Splayed; Water-Worn

Hope Matsumoto

"Splayed; Water-Worn" features cascading passages of Hoʻoulumāhiehie's detailed accounts of Hiʻiaka, Wahineʻōmaʻo, and Lohiʻau's encounter with Kamōʻiliʻili as portrayed in *Ka Moʻolelo o Hiʻiakaikapoliopele*. Conceptually, this poem is shaped by my own personal lived experiences along the flowing waters of Ka Papa Loʻi ʻo Kānewai in Mānoa and the mornings I spend along the contours of the ʻauwai clearing debris from the path for the water to flow. Along with the sounds of water moving through landscape amid cardinal birdsong and the shimmer of sunlight across my own dewy footsteps, these experiences blur with my mourning rituals after the death of my paternal grandparents as plumes of brown smoke rose from the fire late in the year of 2023 that burned through the forests of Waikakalaua and Kīpapa. During this time, I walked nearly daily with the water, knowing that many elders and kūpuna have walked this footpath before. An important lesson I have learned is to ask kūpuna for guidance and listen as the stories flow forth to feed the imaginations of future generations.

As I walk barefoot across scattered, smooth, jagged, fractured stones of the ʻauwai, I notice that each layer of rock, sediment, clay, limestone, concrete, and pebble is transformed over time by the growth and regrowth of ferns, sprouting trees, weeds, medicine, grass, buildings, and flood. Even to scratch the surface of understanding the moʻolelo of Kamōʻiliʻili requires

me to descend into converging currents and to allow myself to be carved by the cold water. Aloha ʻāina changes my body: My fingers callous from the shovel, a sweet pua in my ear softens my sweat, and my eyes adjust to watch flashes of humming dragonflies in quick-witted flight. Water-worn stones surround me.

What constitutes the body of Kamōʻiliʻili, who is named in a state of being undone by Hiʻiaka? Hoʻoulumāhiehie notes that while this version's Kamōʻiliʻili is wahine, other versions of this moʻolelo gender the moʻo as kāne. The changes of a shifting landscape perhaps indicate a representation of characteristics present in the Mōʻiliʻili karst, a vast network of caverns and underground passages that allow for the subterranean movement of water. The process of limestone eroding from acidic rainwater is a form of unbecoming that Kamōʻiliʻili embodies. Yet even through this process of erosion and becoming undone, the widening of a porous karst belly grows the land's capacity for life and allows for the passage of water. As the winds and rains come, these stories continue to unfold like bodies un/becoming.

The water teaches me that unbecoming sunlight and shadow means becoming reflection, which is the intermediary space this poem inhabits between opposite chasms of the gender binary. Refracting within prisms of contradictions, visions for new worlds beckon among arcs of rainbows that shapeshift like my shadow along riverbanks to supersede external expectations. Like a mirror, recognition is two-sided and multifaceted when fractured.

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SPLAYED; WATER-WORN

Kamōʻiliʻili was rendered the rubble of water-worn pebbles
heaped among the leaking barrier of an elbowed creek
    uwē ka lani, ola ka honua
we shelter ʻohā in acrid rains bitter from wild fire
splitting river forking tongue alive again in sea spray
the bifurcation of a fragmentation is a mana of a moʻolelo
(dis)splayed across paralleled hūlili turned kuahiwi
by the slain backs of my ancestors, this bridge to nowhere

but my true self, my
binary jaw widened in plumes of rising dead
bodies of coral beds reanimated
by their names seeded beneath river bank
    he ʻano hoʻoluʻu ʻōlena ʻo mua o ke alo ma kekahi wahi
        a mai ke poʻo iho a hōʻea i ka umauma he ʻano kekea ka hoʻoluʻu
winds whistling through splayed caverns parched for kahawai
land slides and flooded droughts collapsing red simulacra of akua

the mouth of this valley is guarded by rusting ʻōlena stone faces
sheared from the sharpened teeth of my grandmother's jaw
a new island emerges in the Lāʻaupau light of my grandfather's death
omens glowing ember among the awāwa of Waikakalaua and Kīpapa
    wehe ke ā luna
        wehe ke ā lalo o ua moʻo nei
            pulelo nō hoʻi kona mau lauoho i hope
                ʻaʻā nā maka a kekē nā niho

a piko is a seed sprouting at the interstices of our intertwined spines watered
by every fluttering vertebraic breath of fallen lauaʻe adrift again in ʻauwai
the wind becomes more than just a voice echoing in the uwē ʻaʻaka
of a swollen ʻōpū fed broken glass, spilling cemented concrete pillars
adrift again as our bodies become undone layers and strata of the earth
slipping back into the darkness of a sea verdant with teeming coral beds of papa
to be dislodged in shallow ʻauwai leaking like tears from closed pores of loose stones
or roots furrowed in the forgotten passage of another descent into gravity's core

there are no bridges in the heavy Hoʻoilo sky, only bellies of cloudbanks
slick from overturned kuāuna drowning in dredged histories
    ʻo kona hiu aʻela nō ia i ka pāʻū o ia nei
        puehu liʻiliʻi ana ke kino o Kamōʻiliʻili i ʻō i ʻaneʻi
            ʻo kēia mau ʻāpanapana o ke kino o Kamōʻiliʻili i lele liʻiliʻi aʻela
                ma muli o ka loaʻa ʻana i ka ʻehu pāʻū o Hiʻiaka

he moʻo wahine ia

with swollen belly and red water advisory

remains of ancient moʻo ʻōlelo widening ʻōpū becoming landscape

un/differentiated like water and air and acid filling belly

what will we birth in the bleached aquifers of the firstborn?

long before the first hatching—a body laid down for this vision

a tongue already tasting sweet water's shadow

a reflection of unbecoming with each resurfacing of breath.

disoriented without the direction of an unobscured day,

i turn, searching for my shadow.

instead, i am met with my reflection.

in my right ear: an imperative poem

in my two palms: dialectical tension in the second moon face

Hiʻiaka winks as she walks beside my self down Kapaʻakea street

before departing into the lifting kakahiaka light

and Waʻahila rain.

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About the Author



Hope Matsumoto was born and raised in Honouliuli, ʻEwa, fed by the mountain view of Pōhākea and the sea winds of Oʻahu's southern shores. Matsumoto is a PhD student in the Department of English at UH Mānoa, where they received an MA in English with a concentration in cultural studies, and is also a graduate of Kamehameha Schools Kapālama and Pitzer College with a self-designed major in Indigenous studies. Currently they work as a graduate research assistant at Hawaiʻi Papa o Ke Ao Native Hawaiian Place of Learning Advancement Office. As a lover of the Waʻahila rain, they spend their free time searching clouds for rainbows and cultivating gardens at home in Kānehili.