



Arthur River Suite

for Joe and Margot King

Peter Hay¹

1832: George Augustus Robinson at the River

At the river, it will be told,
the men from Sandy Cape
danced the death
of the Mission blacks.

Only time
in all the Mission's fraught wanderings
that George Augustus Robinson, Conciliator of Aborigines,
faced a bloody dying.

Even at the death camp Wooraddy
will cloak in the old way, hunt in the old way.
Now he urges Truganini to the bush.
But she stays.

No swimmer, hard pressed,
The Conciliator chances the river on a spar
propelled by Truganini, his saving grace.
I stand at the spot - the likely spot - of the haulout.

Here at the river
is a moment of fractal portent,
possibilities intersecting, branching, pointing forward,
some - it may be all - to a doom.

I conjure descission in the island's story -
Truganini slips, with Wooraddy, to the scrub,
Robinson dies on a Sandy Cape spear,
and all is changed.

I tread paths not taken in 1832,
eager for their turnings
even as the imprinted ways falter
on the brushstrokes of the intruding bush...

¹ Peter Hay grew up on the Tasmanian North-West Coast, lives in Hobart, shacks on Bruny Island, and takes the whole of Tasmania as his home range. He is Reader in Environmental Studies, University of Tasmania, and the author of a major academic study of environmental thought, as well as a volume of personal essays. And there's a collection of poetry floating around somewhere in the near ethereal future.

1842: William Lanney at the River

*This was the family that had remained in the bush after refusing to surrender to the Mission Aborigines led by Robinson's son in 1836/37... They 'gave themselves up' near the Arthur River - because, they said, they were lonely. By the end of 1847 both parents and three of the children would be dead, leaving only William Lanney and his brother, Barnaby Rudge (Lyndall Ryan, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*).*

*All here are gone
Gone from the sun
With the wind
As it flows to the east.
Who were the land
Its sap and its kind
Are lost;
In its silence the land is lost.*

There are days
encased within banality,
the urgent
despatching the important,
mark of a life
grinding on
through the small meanings
of Carping John's country.

I am saved
on such days
by the machinery of dreams.
I ship upon a westing stream,
rouse
on a blustering morning north by west.
There is salt-smoke off the sea,
a smirr of gull-down on the breeze -
and the Black Bull Scrub astir
in expectation.

I would hasten things,
light a summoning fire, perhaps,
or call upon the sun,
call down its roaring power
to free the spirits
marooned upon time -
this latter more fancifully,
but know that I know nothing,
that I cast blind
and pointless as a volute's husk
tumbled in the tide.

It is not mine to know -
not mine to know why the last free people,
William Lanney's family,
chose a social death
to the solitary sorrow
of the ghost-fled scrub.
The tracks of the people blur for want of feet,
the ghosts retreat
to still places
in the distant heart of trees,
in the mat of sunken scrubroot.
And all around,
relentless
clamping silence fans to the sea.

The boy from the Black Bull Scrub
grows strong, childless, kindly,
well-fashioned to bear a people's weight.
He dies in the Dog & Partridge;
the local hounds of science
finesse the devil
for the chance to tear him apart.
All make the trick:
Bacon's children gouge and chop
and deem themselves noble
in colonial Hobart -
but I fly to the Black Bull Scrub,
lose myself there,
lean to the salt-laced wind,
wishing, for one omniscient instant,
to touch the lonely edge
of a family
stepped forth
from the hauntless bush.

*All here are gone
Gone from the sun
With the wind
As it flows to the east.
Who were the land
Its sap and its kind
Are lost;
In its silence the land is lost.*

Church Rock 1999

After passing MOON.DER.HE.COW.DIM there is another small point (where there are passes in between rocks, like walking between two walls about twenty feet apart, and in these narrow defiles are plenty of mutton fish and crawfish), and a small river... (George Augustus Robinson, Journal, 19 June 1832).

A pudding of spume, layered up, scarce masks
the implacable tide. It fluffs and clogs.
Spars snatched from the island's flowing heart
smash upon beached piles, snag there.
On this coast seawrack is a jam of ship-stoving logs.

North lies Church Rock; beyond, Bluff Hill Point.
I look, and the past runs up the line of my eye -
and overwhelms; it could not be denied
were my mind to will it so.
And I do resist. It is too recent; it presses too potently.

The tide crashes in and yesterday is pitched
too potently into today. Too recent, yes,
this glittering moment a mere seed's drift
from genocide.
And I seek still, and in vain, a liberating redress.

...Tonight the natives engaged in a little hilarity by singing. The people were now glad they had got to the natives. They were now unrestrained and could enjoy fire. Heavy rain during the night (George Augustus Robinson, Journal, 19 June 1832).

Saucered depressions on dune hillocks
are the encampments of the people. In the leisured
passing of deepest time they are proximate as skin,
clear to the eye, at touch:
And now and forever passed from history's measure.

Down here - hereabouts - the people danced.
I watch, with Robinson. Here is envy, too -
and I know myself his fell heir. It is easy to see,
slipping round the Church Rock defile,
the Manegin come, come to claim their due.

A clump of sea-rocket stands heroic in sand,
food for the rare orange parrot.
An engine's whine insinuates, builds... bursts
across the midden, scattering bone, shredding rocket...
Flakes of time leap to the wind; fall to rot.

White-Breasted Sea Eagle...

I know the river.
I know the tree-carved
 fish-hearted
 river
As I know my arcing, ropebarked
 heights.

If I choose
I can drop like swift rain,
 rake the river, strike it,
 tear.
And know you that it will be so; that
 I will so choose.

I know air and planes of water.
I am irresistible,
 the river of my eye
 true-running.
I fill the air, and my white shadow
 holds the wind.

Just this is not known:
Why the seafroth of my breast
 excites such low, pointed
 babble.
It is white, yes, noonsun white,
 the river-colour of death.

This also is not known:
All flee from my white shadow -
 so why does a creature; this man-thing
 trapped in its one plane;
Why does it conjure such welling
 alarm?

Only this hint: that it holds a rampant power
abeyed; holds even *me* at its capricious whim.

...And Nest

Midmorning rises on the Arthur River
and we have found the sea-eagles' nest.
A battery of binoculars prods the forest canopy,
seizes upon a flood's encrusted flotsam.
But no monster flood arranged this
artfully wrought absence of order. We
are flummoxed, all of us, by such ambitious scale,
by the avian patience of mountains.
We search - I sense it - for escape from history,
from its categories and familiar metaphors;
but the joke, when it comes, is predictable:
'A renovator's dream, and have we got a view for you!'

The tourboat chugs on an idling throttle
to a Turks Landing luncheon, and wine by the bottle.