Poems

Abstract
THE HEARING, THE FIRST MAN

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I THE HEARING

The case is Christian's mutiny. But your court
Won't stomach that Christian. It smells of
Mercy. This tale's awash like the Bounty's
Bilge with meanings no one wants. Ay, it was
Christian's mutiny. We were all there, you
All saw, Adams, black Matthew, gunner Mills,
By Christ, Adam's mutiny! Jack Adams, John Doe,
Every-man-Jack's mutiny! But your Lords
Need a hanging, not this tale rippling
Irishly like a stone in a green lagoon.

I remember the white untidy beach, my head
A washed up coconut jumping with sandflies.
If my fiddle were jailed and not fathom
Five in the Barrier Reef singing to catfish.
I'd strike up a jig the court martial
Would dance to! Michael Byrne, Irish fiddler,
Two thirds blind, on trial for my life.

I kissed that maid and went away,
Says she, Young man, why don't ye stay

George Stewart, midshipman. That's a truly
Life matter! Gentle George, drowned in leg-irons
In a panic of keys while your Captain Edwards
Jumps ship as light and easy as he's danced
From your court. Tacks his ship on the coral?
Huzzah! Drowns his shipmates? Well away!
And George's bounty, sweet brown Peggy, who
Ever chose a better wife in the South Seas
Or England? Crouched on the poop by the cage
Keening and I could smell the blood, George
Heaving at his chains yelling she was bloodying
The baby and us cursing double Edwards
She was after carving open her scalp
With a shark's tooth.
All dark his hair, all dim his eye,
I knew that he had said goodbye.
I'll cut my breasts until they bleed.
His form had gone in the green weed.

Did she see her midshipman
Dead in Edward's box on Great Barrier Reef?
A life matter truly! And now I recall
The oath he swore her in Matavai bay
He'd never again set foot in muddy
England with its watery sun and broomsticks.
That sweet sundown with the wind offshore
Drunk with blossoms no white man had named,
He held up his left arm to my better eye
And I squinted at a heart with a dart
Through it and a black star. "What's this?"
I warbles, and he says "tattoo." Took him
All day and hurt like blazes. But permanent.
One of their words, tattoo. Strange how we
Needed their lingo to make a landfall.

_English boy, please tell to me
What is the custom in your country?

The new Cythera. Two volcanic breasts
And a fern-lined valley. Half a degree
Leeward, you'd miss it. I'll say this for Bligh,
In the whole South Seas he'd smell out one
Breadfruit tree on a rock. But Tahiti
Scuttled us. There were oceans we couldn't
Sail and that island named them: taboo.
Another locution we harboured. We're
All marked with Tahiti, hearts and stars
And commemorations. You, Millward, is it
God's truth you've Tahiti's chart on your yard
And testicles? Morrison, scratching your
Journal of excuses, is your loving groin
Gartered with Honi soit qui mal y pense?
How d'you hope to escape hanging after
Pledges like that? Leave Bligh out of it,
Truly the only blind man in Tahiti,
A poor fool with his rules and longitudes
While Michael Byrne, fiddler, kept watch.
Taboo: Christian's mutiny. Ten of us
Of twenty-five still waiting to be hung.
King Louis had a prison,
He called it his Bastille,
One day the people tore it down
And made King Louis kneel.

II THE FIRST MAN

Tahitohito,
the fifth Age when
cunning gave birth to mockery.

Was Ta’oroa the egg, tired of loneliness,
and his wife Stratum Rock,
Ta’oroa of sure bidding, of the cloudless sky,
who stood over the passage of the reefs.
Ta’oroa was a god’s house, his backbone
the ridgepole, his ribs the buttresses.
Ta’oroa married his daughter Moon
and moulted red feathers from which grew
all plants except breadfruit tree.
Ta’oroa conjured Shark God and Rooster
and Octopus who clasped
earth to sky, smothering all light until
Ti’i stood forth, the first man,
and was angry,
Ti’i the boat-builder, clothed in sand,
was angry demanding
Light and he wrestled with Octopus’ eight forearms
till sky floated free
shining with starlight and sunlight.
Then Ti’i the fire-maker, the axe-sharpener, was hungry
and his oven was sealed at daybreak
and opened at nightfall
but the meat was raw because
Sun was made drunk by space and hurtled like a meteor
until Maui his firstborn
Roped his ten rays with ten anchor cables
and day became a task’s length
and order was complete.