Fa'afafine & Māhū

Dan Taulapapa McMullin

This poem is a genealogy: ancestral, historical, spiritual, and embodied. It begins with my own lineage, though much of it may also belong to the genealogies of other Pacific readers. Its truths come through history, memory, story, and inheritance, forms of knowledge that cannot always be divided neatly into fact and metaphor. No single poem can contain the whole genealogy. This is one current within it. Me ka mahalo iā Jamaica a me Ākea.

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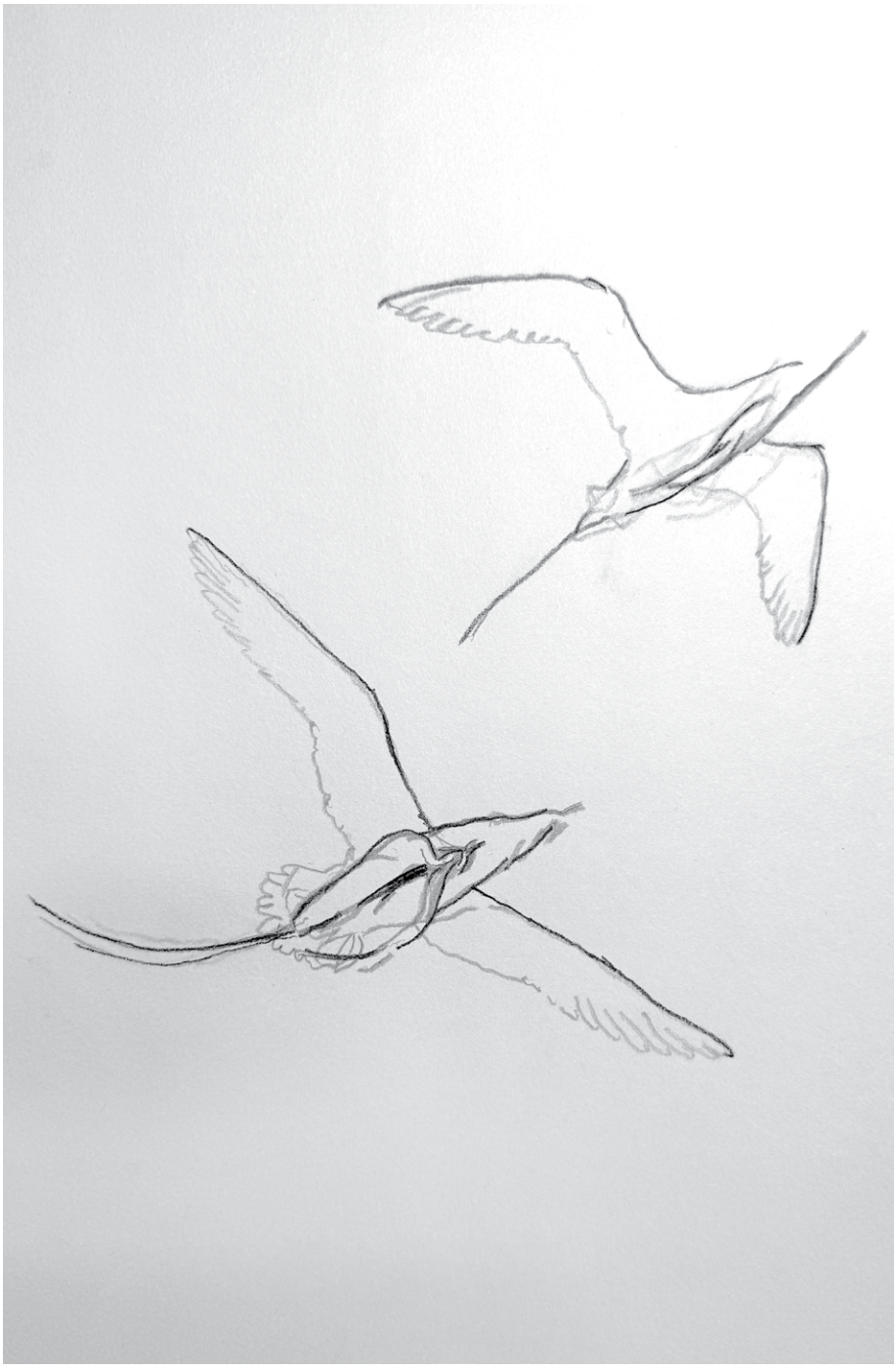
VASA / FAʻAFAFINE / FAFINE

Vasa e,
the unbroken blue mirror
we once
entered
in flight
returned to now
as breath.
Alofa draws their ropes from the deeps,
blood-wet strands,
anchoring meaning.
The Va shimmers
net of lineage,
reef of relationships,
woven like tide.
Above: Tuli, child of Taŋaloa,
wings open in every direction,
island to island,
wind to memory.
Gathering morning dew:
ʻo mata o le timu
the many-eyed rain.
Tuli plucks two grubs from the sand
limb by limb
and shapes
Tāne
and Faʻafafine,
first fishers,
first lovers,
first tide.
When Lo poisons Faʻafafine,
Tuli remakes her:
Fafine, breathing.
Tāne and her joining, becomes the mother of us all:
ʻO Samoa ʻatoa ʻuma lava e.



'O Mealele Kohe
Illustration by Dan Taulapapa McMullin

Fafine Toalua
Illustration by Dan Taulapapa McMullin

MAFUI'E / TE'E

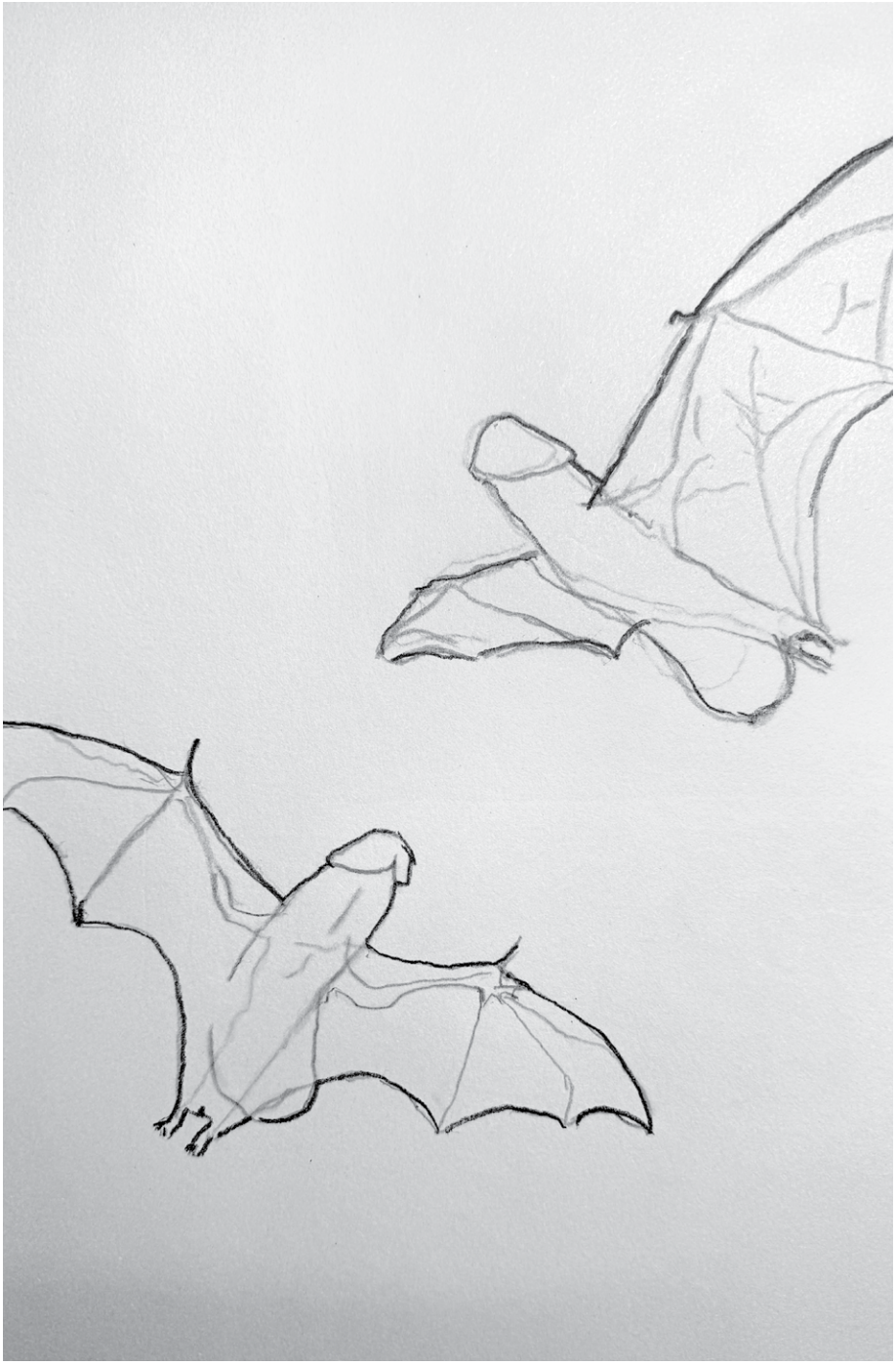
Inland, beneath the volcano's ribs,
Mafui'e teaches:
Pain warms. Steam rises.
The rising speaks.
Its voice is our oldest memory.
To Māui Te'e
sky-lifter,
mast of worlds
Mafui'e taught that distance
is our poem.
Vasa, deep purple mother,
swallowing suns,
ties island to island
with the rope of Te'e.
Islands rising
from the moana its color,
the sami its material,
the Vasa its measure.
Alofa its name, as distance
alofa atu e.

SOLAR ANUS

Centuries loosen,
currents shift.
A wind arrives
from elsewhere
disease-bright,
metal-cold.
Papālaŋi, the pale ones,
papa, their cocks;
laŋi, the pale grey sky
grey dicks, pale peckerwoods.
The valleys fall to sickness.
Nearly all fall.
Grey priests come for the undead,
dragging a grey tide with them.
Auē… Auē e…

FA'ATANE / NAFANUA

Taemā & Tilafaiŋā
sisters once joined at the spine,
parted by salt and beam,
landing at Savai'i
carrying tā tatau from Viti.
Women cry out:
Puipuiŋa le ola o fafine!
Tilafaiŋā steps forward,
takes the mantle Fa'atane,
guardian,
and descends to the malae as
Nafanua,
goddess of buried ancestry,
lawmaker of peace.
The sisters' parting vow:
We will meet again through our children.
Talofa e.



'O Maelele Ule
Illustration by Dan Taulapapa McMullin

MĀHŪ / ATUA TAITI

Across the Vasa, in Taiti:
  Māhū of the mountain,
  of sisters three,
Atua Vahine with smoke-colored hands.
Papālaŋi ships arrive,
  spitting disease.
They promise a milk-mouthed child:
  Iesu,
untouched by sweat or blood.
But Māhū lights the low fires.
Steam rises like a language
  unrolling from leaves.
Herbs hiss names.
The air turns green.
Her visions:
  insects beating mirror wings
    against the mountain spine.
Her curse to
  cannonballs of prayer,
  a god nailed on the white horizon.
    Auē, auē e.

IESU FEVER

Sweet Baby Iesu
  angels armored in gunmetal
moves through the people
  in a fever.
Bodies open,
  flowering in sickness,
    mouths bright as wounds.
Survivors carry the Lotu Taiti
  to Samoa,
tiputa laws clothe beauty
  and health with shame
    the priests taught well.
We pray for deliverance
  from the peckerwoods of land theft,
  from the blackbirding ships come kidnapping.
Salvation becomes
    the grammar of obedience.
Inside us, a fe'e grows
eight tentacles of
    settler hunger,
    missionary snarl.
We learn to call ourselves monsters
  so we may enter
    a backdoor heaven.
Yet the Vasa keeps us salty.
Mafui'e. Fa'atane. Fa'afafine.
In churches with white gloves,
fans whisper:
    We remain.
Samoa 'i Sasa'e / Samoa 'i Sisifo
  two lungs,
one breath.
Sā... e.

ALANEO / LONO

In Hawai‘i, Māhū healers burn kōali,
blue smoke rising
in scripture.
Twelve kahuna of Lono, the Alaneo
chant healing in silence.
But Iesu returns loudly
on the prow of a gunboat.
The survivors sent to
whaling decks,
coffins of the new gospel.
Kāmuelā reaches Aunu‘u,
my mother’s island,
and is renamed Sāmuela, our ancestor.
Hawai‘i nei salts
our Hāmoa blood.
Flags arrive on new storms:
Siamani
Maleke
Peretānia
Falani
each a flood sent by distant banquets
each a rupture from our bodies.
Auē, auē e.

MANU‘A / FE‘E

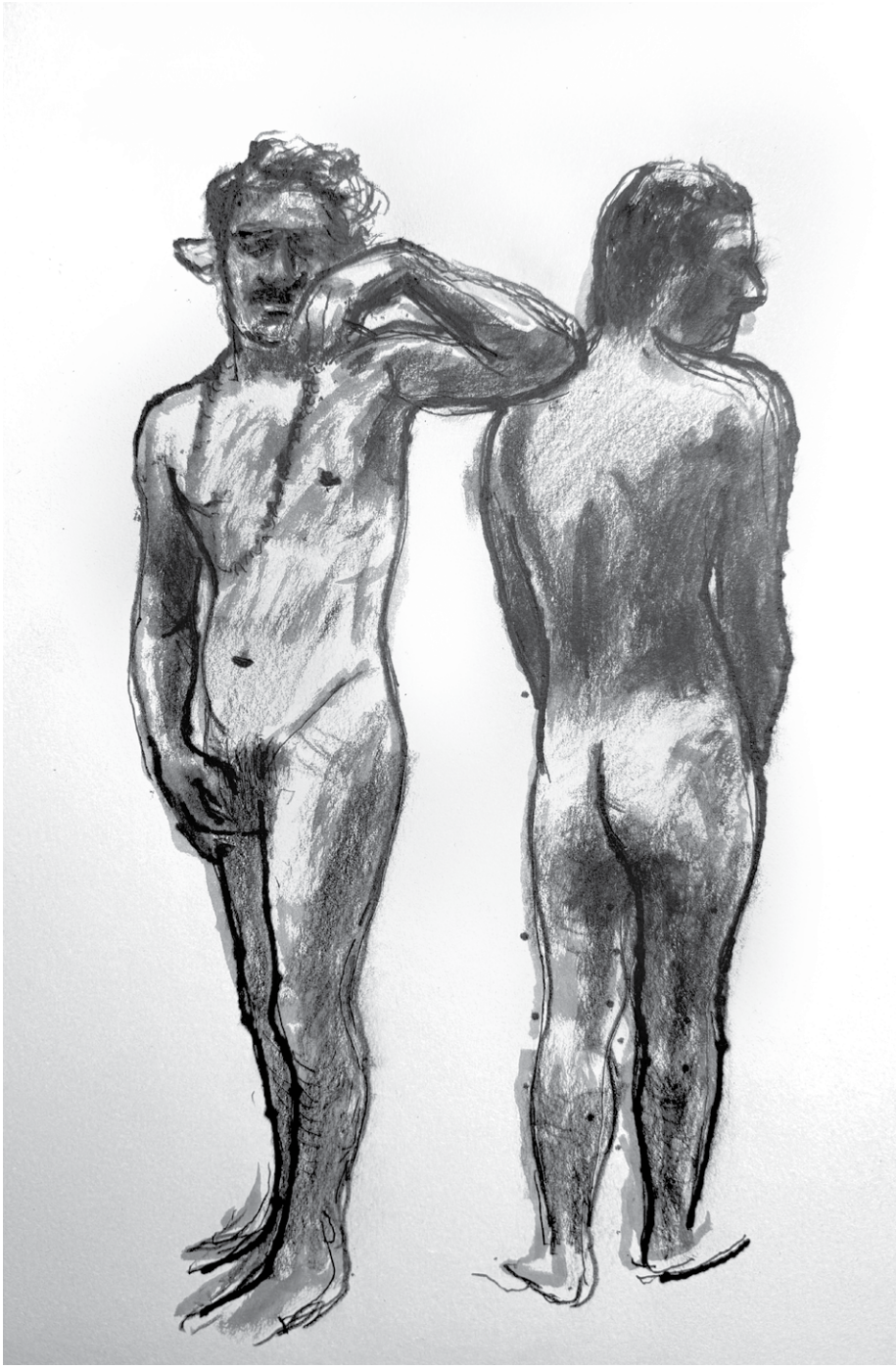
Tui Manu‘a Elisala stands
before American cannons,
island ringed in iron.
Tried twice
on land and sea.
Forced to sign the Deed of Cession,
he swims beneath the white ‘Aniva
that night.
The fe‘e grows inside him,
devouring
the sovereignty of his noble heart.
The grey ones glance.
Our sovereignty moves
as water moves
through the many
not the crown of flowers but the roots.
Fa‘afafine the wide river.
Fa‘atane the narrow.
‘O le Atu ‘atoa e.

SIAMANI / NIU SILA

Siamani comes,
  cutting borders with
    teacups and penknives.
Samoa 'i Sasa'e, o rising sun.
Samoa 'i Sisifo, o diving sun.
A nation divided
    by tongues, bombs.
Lace houses outlawing mixed blood.
In whites-only balls.
Flying foxes all shot
  from the sky.
Papālaŋi war fighting even Papālaŋi;
Siamani falls.
Niu Sila takes its place,
singing "God Save the King"
on the bones
  of Mau Samoa
    the noble Tamasese.
'O Mau e.

SĀMUELU / EXILE

From Tutuila he departs,
  a man between names.
On the deck of a Maleke ship,
fedora and notebooks
  small shields
against the glare.
His village fades
  lavender reef,
memory polished by tide.
Mau Samoa 'i Sasa'e
  folded into false rumor.
'O Mau e.

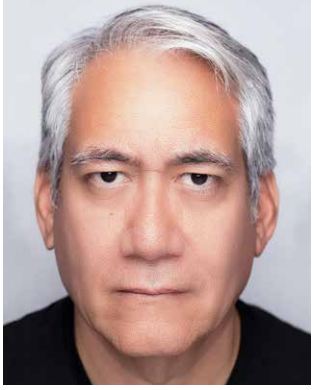


Tane Toalua
Illustration by Dan Taulapapa McMullin

MAFUI'E RETURNS

Rainforests where Mafui'e once spoke
  flattened for war games;
Maleke soldiers
  more numerous than flowers.
When the guns die quietly,
people follow
  their shadows
  to the empire that makes the only men.
Yet Tuli returns
  each year,
seeking Fa'afafine and Fa'atane
bodies that refuse erasure.
The name Mafui'e moves
  from Fa'afafine to Fa'afafine,
  from Fa'atane to Fa'atane.
Descendants of descendants
rekindle the ancient fire,
steaming the foreign spells
  from our own bodies.
We are still here,
  and say.
Not I, but Mafui'e.
Not that, but this.
'O Samoa e.

About the Author



Dan Taulapapa McMullin is non-binary fa'afafine from Samoa 'I Sasa'e (Eastern or American Samoa). Their current body of work in museum exhibitions is *Our Bodies Are Memories of Our Bodies: Siapo ma Solo* (to be published as a book in 2026), a growing collection of abstract works based on the tradition of Siapo tapa making in Loŋoloŋo abstractions, which Taulapapa learned as a child from their grandmother Sisipeni and great-grandmother Fa'asapa. It also includes poetry based on the tradition of Solo in which Taulapapa finds influence in the works of Tuiatua Tamasese and in their own family traditions of Solo of the Satuimanu'a. Taulapapa's 2022 work, *The Healer's Wound: A Queer Theirstory of Polynesia*, will be reissued in a third edition in 2028 with new research. Their past work was shown at the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum, and the Hawai'i Triennial. They live with their husband in Muh-huh-con-neok lands in upstate New York, where they are working on a novel, *Mafu*.