

COMMENDED: BERNIE MULHERIN

EMIGRES

Of one tree are ye all the fruit and of one bough the leaves . . . Let not a man glory in that he loves his country; let him rather glory in this, that he loves his kind. — Baha'ullah

Been back in the town of my birth just over a year now.
About a furlong from the house in which I first read
Treasure Island,
all those light-and-dark years/miles ago,
there was a mangrove creek.
We swam, and caught bream and crabs and prawns and
sleepy-cod,
watched silent, lithe water rats glide,
like *prima ballerinas*,
across the breathless dark-olive stage of water
in the sandfly gloaming.
Wasserrattendämmerung
Siegfried and Brunhilde in Dreamtime furry *Tarnkappen* .

Weekends we held grand, brawling mud-fights,
till one or other of us got an eyeful of mangrove-juice,
and the rest of us had to cleanse and comfort him
with a ritual ablution of salt water
so you couldn't tell if there were tears or not.
(When I first read *Tom Sawyer* and *Huck Finn*, I understood
those lads; they'd've been mates of ours.)

And, on rare, enchanted nights,
a living faeryland of fireflies.

Now, since *Star Wars*,
I find they've dumped a galactica of sand
on top of the creek
(mangrove, per food-chain, produces more protein per
unit area than the most arable farmland)

and they've reared
a living atrophied Pompeii
a shopping-town called Caneland.
When, occasionally,
I walk through Racecourse Mill Mall past Woolworths,
I feel the mud sucking
where I used to sink to my thighs,
and notice that my feet haven't penetrated
the pavement by a millimetre
("Nostalgia's not what it used to be.").

But there's still the skyline
to the west
right up the valley to the Great Divide
and above
and beyond;
and nearer
seven mile or so north-west
Black Mountain,
where my father farmed sixty years ago
(they called their joint 'The Mayo', for the county
in Ireland where his mother had been born);
and just past that
the twin nippleless breasts of Mt Jukes,
and the stark face of The Leap,
so called after an aboriginal woman
had leapt with her baby to her death
rather than be captured by troopers chasing her
for Christ-knows-what reason;
nobody knows why.

But, ah, the hills, the hills
The land. It means, it means . . .

It is . . .

One evening in Lae,
just at dusk,
more sudden in Papua New Guinea even than here,

lying, feeling,
or not feeling,
dunno;
I heard birds calling,
birds I couldn't recognize (a bit unusual)
and children's voices at play;
too far off to distinguish any words,
but I could tell
by the cadences,
the music,
that it was a language I did not know
(by then I spoke good Pidgin)
but this I did not know.
Its music told me;
and it came to me
that I'd *never* really had a home,
and *never* would have;
not a particular home;
but nowhere and everywhere;
that all I'd ever hear would be strange bird-songs
and the cries of strange children;
and that that was as it should be;
and I felt as I should be
without knowing how or why

cosmopolitan
kosmos polites 'a citizen of the universe'.

Along the green rim of Archery Park,
a hundred yards or so from Caneland Shoppingtown,
rears a colossus of a palm-tree,
imported, before Federation,
from India.

(The British *Raj* perceived geography as either *loco* Greenwich,
or other than Greenwich,
and gunboated ecological niceties with even greater disdain
— cavalier-fashion? — well, at least they could ride,
some of them.)

Anyway, they planted this displaced person,
in the year they hanged Ned Kelly in Melbourne Gaol
(with summary despatch, so as not to cause a public nuisance,
or worse, mischief, for Melbourne Cup Week).
Despite transportation from one colony to another,
the tree blundered through,
like their empire,
and *saw it out*,
well and truly.
The tree survived and thrived.

It's of a strange species
(as ours is, but different):
it lives for a century,
and does not flower and reproduce for that hundred years.
Then, at the end of that Dreamtime span,
the tree heaves out its massive efflorescence,
nuts,
seeds,
and dies.
This year past (1980),
it blossomed;
now the huge cradle of lifegreen fusing fruit
crowns the erect, dying, marvellous
trunk.

Last evening, I, *homo erectus*
(*sapiens* or otherwise)
saw it launching solid at the sky,
went to it,
wrapped my arms around it.
(Its girth, at standing-embrace height, would be about nine feet,
so my hands could not meet, but joined the circuit of my
upright and far taller fellow-being.)
Its skin, hard, calloused and gentle as my dead father's hands,
and somewhat more hard, calloused and gentle than my own,
pressed against my breasts.
(Why didn't anyone ever suggest that men have nipple-envy?
Ours are pretty tiny!)

There was a fair wind up,
about half-a-gale,
and the tree vibrated massively,
and my rib-cage passionately.
I pulsed to the tree
'You are almost thrice my age, by human-time;
I've been engaged in mating activity for more than half
my present sojourn;
now, once,
you give forth,
and soon you will die;
I don't know when I will die,
and it concerns me little, either way;
sojourns are always simply present
and endless.

The tree's sap asked
"What have you learned?"

I breathed to the tree
"I have learned that we can touch each other."

The tree transpired to me
"That is enough."

