

The Hungry Tongue

If you walk along the river under wattles where galls have dropped
like poisoned-goat turds with the sun on your face a sulphur
gauze you end up at a small timber jetty under a dismembered pine.

Those strips of sedge-land over there, in the river, are named
after the nests of snakes and waterbirds made safe every sitting-
season

in hollows between the tussocks. The Egg Islands.

Those strips in the middle of the river could be flying oases wished up
like magic carpets hovering just above the fog
that lumbers silently downriver toward an even more mute sea.

You can imagine that once upon a time or five minutes ago
a superior race of men and women came to those islands to
build their huts of stilts and reeds.

You can imagine that they might have spoken the native tongue
of some distant, vaguely-remembered homeland: a kind of pidgin.

You can imagine that, in that native tongue, there was no way to say:
The current is running fast.

No way to tell of the ruffled pelt stalking down the middle
of the river or the smooth groin-skin slinking at the edges
where the pampas-grass criss-crosses like shattered ice.

In that language there might have been no way to tell of the
fingernail-rattle-on-corduroy of a small frost-bitten bird's wings
hurrying.

In that magical tongue, philosophers in dens of smoke might have squinted and theorized about some infinitesimal germ of life; mathematicians might have spat and scribbled in the precious dust of their belly-skins, and expounded on the clumsy niddy-noddy shape of the earth; artists could describe, from fingertip memory, the phlegmlike texture of tempera; aged priests could conjure the joyousness of Spring, in that faraway homeland, as though magicking a light out of the dark inside a skull; ornithologists could make predictions and chart the mating patterns of all manner of water-skimming and coo-cawing wildfowl.

I can almost see it . . . Can you? The men and women in that happy
land
conversing in that magic tongue until lunchtime when the cook
arrived
empty-handed. — There is nothing to eat! he would have shrugged
over the din of talk about the concepts of gluttony and famine. And so
they might have all starved, the people of that island
over there because, though the tussocks and reeds were pocked
with nests of fowl and reptile, the people of that place
had not one word to say for egg.

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