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Hawai'i's creation chant weaves together threads of ancient Hawaiian thought—heavy science, deep spiritualism, and tantalizing innuendo.

O ke au i kahuli wela ka honua
 O ke au i kahuli lole ka lani
 O ke au i kuka 'iaka ka la
 E ho'omalalama i ka malama
 O ke au o Makali'i ka po

When space turned around, the earth heated
When space turned over, the sky reversed
When the sun appeared standing in shadows
To cause light to make bright the moon
When the Pleiades are small eyes in the night,

O ka walewale ho'okumu honua ia
 O ke kumu o ka lipo, i lipo ai
 O ke kumu o ka po, i po ai
 O ka lipolipo, o ka lipolipo

From the source in the slime was the earth formed
From the source in the dark was darkness formed
Darkness of day, darkness of night

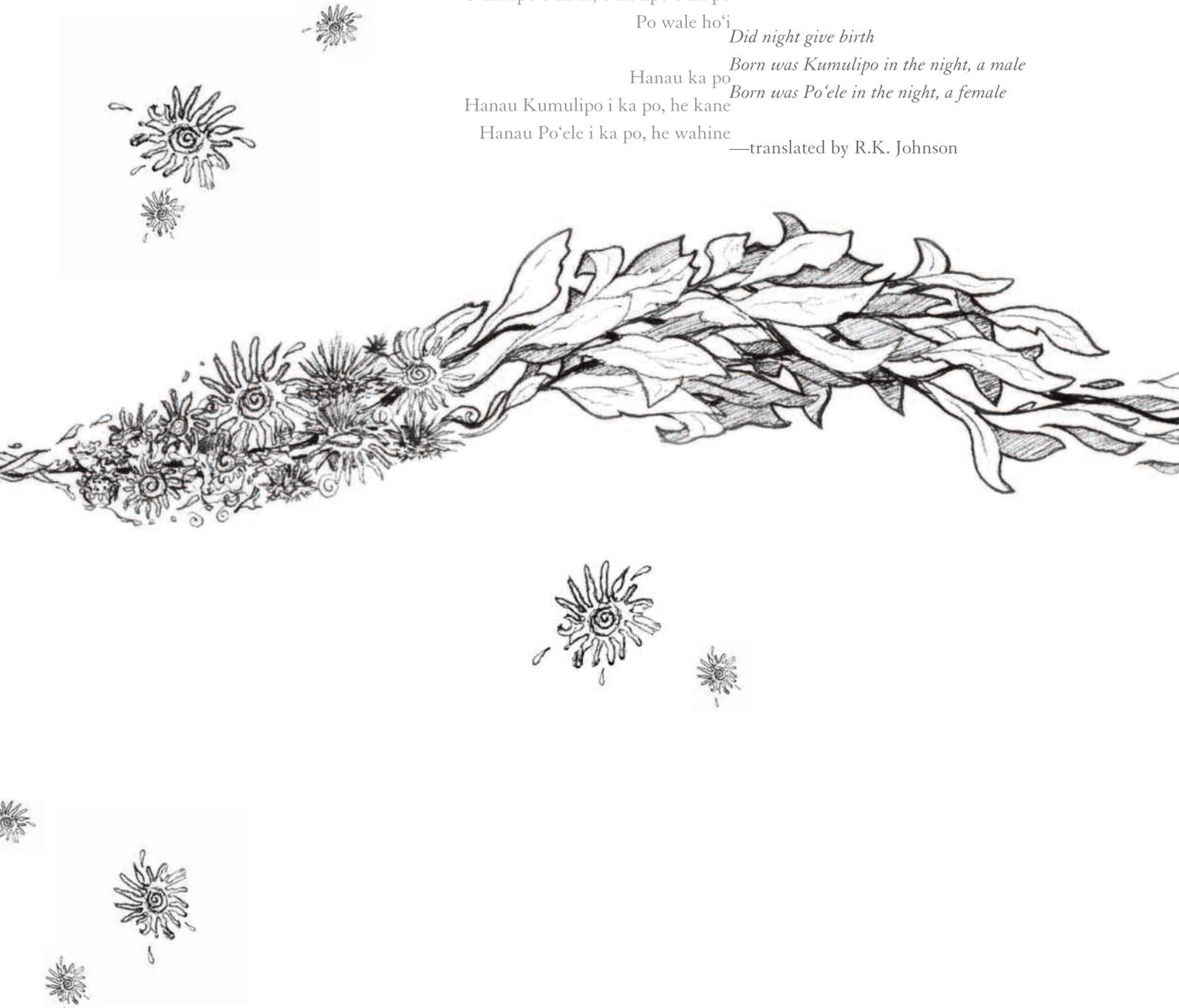
O ka lipo o ka la, o ka lipo o ka po
 Po wale ho'i

Of night alone
Did night give birth

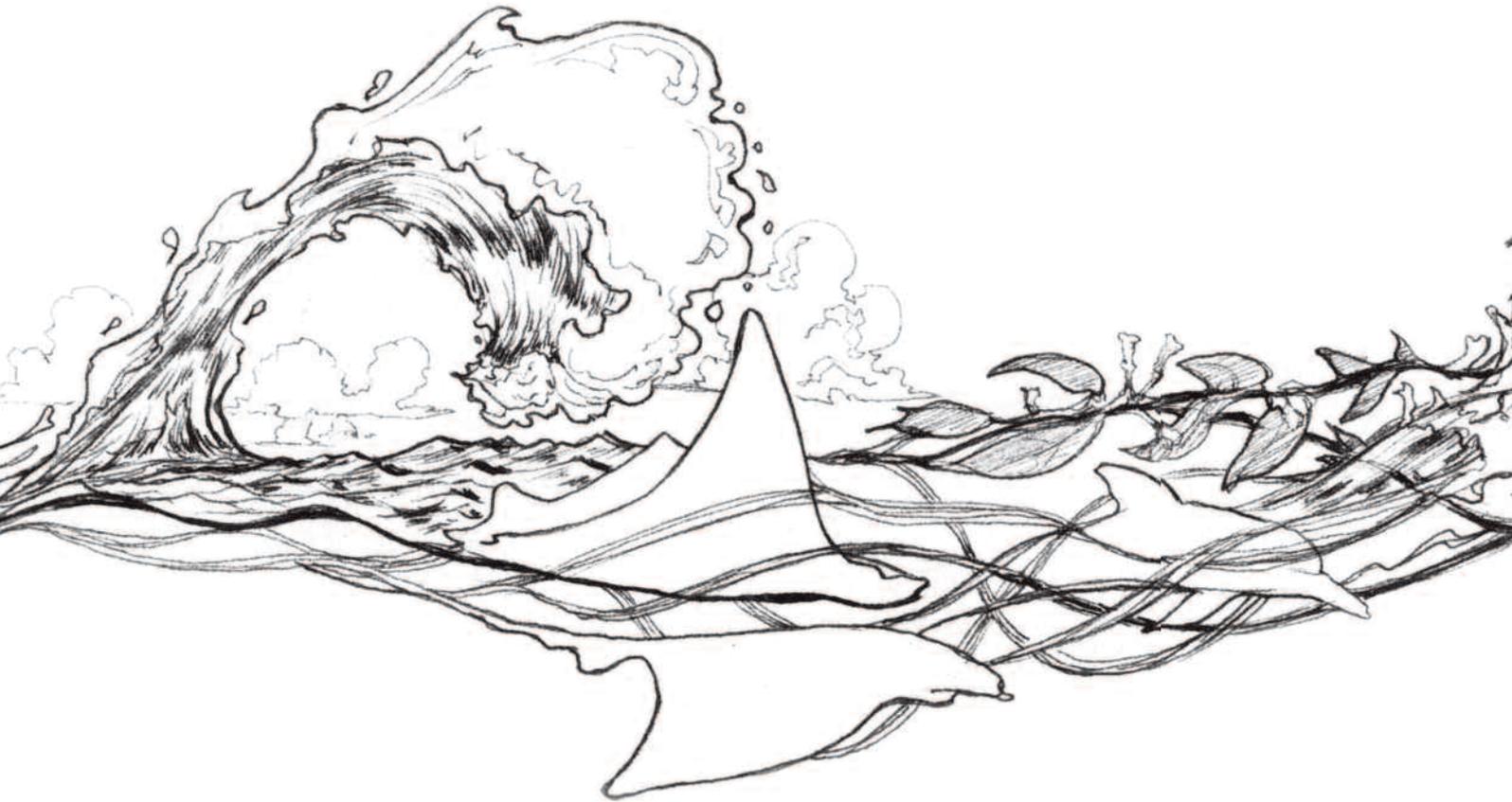
Hanau ka po
 Hanau Kumulipo i ka po, he kane
 Hanau Po'ele i ka po, he wahine

Born was Kumulipo in the night, a male
Born was Po'ele in the night, a female

—translated by R.K. Johnson



When I first heard the lyrical lines of the *Kumulipo* read aloud in Hawaiian ethnobotany class, I was captivated. Composed by an ancient people populating the most isolated large island chain on earth, the chant hints at evolutionary theory and touches on the tenets of modern physics. Delving into its 2,000-plus verses, I began to appreciate what it truly is: the magnum opus of Hawaiian literature. Brimming with passion, politics, and wit, and rooted in an embracing spirituality, the *Kumulipo* is a rare window into Hawai'i's indigenous cosmology.



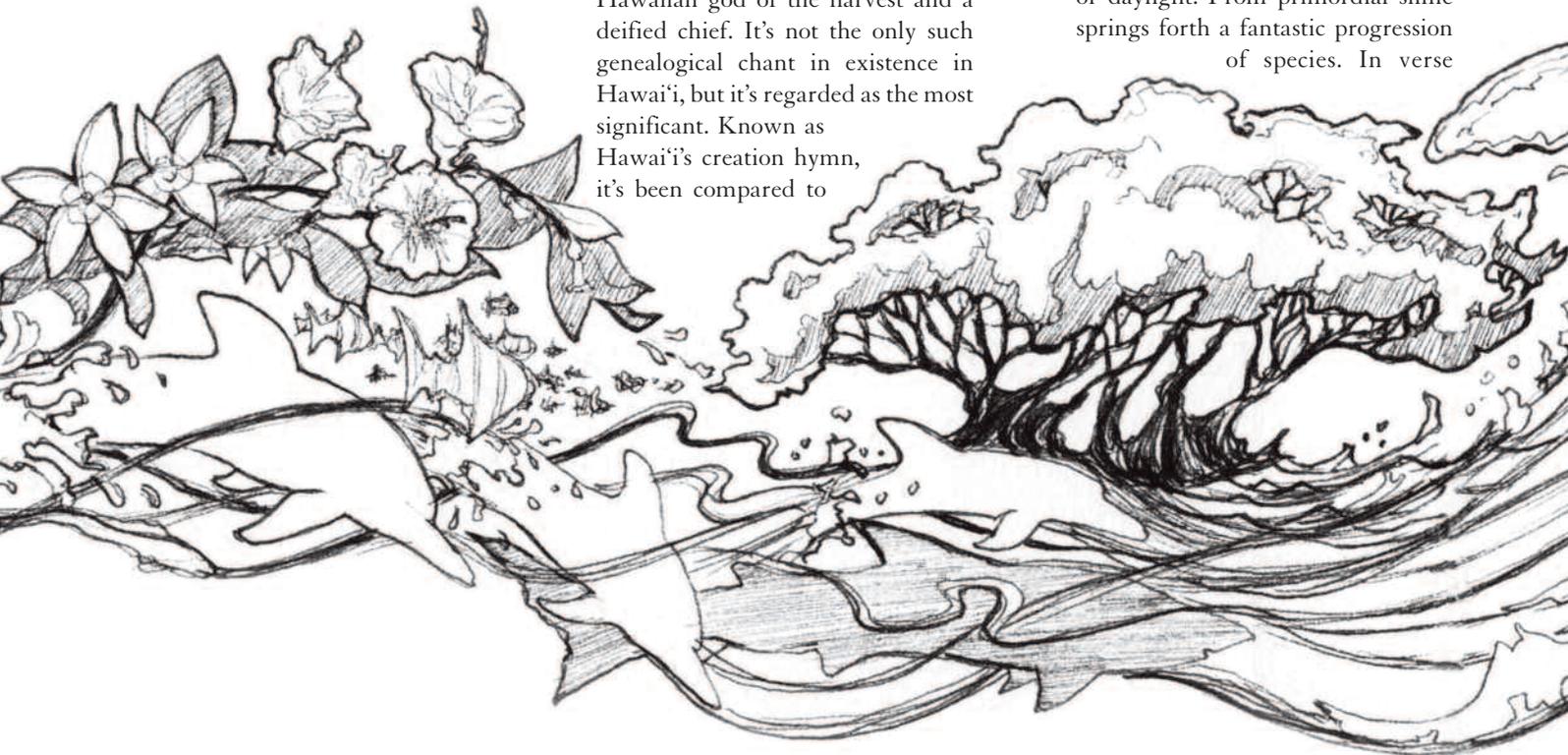
Hōʻopukaku

Composed as a genealogical chant, the *Kumulipo* tells a dynamic natural history of Hawai‘i. The chant starts in darkness, witnesses the emergence of nearly every life form in the Islands, recounts a sort of “greatest hits” of Hawaiian mythology, and concludes with the birth of Lono-ika-makahiki—the name of both the Hawaiian god of the harvest and a deified chief. It’s not the only such genealogical chant in existence in Hawai‘i, but it’s regarded as the most significant. Known as Hawai‘i’s creation hymn, it’s been compared to

fateful arrival of Captain Cook, when he was received as the incarnation of Lono.

Three layers of meaning are woven into the *Kumulipo*, according to Hawaiian essayist Poka Laenui: literal (*ho’opukaku*), metaphoric (*kaona*), and spiritual (*noa huna*). As a budding botanist, I was first grabbed by the chant’s literal aspect.

The first eight chapters, or *wa*, of the *Kumulipo* take place during a period of cosmic darkness, or *lipo*. In the eighth chapter, humans appear, marking the start of the period of *ao*, or daylight. From primordial slime springs forth a fantastic progression of species. In verse



the Hebrew book of Genesis and Hesiod’s *Theogony*. In modern times, it’s been chanted on only a handful of occasions: at the birth and death of two prominent chiefs, and on the

after verse, coral polyps give way to marine invertebrates, seaweeds, plants, fish, birds, mammals, and finally humans. Sound familiar? It’s a rough sketch of evolution. The

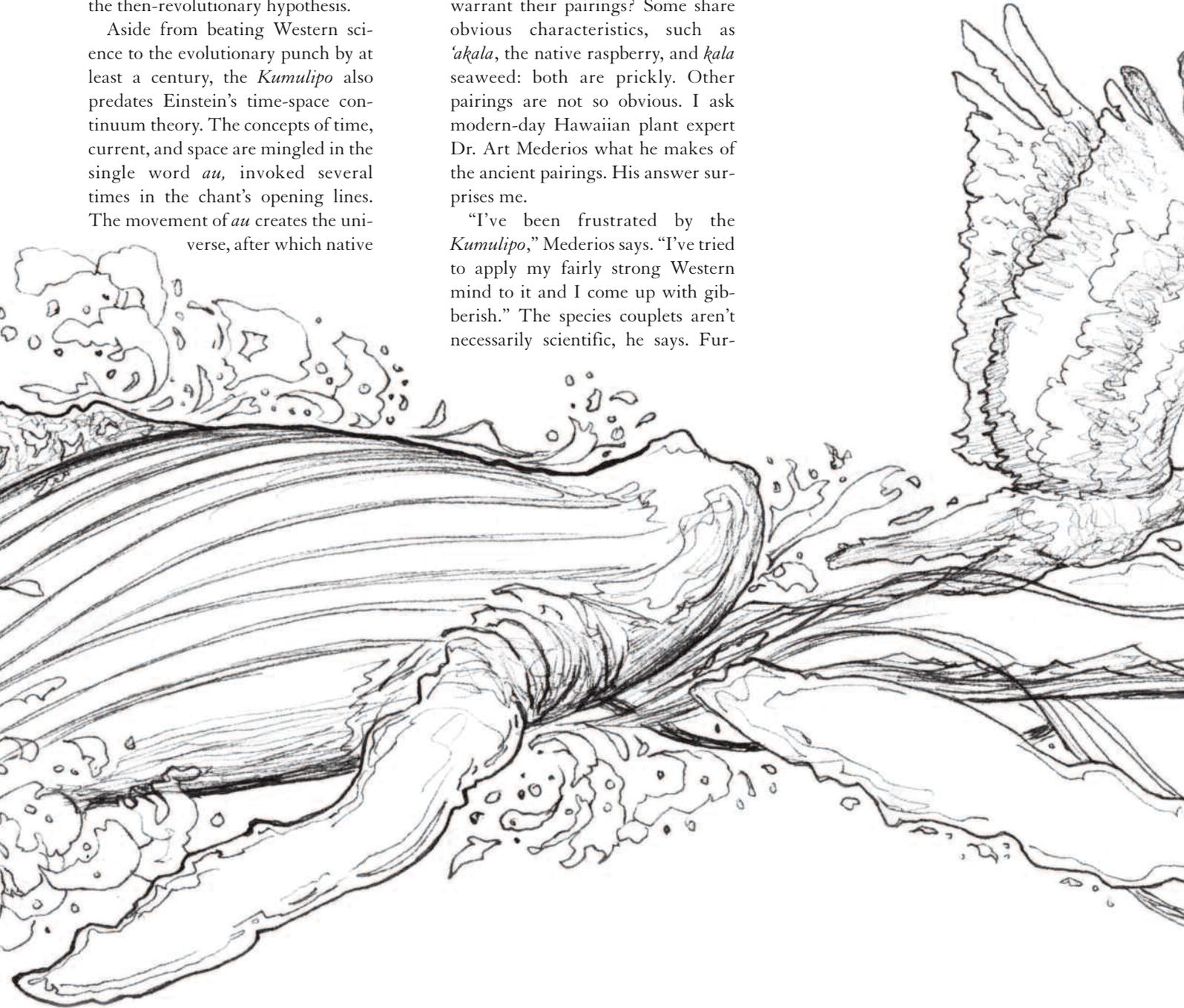
chant's similarity to Darwin's theories prompted nineteenth-century German anthropologist Alfred Bastian to bring a copy of the chant back to Europe, as supporting evidence for the then-revolutionary hypothesis.

Aside from beating Western science to the evolutionary punch by at least a century, the *Kumulipo* also predates Einstein's time-space continuum theory. The concepts of time, current, and space are mingled in the single word *au*, invoked several times in the chant's opening lines. The movement of *au* creates the universe, after which native

species emerge in pairs, one as the parent or guardian of another.

What did the early Hawaiians—those keen observers of the natural world—recognize in these species to warrant their pairings? Some share obvious characteristics, such as *'akala*, the native raspberry, and *kala* seaweed: both are prickly. Other pairings are not so obvious. I ask modern-day Hawaiian plant expert Dr. Art Mederios what he makes of the ancient pairings. His answer surprises me.

"I've been frustrated by the *Kumulipo*," Mederios says. "I've tried to apply my fairly strong Western mind to it and I come up with gibberish." The species couplets aren't necessarily scientific, he says. Fur-



Hanau ka limu Kala noho i kai
 Kia'i ia e ka 'Akala noho i uka *Born the kala seaweed living in the sea*
Kept by the 'akala raspberry living
on land

ther complicating comprehension, many of the plant and animal names used are unfamiliar to modern Hawaiians. “Maybe when Caucasians first got here and cemented a Hawaiian name to a species, it wasn’t the only name. In many cases, I’m not sure we know what’s being described. I have more questions than answers at the end of it.”

Still, he’s always felt drawn to the poem—particularly the stanzas celebrating the balance between land and sea, fresh and salt water, darkness and light, masculine and feminine. “It’s ecologically brilliant,” he says. “It’s an amazing work. I have all the versions by the different authors.”

All the versions? Until this point, I had only read one—Martha Beckwith’s translation of King Kalākaua’s text. Time to dig deeper.



Kaona

To unravel the next layer of the chant, I sought Kaleikoa Ke’au’s assistance. The Hawaiian studies professor at Maui Community College clued me in:

several *Kumulipo* translations exist, and they vary dramatically.

Kalākaua, Hawai’i’s last king, published the *Kumulipo* in 1889 to fortify his claim to the throne during

uncertain political times. He’d inherited the sixteen-chapter epic, composed at least two centuries prior for an ancestor of his. It traced his family history back through generations of highborn chiefs to the universe’s very origins. When the royal chant hit the newsstands, “There was an uproar among many of the *kahuna* [priestly] families,” says Ke’ao. “It wasn’t meant for the masses. It was sacred.”

Hawaiians considered such genealogies to be of great value, capable of bestowing power on their owners. Reportedly, when Bastian sought help with translating the chant into German, his Hawaiian acquaintance replied, “Would you rob me of my only treasure?”

Nevertheless, the chant was shared. Several Hawaiian writers, including the prolific journalist Joseph Poepoe, composed interpretations. Queen Liliuokalani translated her brother Kalākaua’s manuscript into English while imprisoned during the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy. Polynesian folklorist Martha Beckwith created the version

most widely known today in 1951.

Each interpretation is unique. Even within Beckwith's single translation, there are several differing opinions over the chant's meaning. One of her informants felt the chant was a metaphor for the birth of a highborn child—the universe represented a womb and each emerging species symbolized a stage of the child's development. Other translators took a more historical view of it, pointing out political references and themes.

Why such disparity? As Mederios mentioned, the archaic language presented interpreters with a puzzle, as did the original manuscript's lack of *okina* and *kahako* punctuation marks, which can transform a word's meaning with a single stroke. A more significant variable, however, is the Hawaiians' fondness for metaphor.

Embedded within in the lines of the *Kumulipo* are hidden mean-

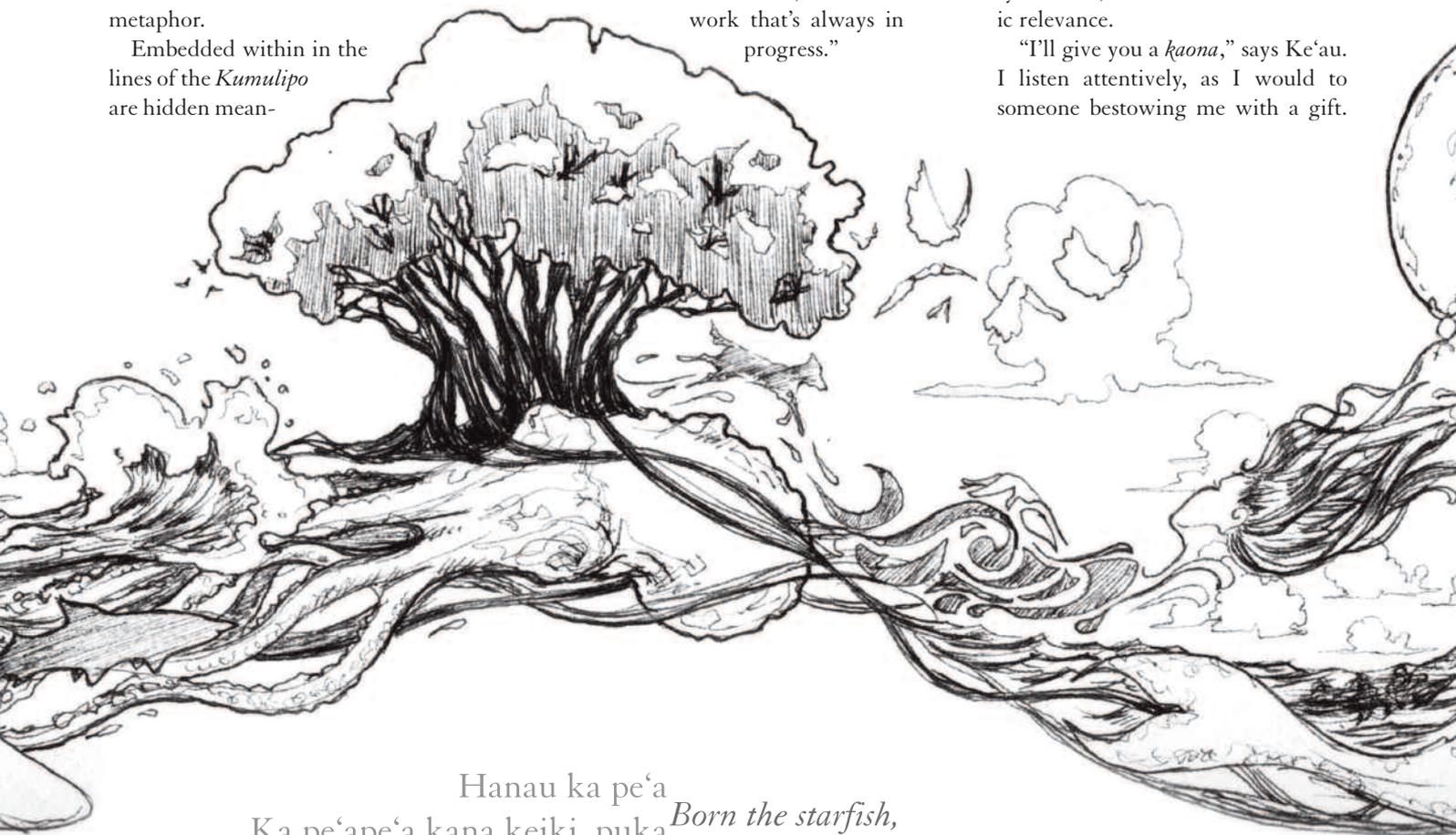
ings, or *kaona*, at which the ancients excelled. Like Shakespearean drama, the chant weaves together astute political commentary and bawdy humor. Sexual references—men with ripe gourds and women who “sit sideways,” a euphemism for taking more than one lover—are rife throughout the chant. The constant word play renders a “true” translation difficult.

“In Western literature there's the idea that there's one true copy. In Hawaiian culture it's a little different, more fluid. It's understood that there are many versions,” says Ke'au. “It's meant to be blurry, open-minded. That's part of the beauty. The more layers one included, that was considered to be the art. Words have *mana*, power. It's alive. It's not meant to be solid, but a fluid work that's always in progress.”

Ke'au studied under Rubellite Kawena Johnson, the revered scholar, archeo-astronomer, and author of the most recent *Kumulipo* translation. He describes learning to detect a chant's hidden meanings in one of Johnson's classes: “‘First off,’ she said, ‘don't use the *haole* mindset. What do you see in the chant? Place names. Where are they?’”

After a little detective work, Johnson's students discovered the places lined up on a map, says Ke'au. “Today we'd use GPS. *Kahunas* had their own GPS.” Place names, star groups, and other navigational clues thread through the *Kumulipo*. Numerology is another component of the chant. Fours and eights are repeated throughout the text. Some species might be mentioned for their symbolism, rather than their scientific relevance.

“I'll give you a *kaona*,” says Ke'au. I listen attentively, as I would to someone bestowing me with a gift.



Hanau ka pe'a
 Ka pe'ape'a kana keiki, puka *Born the starfish,*
The small starfish his child emerged

Hanau ka pe'a, Hanau ka lupe
Born was the stingray, born the spotted eagle ray

Noa Huna



“At the very end of the seventh chapter, it describes the bat. Bats come out at twilight, at the movement from darkness to light. Bats hang upside down, like a baby is born. It’s a preview. It’s telling you what’s coming up: the human is going to be born.”

It’s a valuable gift. The bat he describes is overlooked in Beckwith’s translation, though Liliuokalani and Johnson both refer to it.

Of the many translations, Johnson’s is the most thorough—and elusive. Her complete manuscript tops 700 pages, including extensive annotations and comparisons to similar works from ancient Greece, India, and elsewhere in Polynesia. Unfortunately, only the first volume—just two of the chant’s sixteen chapters—was published. Copies of the out-of-print book are rare treasures. I tracked one down in the Hilo Public Library.

In the book, Johnson illustrates the significance of the Hawaiian word *pe‘a*, which can alternately refer to a bat, octopus, starfish, or rayfish:

“The term *pe‘a* . . . is an inclusive generic term for species that ray or branch out from a focal point. . . . There is a pronounced preoccupation in the *Kumulipo* with species named *pe‘a* by which a basis of cross-shape classification for the radial or kite forms may be deduced.”

Johnson references additional definitions of *pe‘a*: canoe sail, kite, cross, crossed arms, branches bound to a royal standard, or *kahili*. With this in mind, a mention of rayfish may also convey a reminder of royal voyaging canoes on the horizon.

(Kumulipo Hawaiian Hymn of Creation, Vol. I, by Rubellite Kawena Johnson, 1981, Topgallant Publishing Co., Ltd, Honolulu, Hawaii. Used with Permission)
(An Introduction to Some Hawaiian Perspectives on the Environment by Poka Laenui, 1993, essay presented to the California State University Multi-Cultural Center)

Noa Huna

I could easily lose myself puzzling out *kaona*, yet another layer of meaning awaits the sensitive reader or listener: *noa huna*, or the spiritual element of the poem. The *Kumulipo* is a kaleidoscope: any way you turn it, a new pattern emerges. It's a family tree, a star map, collection of private court jokes, an ode to abundance. But beneath it all, a sacred vein runs through its lines.

"The *Kumulipo* sets forth not only that life evolved, but that human life evolved upon the same creational plane," writes Poka Laenui. "Thus, while we are connected biologically to all of the creatures and plants of the earth, we are also spiritually bonded."

"Humans, we are the last chapter of this long story," says Kaleikoa Ke'au. "We descend from, we are related to everything that came before us—the cosmos, the stardust, space, and time."

Rubellite Johnson agrees, "In the conception and birth of the chief is the analogy of the conception and birth of the universe. As man is born into the universe, so is the universe reborn in him; he is the intelligent survivor of cosmic creation in the highest form of organic life on earth. All that the universe has formed has preceded him so that he is the culmination of all forms." (ibid at p. 26)

While the *Kumulipo's* many interpreters differed on the details, they appear to agree that, at its foundation, the chant communicates a deep respect for all life, from a position of equality, reverence, and even worship. The interplay between opposing forces conveys a sense of balance and harmony, and also implies responsibility stemming from the notion of cause and effect.

I was honored to have a brief conversation with Johnson recently, about her work translating the *Kumulipo*. "The distances the poem can cover in just a few words," she says, "that's why it struck me. It's so well conceived. It's one of the most succinct poems in Hawaiian literature. It encapsulates the philosophy

that you see elsewhere in the world, the great thoughts." Far from wishing to keep this native treasure to herself, Johnson says she'd like to see others carry on where she left off. "Anybody who works with the *Kumulipo* is going to derive great understanding from it."

Having just scratched the surface of the chant's cryptic layers, it's clear that my journey with the *Kumulipo* has just begun.

Rita also wants to add the following:

Dave Zaboloski is a California artist whose work has appeared in major animated Disney films; he is currently illustrating Deepak Chopra's first children's book. To see the art he created for this story in its entirety, visit www.mauimagazine.net.