

they stink most sweetly

1.

when i called the section head in darwin
his words were far away as england
the line crackled as if crows were pecking

at our sagging wire from here to there
what is it this time he said *this time*
echoing down some cave of lost voices

i can't take this any more i cried *someone*
has to do something to stop the drinking
the knives i've tried to suture their wounds

but i can't stem the flow any more i just can't
and the line crackled even louder the birds
tightening their grip against a sudden gust

and he said *how much hope can they drain*
from a cask? never mind the dying at least
they've learned how to keep it to themselves

2.

from the Tribe of these curious Fellows
One went into the Wood and came back
bounding with a Bunch of broad Leaves

tied before him by Way of a Fig-leaf Veil
then threw a Lance which fell very near
one of the Sailors and sank several Inches

in the Ground We returned the Compliment
by firing a Musket over his Head and he
nearly broke his Neck in running away

*then We saw them fall back into a group
around him who threw it and strike him
to shew Us how they scorned his Deed*

3.

*we do what we can but it's breaking down
how long can anyone be on call seven days
and twenty-four hours? only eighteen of us*

*to cover a territory larger than europe it's
breaking down those houses there are new
but their windows and doors walked away*

*one night and now the kids sleep on blankets
with the dogs where they breathe in disease
it's breaking down and flies cling to their eyes*

*no matter how hard the kids shoo them off
the flies come back as if they know the hands
must grow tired eventually breaking down*

4.

*in the mean Time the Governor made a Sign
that We wanted Water by dipping his Hat
over the side of the Boat to cup salt Water*

*to his Mouth and the Natives quickly pointed
Westward and walked that Way as if to show Us
the Spot until We steered our Boats after them*

*to land on the opposite shore where We found
the Run of fresh Water to be very good
yet when We advanced to offer them thanks*

*they trembled at our Presents and took them
without setting aside their Fears and would not
touch Us before they shrank back to the Woods*

5.

when the pension cheques come in the women
cringe behind the panes as the drinking starts
and you can feel the anger of the men rising

with every gulp of grog against the setting sun
while they rant on about 'the good old days'
of black drovers before their land was erased

into droughts of bloodshot eyes and stiffened
spines the women cannot douse these licking
flames no matter how hard they try and wisps

of dry grass surround them until they dream
in smoke their men hone night into a glinting
edge that cuts through flesh almost by chance

6.

*I saw her peeping at Us through the Bushes
so I held out the Baubles until she crept out
into the Clearing to take them from my Hand*

*a Wood-Nymph naked as Eve before her shame
and she suffered me to touch her until I did
from Curiosity to see how she would behave*

*nothing else could have so induced me for they
are Ugly to Disgust and stink most sweetly
of Fish-Oil and smoke to my tender Senses*

7.

the women are marching through the streets
of alicé springs arm in arm they want to ask
for liquor to be banned from their settlements

their breasts are pendulous and painted white
with myths but no one hears as they scuff on
through the dust they don't know how to find

a future when their water holes are knee-deep
with sand and tomorrow's a coughing shadow
dreaming of lances and mirrors and lances

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