it'd be like to live as a flower. Unburdened by the loads of obligations. How nice would it be to reach out towards the sky unabashedly- to share what beauty I have with the unexpected. What if I were a hibiscus in Hawai'i?

The *Hibiscus brackenridgei*, is a shrub that can grow up to 10 meters tall. Make no mistake- it is not the shrub that is cared about- but what it grows. The endemic plants display beautiful, bright yellow flowers that can rival the sun. In Hawaiian, I go by *Ma'o hau hele* – also known to locals as the official state flower as of June 1988.

We represent the spirit of aloha, symbolizing hospitality, friendship and affection. It's no wonder we make a living by looking as pretty as possible. After all, I am an ornamental flower. I generally open around two in the afternoon and close after nine at night. Spring is our busiest season, though. We bud and bloom into the wonders we were destined to be. Now exposed to the elements and the culture of a new world- we're left vulnerable. Beautiful and vulnerable. Unfortunately, it is not always sunshine and rainbows for us. Even though we bloom- it is a short-lived spectacle. Like fireworks- we hope to capture the admiration of those looking even if it's just for a moment.

The harsh Summer was upon us- with a stroke of luck it has been fated for me to blossom near a beach whose sands told stories in footprints, and whose waters teemed with life below and above. Like a new tenant, I had to make do with the neighbors.

It wasn't all bad. For the most part- they'd leave me alone; people that is. On some instances a few would stop by and look. Me- being the wonderful flower that I am- would show off my fiery yellow petals and stretch them out to embrace their glancing affections.

What if I were taken? What the people who saw me would go out of their way to pick me up? Would it hurt? I'd imagine it would. Would they take care of me? I hope so. In these thoughts I shamefully remember what really would happen: I'd die. Slowly but surely, I would die.

About a month before Summer, at what felt like my peak, I met a girl.

The sun smiled and the wind blew cool as always. As shy as she was at a glance, her gentle hands ran down the stem behind me- effortlessly snapping me off with room to spare. No hesitation in her hands.

Stripped away from the joys of simply existing near a sea salty coastline. Her serene eternalness drawing a line against my fragile lifespan. The days of being out in the open- exposing my exotic petals for all to see and admire- no longer.

She put me on her right ear initially, then stopped for a moment and tucked me behind her left. In Hawaiian culture, that means that the lady is unavailable.

She had silky black hair and freshly sun-kissed skin. Her complexion matched the light red dress she had on. My yellow added a nice touch to the outfit. Even off the earth- I still manage to do what I do best. However, it seems that my purpose now is to accentuate another kind of beauty.

Flowers in general seem to only catch attention during their blooming seasons. Even more so when they are intentionally picked and brought together in the form of a bouquet. It is only in times of celebration when they're an appropriate gift. And if that gift is for those who've passed- is it not a celebration of life? In either case, clearly, I must have been picked for the intention of celebration.

She approached the waters. Her foot lightly sank into the dry sand with every step. She neared an area shadowed by a cliff and some very large, wet rocks- away from the noise and unbothered by conversations of other people. She sat on a dry, flat stone- feet dangling off just feet away from the ocean's tugging waves- and stared far out into the sea. I was obliged to follow.

In my short life, I've always known the touch of the sun. But here now, we looked at him directly. His orange- yellow rays outstretched just like my petals against a backdrop of darkening purples and blues. He slowly sinks into the water- returning to the earth. The legends say that the one responsible, known as *Maui*, is a Hawaiian demigod who tamed the sun with a snare a long time ago, so that he can no longer rise and set too quickly. And so now he takes his time- forever, slowly submerging his way into the water only to resurface in the same manner.

This was the first time I've known stillness with another being.

There have been occasions where bees would stop by to pollinate. Of course they had to, that's what they do. And let's not forget the hummingbirds that visit to feast upon the nectar of our flowers. Unlike bees and hummingbirds, people exhibit other non-mutualistic behaviors with the environment they live in. They seem to have evolved to operate outside of any natural ecosystem of the environment they're in.

About 40% of all endangered species in the United States are endemic Hawaiian species and almost 75% of all extinctions in the U.S. have happened in Hawai'i. Imported livestock have greatly contributed to this. But perhaps people are the culprit.

A selfishness was evident in the actions of the girl. She decided to pull me away from my natural habitat, my home. I had absolutely no say in the fate of that encounter. Although I was here to live my life beautifully and independently- I was left vulnerable to anything and everything, including her.

But I saw no benefit for her taking me. We were alone on a rock- just enjoying the final moments of a glorious day. Away from the judgement of others. What was she thinking- I wondered.

Let's not forget that I am going to die soon. It was inevitably going to happen- but by taking me off my shrub- it only makes the process faster. The idea of death did not scare me. After all, I felt that I've done a good job being beautiful- my purpose has been served.

It must have already been more than an hour watching the sunset. Dedicated surfers still out catching last minute waves to shore. Tourists and *kamaaina* alike were packing and slowly leaving the beach- making room for patient chickens and pigeons to claim their crumbs for dinner.

Suddenly, darkness filled the sky. Low, inaudible chatter echoed from the surfers who were rinsing off the stubborn sand from their rash guards. There was enough light near them to make out that they were teenagers.

Alone in a new dusk, she continued to stare far into the distance, in the same direction the sun was put to rest. Thin clouds laid the foreground against a clear, deep navy-blue. I guess one could say we weren't alone. The night sky flickered with proud eyes- twinkling as to show off to anyone who dared to challenge their brilliance. We saw them. I wonder if they saw us too.

Now here we are, gazing at universes millions of miles away. A vision I never would have experienced if it wasn't for her.

The girl continued to stare into the distance. An array of thick clouds pulled over. The clear night where the stars danced as if they performed just for us- gone. She turned her head and looked towards the parking lot behind the beach. The lamp posts and a local restaurant still emitting their own artificial light.

The moment finally came. She stood up carefully, brushed the lingering dirt off of her dress and headed towards civilization. She gently pulled me off her ear, raised me towards her lips and whispered: thank you.

I guess on a summer day like this- warm and not too hot, with just the right amount of Earth and salt in the air- I could accept that.

2018. Hibiscus. <https://extension.umn.edu/houseplants/hibiscus>

W. Hudson. Insect Control for Home Flowers, Shrubs, and Ground Covers.

https://secure.caes.uga.edu/extension/publications/files/pdf/SB%2048-10_1.PDF

September 2023. Environmental Issues in Hawaii.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Environmental_issues_in_Hawaii

December 2023. Ornamental Plant. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ornamental_plant

E. Herring. August 2001. Hibiscus brackenridgei.

<https://www2.hawaii.edu/~eherring/hawnprop/hib-brac.htm>

A. Apalla. February 2024. Exercise 4.

<https://wsu.instructure.com/courses/1723024/assignments/8818234/submissions/4073624>