

## Robert Sullivan

### Poem Notes

These poems come from a book-length sequence centred in Italy. My grandfather served in the Italian campaign of WWII, along with many others, in the Maori Battalion. He did not serve at Cassino; I chose to name the book *Cassino City of Martyrs / Cassino Citta Martire* because I was moved by seeing a plaque there dedicated to the city from the people of Italy giving it that name. At the time of my visit, I was living with my family in Honolulu, and so the poem called 'A Parallel' talks about the treatment of Japanese Americans during the war, many of whom were residents of Hawai'i. It occurred to me there was a parallel between the American Japanese infantry battalion and the Maori Battalion, but of course that is up to the reader. For geography's sake, Cassino town is below the very steep Montecassino *massif*. The Benedictine abbey at the top can be reached by driving up a long spiralling road.

### Poet Notes

Robert Sullivan (Ngā Puhi/Kai Tahu/Ngāti Raukawa and Galway Irish) has won several New Zealand literary awards for his poetry, children's writing and editing. He co-edited with Anne Kennedy *Best New Zealand Poems 2006*. Internationally, his poetry appears in *Harvard Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Berkeley Poetry Review*, *Mānoa*, and *Moving Worlds*. His seven poetry collections include *Star Waka*, *Captain Cook in the Underworld*, *Voice Carried My Family*, *Shout Ha! to the Sky* (Salt Publishing, London) and *Cassino City of Martyrs/Citta Martire* (Huia). He co-edited *Whetu Moana: Contemporary Polynesian Poems in English* with Albert Wendt and Reina Whaitiri. His scholarly work appears in *Kunapipi: Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, *Ka Mate Ka Ora: a New Zealand Journal of Poetry and Poetics*, *Landfall*, the monograph *Figuring the Pacific*, and *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (forthcoming). He is head of creative writing at Manukau Institute of Technology.

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## **A Parallel**

Israel Yost was chaplain of the AJA 100th Infantry Battalion  
later attached to the AJA 442nd Regimental Combat Team  
which served at Cassino. These American Japanese soldiers

sacrificed themselves to earn the respect of their country  
despite the internment of many of their families back home.  
Their extreme casualty rate and heroism made them known

as the Purple Heart Battalion. Yost helped them get through.  
After the Māori Battalion suffered very heavy casualties  
at Cassino they transferred along with

the New Zealand Division from the heaviest fighting;  
they moved into the mountains above Cassino  
as we bow our heads.

## **Long Light**

‘Inside human beings is where God learns.’

Rainer Maria Rilke

Through the fractal I’m back at Montecassino’s summit  
in restoration time, with the white cloisters  
and the Benedictine monk at the souvenir counter  
thanking me as I buy a postcard of the abbey  
my head already filled with 1944 photographs  
and another Sandro Botticelli which I followed  
a series of rope-lined rooms to reach  
I’m looking up now, vertically, in a way  
I never could when I was there  
waiting for the bus to take me down the spiral to Cassino

The restoration took away  
the Regimental Aid Post cave  
so I’m only left with my high thoughts  
moving through the humid cumulus circle  
too close to the blue to appreciate its hue  
until I’m back down in my body on the summit  
moving through the blue line  
bounding the circle’s contact with outer space  
like the dance of solar wind  
and its blackness so all the light when it’s there  
is sharp and long like my country’s name

### **Te Rā**

only our love has no decay  
the pin that never rusts, e kore nei e waikura e  
a song without end and always a funeral  
warned like Antigone to propitiate  
to bow before mountains  
that even the sun sinks in shadow behind  
but even from the long shadows is love

### **Air**

Ha! and ha! and ha! and haaaaahhhh!  
he shouted at Aeolus from the top of Montecassino.  
Tāwhirimatea sent a curling whisper  
brushing strands across his forehead  
as it flew down into Cassino town  
carrying the touch with it.