

1995

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Recommended Citation

Woodhouse, Jena, The White Ants' Dreaming A fable, *Kunapipi*, 17(2), 1995.
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol17/iss2/3>

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Abstract

The landscape of this country has a story to tell, but those who can still tell it speak a different language from those who have not yet heard it. Much of the country resembles an ant-colony in the presence of danger, the occupants agitated, unsure of their bearings, somehow ill at ease with their surroundings.

JENA WOODHOUSE

The White Ants' Dreaming *A fable*

The landscape of this country has a story to tell, but those who can still tell it speak a different language from those who have not yet heard it. Much of the country resembles an ant-colony in the presence of danger, the occupants agitated, unsure of their bearings, somehow ill at ease with their surroundings.

They have been told repeatedly that theirs is the safest country on earth, so what prevents these frightened ants from feeling safe? Those wishing to undermine the work of worthy, honest ants speak of a refusal to acknowledge what was done to other ants, who settled in this country long ago, before the white ants came. But the new ants have no memory of these events. They have been conditioned to forget.

The new ants, having made great progress, have advanced too far to understand what the old ants want, nor do they comprehend what the old ants feel for each other and their birthplace. The old ants are, it seems, opposed to change. The new ants are amazed at how the old ants can sit still for ages, rapt in contemplation, sunk in the psyche of their continent. The new ants are another breed, they like to cover distance quickly. Getting there is preferable to being here. Theirs is a world of shiny surfaces, they fear the dark.

The new ants have heard rumours of the love the old ants seem to feel for their lands, but they are sceptical of this. Searches of their data bases fail to furnish proof. Meanwhile, new ants buy and sell the land they seized by force, though they don't own it. Nor does it own them. Some would even say that it disowns them.

But if one day they were to find inside themselves that ancient love that comes before all other loves, their life-patterns would change. The formless agitation would become circles and cryptic lines that contemplate the hidden seams in rock faces, the veins in trees, the secret watercourse beneath the sands, the ways of schooling fish, the flightpaths of migratory birds, the formulae in seeds.

Then it would be clear to the new ants why they have felt unsafe. Then the old ants' spirits could lie down in their ancestral places. Then the land would trust the new ants with its mysteries, and take them to its inmost heart where they have never been.

The new ants would become the old, until such time as the cruel cycle should again commence.

Jena Woodhouse

GREEN DANCE

I've tried before to memorise
the textures, fragrances and sounds,
the pearly trunks of candle barks,
the banksia's black, wizened cones,
wild ginger colonies with broad,
tough, rich jade Asiatic leaves
and blooms like torches in the filtered
shade, delicate as orchids or as dragon-
flies, wing-petals raised, their coral
stamens messengers from paradise
when they exhale. I've tried to take
this essence in, make it an element
of me, the detail of the canopy, the forest
floor, each leaf, each tree, accompanied
by choirs so subtle, variously strident,
sweet, the unstudied polyphony of bird-
discourse, and I have failed. Each time
I leave, they blur into nostalgia, lose
clarity; when I return they ambush me,
sharp and fresh, alive, complete
with ancient mockery of kookaburras
in a ribald throng, reverberating
timbals of cicadas in astringent air,
the gentle play of leaves like ripples
in a peaceful sea, cloud-continents,
nomadic islands riding inland sky,
and all the distant fracture-lines
of spur and range ablaze with light,
anointed by vermilion sun and scarred
by fire, as here in isolation, realms
of animal and plant conspire, wild birds
come together to upbraid each other,
pipe and chime, a green dance circles
'Abydos', weaves spells that consecrate
and bind. The air is pure, the mornings
heavenly, the human heart goes free;
here it is higher, clearer, lighter,
easier to breathe.

Jena Woodhouse

CICADA COLONY, MOUNT TAMBORINE

Clamped hard against the textured bark
beneath the swaying canopy, they temper
the blurred edges of a song of sighing,
fleshy leaves; their brilliance of tone
resounds and ricochets, intones and rounds
tree-sibilance to brilliance of phrase.

In this cicada-heaven on the mountain we
are trespassers; green cobra-hoods of lilies
make us start, and buttress-roots baulk paths.
First syllables of pod and spore and seed
are crushed by careless feet, with arrow-
heads of fern and rust-brown fungi.

We crane at phraseologies of fronds
that cartwheel into sky, slim-columned
palms, and huge green hands of giant
stinging-trees; untitled fruits adorn
our trail with violet, inky blues and coral;
looping into shallow pools of sun, lithe
as a snaking vine, the interrogative of head
and neck, a warning sign.....

The words for awe
and fear were not invented here, this universe
was set in train millennia before our time.
We stumble under language-trees attuned
to darker lores and rites, conditioned
by smooth surfaces and glassy light.