

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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