

Song of the Banyan Tree

Sia Figiel

We bless the feast prepared by Hinenuitepo's daughter
As we gather around the table
Dan's silence draws a lizard around Lufi's ankle
And the mokopuna conspire to explore the streets of Waikīkī
But not before they wash the dishes warns Reina
While you catch black rainbows in the palms of your hands
Each cocooning a memory of the childhood you spent on the lap
Of Aunty Ita
Listening to her weave yarns of legendary giants along with
Aesop's cunning foxes while piglets squeal on the malae at Malie
So long ago while we talked of your visits with Kenzaburo Oe
And the personal matter of his son's autistic genius
And the books we'd read before the Volcanic Goddess
Stretched out on abstract canvas
Before the Vateatea too
Depicting the memory of time and space
Suspended above the wings of flying foxes
And cicadas
Birthplace of the black star
Of the shaman of visions toward
A new Oceanic journey that spans decades
Pioneering treacherous terrain
Shattering paradisaical facades
Reclaiming our humanity in the stories of us . . .
Bittersweet in their recollections of mountains and men
And mountains and women drowning
In their own weaknesses
Gasping in their own strengths
Under the leaves of the banyan tree
Surviving the fa'a Sāmoa which is perfect they sd
Until the flying fox in a freedom tree sings no more

While Mele the matriarch combs her hair in the mirror without a
 reflection
 Reflected between the lines of every poem
 Alofa for the dead
 That live inside us
 Nurturing our imaginations of ancestors across continents
 Across time and space
 Feeding too the madness that drives old men to shake the status quo
 While women give birth to sons for the return home
 And miracle men
 And men of talent who swindle
 A nation's innocence for corrugated tin
 Houses and flash cars and athletic shoes Made in Taiwan
 While galupo crash on the rocks of Pouliuli
 Out there in the distance
 Where we once belonged pondering existentialism
 Barefoot on communal lava fields
 Conversing with the Gods
 The ancestors of Pili
 Owls
 Half-men half-eels begetting the descendants of the War Goddess
 Son of the Vaipe
 Self-exiled but you always long for the green mauga of Vaea
 Sheltering the tears of Apaula

We bless the feast you've prepared for us
 And in return we feel blessed as we follow in your footsteps
 Aware of the privilege we have to be a part of your song
 Aware too of how terribly lucky we are to call ourselves
 Descendants of the mountain
 Descendants of the whetu moana
 Descendants of the banyan tree . . .

We gather now to sing in y(our) genealogical tree
 Sing!
 Sing!
 Sing!

Our voices will be heard on the streets of Aukilagi
 London/Pretoria/New Delhi/Tokyo/New York/Buenos Aires
 And throughout the vasaloloa of Oceania

Mili mili mili mili mili

Pati a!

Lua pati ma le po!

Ua fa'afetai

Ua fa'afetai

Ua malie mata 'e va'ai

Ua tasi lava oe

Ua tasi lava oe

I lo'u nei fa'amoemoe . . .

Glossary

Apaula: mythological lover of Vaea who cried tears (Loimata o Apaula) after discovering Vaea had turned into a mountain

Aukilagi: Auckland

fa'a Sāmoa: the Samoan way

galupo: night waves

Hinenuitepo: Māori goddess of death

malae: space in the middle of a Samoan village used daily for sports and on occasion for ceremonies.

Malie: village in Sāmoa known as the origin place of the Malietoa clan, where Al was raised

mauga: mountain

mokopuna: Māori grandchild

Pili: lizard, god of old Sāmoa

Pouliuli: darkness; refers to one of Al's novels

Vaea: Samoan warrior who turned into a mountain after waiting for his beloved Apaula

Vaipe: Dead Water; refers to Al's family home location in Apia

vasaloloa: the deep blue sea

Vateatea: the heavens; refers to the title of a painting by Al that hung in his UH Mānoa apartment

whetu moana: blue star; title of a Pacific anthology edited by Al, Reina Whatiri, and Robert Sullivan

The following refer to a Samoan song that is sung after a visiting group has performed. The song shows appreciation by the host. It is begun with the fa'aluma,

or the conductor, calling out to the singers to clap. There are several ways to clap during a song: pati, which has a light sound; and po, which has a deeper sound. This command from a fa'aluma is a language of its own and is unique to Samoans.

Mili mili mili mili: The fa'aluma or conductor asks the singers, who sit in a circle, to rub their hands together in a fast motion.

Pati a! A command from the conductor to clap

Lua pati ma le po! Two lighter claps and one deep clap

Ua fa'afetai: We thank you

Ua malie mata 'e va'ai: Our eyes have been satisfied

Ua tasi lava oe: You are one in a million

I lo'u nei fa'amoemoe: In my (our) thoughts