

I. BLOOD AND INK

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For Uncle Ross

'Blood, Herr Reiss, can never be eradicated like ink.'

– Philip K. Dick, *The Man in the High Castle*

i. Headwaters

I AM A RIVER ...'

How your words reverberate off the mirror of our conscience. The connection is water. Wanting to pour forth the bubbling within. A well of knowledge, waiting below the surface of us all.

And as you professed, my uncle, we all congregated. Albeit in a dark hour, we dreamed as one, in a pure breast of afternoon light. There were tears, but they were merely spray off the surface of your departure. Young sea eagles danced your wake.

What you gave us cannot be taught in foreign halls; the darkness of humanity and poison pens. How they fashion textbooks to suit the tides of chaos.

Ink can be cleansed in the headwaters of your flow. Wash my eyes from censored images of history. I am not a neo-human of dystopia.

Below your river a dangerous undertow can gather momentum and try to pull us down.

But we will always float as estuaries in your memory, a consensus of blood that can never be eradicated like ink.

ii. Ebb tide

There is no recession in your departure. The river replenishes and everyone needs time to regain buoyancy. We have to catch our breath and wade.

You taught us never to dive ‘headfirst’ into unknown depths. Feel the water as each one of us is our own burgeoning course.

There will be low water succeeding at times, but we will always try to maintain a steady drift. And in the ebb tide – as your decree, my teacher – no one should be left behind.

Question all questions drowned and forgotten. In their resuscitations, storm birds break glass and fish shed tears. In a consensus of dreams, everything could surface.

iii. Backwaters

As a pupil I must ask: How is it you charted the backwaters before your time? Is it connected with the Dawson River, the conduit of your mother’s spring? I am uncharted of the Kungulu ways in my being.

I have smelt the burnt husks of brigalow leaves and twine, as we have now entwined, in the backwaters of your journey. No heart of darkness has rested here. The river does not rest.

What I search for is further upstream, in an essence, the midst of unexplored waters. A whirlpool simpatico belongs there; unrest and calm.

iv. Postscript in a bottle

Uncle, will you please make a beacon; a campfire on the shore of our backwaters? I fear some of us could lose our way ...

The river will never rest, our collective thoughts from the headwaters, through the ebb tide and into the backwaters of our being. We are all rivers, on a discourse of ink and blood ...

Kungulu – Great-Granny Watson’s language group in Central Queensland.

Brigalow is a sacred tree of my honourable ancestors.

IN THE LIGHT OF TWO FIRES

i.

(The state archives reveal too much, circa 1996)

My eyes trawl depressions created by ink.

I am able to navigate sinkholes
void of humanity.

Lines of ignorance and contradiction
proud factotums of brutality.

And these documents are not even a century young,
authored by a monster, claiming to be a 'Protector of
Aborigines'.

My great-great-granny is constantly referred to as a 'gin',
her piccaninnies are traded like cattle;
this is the commodification of my blood.
There are no romantic tales in these pages
just itemised accounts of my kin's value
in pounds and shillings.

These are the wages of war and fear.

ii.

(A morning of dark horses, circa 1907)

Hooves stab a ground that dawn barely touched.

A little boy is ripped from the camp, his mother a widow.

Mourning-stench flakes everything already and soon flames
of sorrow

will bear ashes again.

A swift sulky is driven by a black-robe of god.

Another horse is mounted by a black-robe of the gun.

The infant is barrelled into the nightmare of servitude
the infinite career of horrors.
I am named after this child, and he will never be civilised
like this again.
We've never used the word 'stolen' at home,
but the term hardly surmises our history.
Echoes of screams shared by mother and son;
from warm maternal provisions, into a furnace
the slave-master's wrath.
Journey into limbo; between the
light of two fires.

APOCALYPTIC QUATRAINS: THE AUSTRALIAN WHEAT BOARD/IRAQ BRIBERY SCANDAL

'The call of the strange bird is heard
on the pipe of the breathing floor;
so high will become the bushels of wheat
that man will cannibalise his fellow man ...'

– Nostradamus, II:75

We learn, yet forget, in the cataclysm of our birth
the owl songs of Muk-Muk;
the death feather, and reacquainted we shall be
in the sunset of our mortality.

(The call of the strange bird is heard ...)

The didjeridu sits in the corner of my room
near the window, ghosts breathe
my frailty of spirit
resonates in the acoustics of this gouged plain.

(... on the pipe of the breathing floor ...)

The dark skin ripped apart
perished seeds of the Dreamtime
to the new crops of the invader
blood furrows this occupied soil of neo-pestilence.

(... so high will become the bushels of wheat ...)

Harvested by the demon-seed of the invader
and grain-fed the insatiable hunger of the dictator
they danced, until caught red-handed
the hands bite the hands that have fed them.

(... that man will cannibalise his fellow man.)

THE GROUNDING SENTENCE

'On Friday, Rockhampton Magistrates Court heard that [a male], 17, had been driving around with an air gun looking to "shoot an Aboriginal person" on Australia Day ...'

– 'Stung teen shot in back', *The Sunday Mail*, 29 January 2006

i.

It has been an eternity of dispersal. Knowledge, secret and sacred ... my people have become the most written about indigenous nations of the world ... but are any of those words valuable? The world my children inherit is a scattered plain; the earth is flat and often void of the echoes of their elders. For too long I have listened to the wind as it is spoken by passing semitrailers and luxury cars. For too long I have complacently existed on these killing fields and built a house of straw in the down-wind of the enemy. My ancestors' tongues are sealed and delivered trophies on the shelves of the invader's sterile museums ... for too long I have permitted the hunter inside of me to become the hunted.

Australians all let us rejoice, for we are young and free ...

ii.

From the southern banks of the Brisbane River my Mununjali blood flows south. My Birri-Gubba blood is far in the north, on the Dawson River, another river, another world away. Worlds swept with the changing winds of successive hunting regulations and administrations. From the moment we are

born we are taught who we are and where we cannot go, but to be out of range is the safest place to be, no matter where your blood flows. Open game and fair game are two hearts of darkness that beat as one. The skin of the country is branded deep with crosshairs and warning signs.

*A sunburnt country
land of extreme prejudice
advance Australia where?*

iii.

I have hunted for trophies of my own and fallen into the snares of what the invader prides most of all, and that is the ability to turn blood against blood. There is nothing noble about becoming a savage in the despair of your own people ... I am the most ignorant savage of them all ... I cannot interpret the words of my Dreaming.

*I cannot fly straight
a reluctant boomerang
my grounding sentence*

*Mununjali refers to my nan's tribe in the Beaudesert region.
Birri-Gubba refers to my pop's tribe on the central Queensland coast.*

SENTINEL

The midden remains; a material witness on a promontory or beachhead over the expanses of epoch and aeon, where tributes were held in worship of richer seasons. Festivities – not so dionysian in revelry – but more rainbow-serpentine in respect, these ceremonial milestones that would acknowledge the midden a monument to a spiritual pathos of economical sharing. Sharing and nurturing; graces now almost driven from this land.

The midden remains, where elements once convened in the most sacred of communions – earth, water, fire and wind – mused in the easy linguistics of sea breeze, tongues lathered with salt. Feast and dream the prosperity of the lucky and chosen peoples, custodians in the world of the living and plenty.

The midden remains, but the sea is threatened, the earth torn, the fires exhausted, and the sky tarnished, the people scattered. Conquerors look upon you as a ‘trash heap’ and not a factotum from an ochre Babylon. You, the treasured ‘debitage’, are preyed upon by roads, skyscrapers and desecration. Your selected bones and matrix of lithium flakes are indecipherable in the wake of the newcomers’ ignorance. The shells in your structure form the unworn necklace of ghosts, held together by songlines locked in an obscure servitude of silence.

The midden remains; guardian to memory.
The midden remains sacred.
The midden remains, sentinel.