He Mele Aloha no ka Niu

By Brandy Nālani McDougall

I’m so tired of pretending each gesture is meaningless,

that the clattering of niu leaves and the guttural call of birds

overhead say nothing. There are reasons why

the lichen and moss kākau the niu’s bark, why

this tree has worn an ahu of ua and lā

since birth. Scars were carved into its trunk to record

the mo’olelo of its being by the passage of insects

becoming one to move the earth, speck by speck.

Try to tell them to let go of the niu rings marking

each passing year, to abandon their only home and move on.

I can’t pretend there is no memory held

in the dried coconut hat, the star ornament, the midribs

bent and dangling away from their roots, no thought

behind the kāwelewele that continues to hold us

steady. There was a time before they were bent

under their need to make an honest living, when

each frond was bound by its life to another
like a long, erect fin
skimming the surface
of a sea of grass and sand.
   Eventually, it knew it would rise
higher, its flower would emerge
gold, then darken in the sun,
that its fruit would fall, only
to ripen before its brown fronds
bent naturally under the weight
of such memory, back toward
the trunk to drop to the sand,
back to its beginnings, again.
Let this be enough to feed us,
to remember: ka wailewa
i loko, that our own bodies
are buoyant when they bend
and fall, and that the ocean
shall carry us and weave us
back into the sand’s fabric,
that the mo’opuna taste our sweet.

Notes:
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