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.

Philomena van Rijswijk