**PRESCRIBED FIRE**

**By William Alfred Nu’utupu Giles**

as some of the tallest trees in the world  
redwoods can grow to over 350 feet above the earth  
yet their roots, on average only travel 10 feet into it  
in isolation, it should be physically impossible for them to stand

however, these enormous trees do not grow in isolation  
their roots, each only a single inch thick  
wraps around the roots of it’s neighbors  
a stubborn foundation of brown fingers  
clasps an underground stand  
and grows

my family is a group of redwoods  
that sought god instead of ground  
when my mother immigrated to the united states from Samoa  
she taught none of her children how to speak our native tongue

now 26 years later  
I cannot feel the hands  
of the land I come from  
how do you stand when your roots  
have been burned away

today I am a tree toppling over  
a man cut off at the knees  
stuck between a loved language lost  
and a sky still out of reach

and that is the true legacy of world war II in the Pacific  
a generation of Islander and Asian immigrants who learned  
that their foreign accents and different skin  
could mean your family in internment camps  
learned their place in this society  
could only be bought with blood in uniform  
they learned their citizenship papers  
would only be traded for their severed tongues  
it is true

that the branches of a tree may spread no wider than it’s roots  
but when parent countries  
are just another word for poverty  
when you are made to choose  
between putting your children in culture or clothing  
which blood would you want?

this is how redwoods fall  
they forget the only reason  
they are able to stand and defy common logic  
is how well they hold one another

in Hawai’i  
an immigrant mecca  
where so many of us try to stand with a lost past  
we have old weeping banyan trees who also came from across that sea

these banyan’s start from seeds that are blown to other canopies  
and without pity or regard for past  
they create their own way to the ground  
sprouting aerial roots that crawl to the earth  
and make a home wherever they find it

in Polynesia,  
we have always learned from the earth around us  
so now I do not lament my lack of roots  
instead, I grow them myself

so every day I am a windblown seed  
I am “foreign” accents and different skin  
every day I fall towards the earth and am reborn in dirt  
I am blood in uniform and severed tongue

every day, I am the blood I want  
every day, I look around  
hold on tight to those I love  
and I grow

into an extended

family

tree