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## Poems

Landeg White

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## Poems

### **Abstract**

THE HEARING, THE FIRST MAN

# Landeg White



## 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.

First

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.