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Poems

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Abstract
PORT ESSINGTON (NT), MONSOON STORMS, PLAINS AND PYRAMIDS
12. Ibid., pp. 88-89.
15. Ibid., p. 169.
17. Eddie Mabo and another v. the State of Queensland and another, 1988, F.C. 88/062 (High Court of Australia), p. 34. (Later published in *Commonwealth Law Reports*, vol. 166, p. 186.)
18. Eddie Mabo and others v. the State of Queensland, 1992, F.C. 92/014 (later to be published in *Commonwealth Law Reports*), p. 1. All further references to this report are included in the text.

Mark O’Connor

PORT ESSINGTON (NT)*

Nowhere is the sea so entrapped by land, a smooth basin flooding and draining silently. Here the tailed, keeled reptile-shape is best.

Kunapipi, that old Snake-Lady, has swallowed an endless plain, spews back a third at each low tide.

This lace-coast, froth-land mixed with sea, sea patterned with land, tide country, crocodile-totem land, turns fresh-water floodplain, or salt-marsh as snows thicken or thin on Antarctica. An ocean with ripples in place of waves echoes and gurgles against clay cliffs. The air is a warm-mousse kiss, above soft waves friendly to the turtle and the bark-mat canoe with turned-up sides. In its shallows the stingray slides easily,
Landing,
the sandhills are a slither of snake-trails
stitched with tussocks, among dead-coral oddments
like mouth-guards or pink plastic gums,
scrap of sea-corset or abrasive lace.
The sandcrab’s eight-footed bunch-punch tracks
swirl like octopus arms around the hole,
a twirling border of bead-work.
In a sparse perspicuous place
the coiled death-adder jumps to view
and the spinifex pigeon scratches
its morning flourish on the ground
- a land to be felt with the toes.

*) Port Essington in Australia’s Northern Territory is the site of an attempted 19th-century European settlement, destroyed by malaria and cyclone a few years before the city of Darwin was founded.

MONSOON STORMS

Thunder through Arnhem Land’s
worse than eroded lands...
The gust-front hitting before the rain.

Flanked by icy outliers of cirrus,
in the booming belly of the cloud
the Kunapipi serpent thrashes,
crackles a forked tongue down
to favourite caves and valleys.

‘That Old Lady’, they call her,
whose roar first let shamans guess
how a god’s love and anger could coexist.

Yes, but it’s just electrons talking.
The storm-cloud’s advancing portico
sharp as a cut-out with sun above
is a fluffed, dynamic aerosol, electric ice
with a high patina’d aura of subtracted shades,
in reverse-rainbow colours, rare cyane and magenta
as if oil had mixed with the pastels.
And skating above it,
Australia's eagle with hoodless eyes
that loves the sun and thunder mixed.

The rain's barrage moves in, gets our range;
frogs crank up again; drops hiss
on rocks still hot to touch.
We watch the monsoon's first plumblines drop
and the long weeks begin
of the lightning's miles-in-a-millisecond.

After the cannons and retreating drums
the shipwrack of a storm staggers
away from the sunset
blazing and howling into the East.

PLAINS AND PYRAMIDS

The plain, a vast lawn of goose-mown grass,
seems an old lake-bed – and is, from three months back.
Its harvest, in spike-rush bulbs, exceeds a wheatfield.

Brindled geese and white herons move on it, placid as sheep.
A distant flock rises and placidly glides
to some new down.

Pelicans cross it on lazy wings, flap, flop, glide,
– taking the beat from their leader.

In Jabiluka Billabong archer-fish glide
at the surface, careless of herons.
Their eye, that can see to shoot a midge,
holds the sky and all of its beaks
lightly in fish-eye crystal.

The floodplain bakes to splitting seedful mud
where the Lightning Man will strike his axe
and the Rainbow Serpent,
blood-scenting dragon, resplendent monsoonal
air-snake that upswims the rising mist,
will swirl hungrily to the fertile smell
of a girl’s first blood at puberty,
swilling the land to mud-brick soup
brimming with all fertility.

The white distant trunks and wet greens
might be English but for the killing heat.
– a wood surrounding a pleasant dale
where knights joust from a line of trees.

Yet the plain has odd dips and gullies
where half a host might hide – the goose camps.
presided by the Lord Jabiru
in red leggings and white plume-badges.

This was the Ice Age field of the Yam People

who drew themselves as pregnant tubers
with plump distorted heads and legs
10,000 years ago, on a high cold plateau.
That same cold-drought begins
afresh each winter, but the monsoon comes.

I think of another floodplain
livened by seasonal floods
where a black race mixed seed and language
with a paler long-nosed one
and built the pyramids.

There too the ibis and hawk were sacred;
and the crocodile answered prayers.