

Craig Santos Perez

In ecology, the term "understory" refers to the plant life that grows beneath the canopy of the forest, and consists of a diversity of shrubs, saplings, fungi, and seedlings. When my wife became pregnant last year, we would watch an animated video of a developing fetus on a "My Pregnancy" App every month. I began to think of a human understory, and the various overstories in which we live, dwell, work, and give birth.

My wife, who's Hawaiian, and I both come from cultures that believe in the earth as an ancestor, that all beings are interconnected, and that mutual care and co-belonging are important ecological ethics. At the same time, we both come from places that are currently occupied by the United States of America. This history of colonization and militarization has resulted in severe ecological contamination of our lands, waters and bodies.

Our daughter was born, this year, in a time of further militarization of the Pacific and the devastations of climate change. She is five months old now, beautiful and vulnerable understory at the intersection of our human and natural overstories. So I began a series of poems titled "understory" to explore a native Pacific eco-poetics. This particular poem was written during the RIMPAC military exercises, when the militaries of many countries around the world train in Hawai'i. Nālani is my wife's name and kai (short for kaikainali'i) is my daughter's name (kai mean water in Hawaiian). The word, mākuā, which appears in the poem, means "parent" or "elder."

*from understory (3 months old)
during RIMPAC 2014*

when kai
was newborn

nālani rinses
her in

the sink—
a fat

pilot whale
deafened by

sonar washes
ashore hanalei

bay—now
that kai

is bigger
nālani bathes

her in
the tub—

thousands of
recently spawned

fish litter
the tidelines,

lifeless, of
nānākuli and

mā'ili, ko 'olina
and waikīkī—

while washing
behind kai's

ears, nālani
sings "my

island maui,"
written by

her dad,
jeff mcdougall—

microwave radar
breaks generations

of mound
coral which

fall to
ocean floor—

when we
first take

kai to
the beach,

nālani carries
her into

moana nui—
i tasi—

DU munitions,
PCBs, SINKEX—

nālani secures
her feet

in submerged
land and

holds kai
tightly to

shield from
the currents—

what will
the weapons,

submarines, ships,
aircrafts and

soldiers of
22 nations

take from
us? i

wrap nālani
and kai

in one
large towel

when they
return—lifeguards

tow one

melon-headed

whale carcass
off kailua

to shore—
"i introduced

kai to
grandpa jeff,"

nālani says—
his ashes

scattered in
ma'alaia harbor,

maui, several
decades ago—

is ocean
memorial or

target? monument
or territory?

economic zone
or mākuā?

kai sucks
her fingers—

tastes the
salt water—

without warning,
the salt

wind swells
kai's rib

cage where
a coral

reef shivers—

Craig Santos Perez is a native Chamoru from the Pacific Island of Guåhan (Guam). He is the author of three books, most recently *from unincorporated territory [guma']* (2014).