

David Eggleton

Poem Notes

As a performance poet living in Aotearoa/New Zealand, I deny the provisional rhetoric of the famous Englishman W. H. Auden who claimed that “Poetry makes nothing happen.” On the contrary, poetry makes everything happen. My poems seek to enact states of being, to put you in the moment, whatever that moment may be.

My first poem has neo-Marxist tendencies. It is a poem about identity politics, but is not necessarily an endorsement of any fashionable position; rather it is a subtle interrogation of possibilities. Maybe the dramatic monologue of the poem is being recited by someone through whom the idioms and slogans and textures of contemporary English, as heard in the New Zealand media or in the street or in the jail, are being channelled or ideologically recycled. Alternatively, maybe there is no-one positioned behind the text and the voice has been arrived at as a series of echoes from “what is out there”. Or again this maybe a standardised incantation that has learnt from the traditions of Maori and English literature and oratory. It also presents itself, or is presented by me the poet, as an address to the powers-that-be, so as to speak for the damaged, the absent, the unspoken-for.

My second poem is a saga of the landscape of the southern part of Te Wai Pounamu/South Island, seen from the perspective of a wild air current personified as a deity. It is also a lyrical celebration of the freedom of the open road and of big sky country.

My third poem is a phantasmagoria on the transition from the colonial to the post-colonial and the neo-colonial. It is about the struggle against alienation, the struggle to belong in a South Pacific/Pasifika which has a bloody history. It is also about the anxiety of the global condition, or globalisation, and its industries, from cruise ship tourism to mineral extraction and plantations.

Poet Notes

David Eggleton is part-Polynesian (his mother is Rotuman-Tongan, his father Palangi). He grew up in Fiji and South Auckland, and now lives in Dunedin, NZ. Formerly a factory labourer and city council gardener, he is now a poet, critic, writer and freelance journalist whose reviews, articles, essays and short stories have appeared in a large number of publications since the mid 1980s, and his writing is included in a range of anthologies. He’s won the Reviewer of the Year Award six times at the Montana–New Zealand Book Awards, most recently in 2009. He has had five books of poems and a book of short fiction published, as well as several works of non-fiction, including *Ready to fly: The story of New Zealand rock music*, *Into the light: A history of New Zealand photography*, and *Towards Aotearoa: A short history of twentieth century New Zealand art*. He has also released a number of poetry recordings featuring his collaborations with musicians, and been involved in poetry text collaborations with practitioners of a variety of other art forms, from sculpture to fashion design to film and dance. His first collection of poems was co-winner of the PEN New Zealand Best First Book of Poems Award in 1987.

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Jailbird at Momona Airport

He kārearea ahau...

I come from the bay of hawks.
Propellers roar my tragedy.
I roar my own ecstasy.
I'm exiled where I walk.
I drool. I hang on my own talk.
I'm between jails coiled in a shroud.
Enter shackled at wrist and ankle.
My feet are bare. I rankle.
I'm off to where I'm sent.
But my stare is proud.
The howl of the mongrel.
The fool's toothless scowl.
My tinny shack paid back.
Tinfoil, flame and the glass bowl.
I drank. I trespassed. Now I rage.
I don't utter sounds of doubt.
My rhetoric is renegade.
I return to thoughts of dak.
I chew my cheek. I'm made.
My toes claw the floor.
I am silent as a waiting gun.
I stare at the sun.

Tawhiri-mātea, the God of Winds, Visits the Province of O

On this blowy evening in high summer,
all tassels of toetoe are dipped in aura,
and tarry roads are pulling Dunedin taut,
like stout ship's ropes,
as if the whole brick-and-stone shebang
was about to launch oceanwards
in search of some further shore,
with the sky
holding the moon's thin scythe,
for harvesting pumpkins,
watercress, clumps of borage,
wild blue flowers flickering.

Clouds, white as the paper bags
wearing the initial of McDonalds
blowing in the wind down George Street,
turn gold in dying rays,
like tattered battleflags of brigades,
whose remnants lodge in cemeteries

the length and breadth of the Province of O,
in a region given over to remembrance,
through war memorials and parkland statues,
of a lingering imperial past.

And, as a nor'wester rises through the asphalt
jungle of North-East Valley
between houses ploughing down the green swell
and up the other side like flotillas of boats,
lifting on its buoyancy, on its updraught,
supermarket carrier bags full of wind,
full of the breath of Tawhiri-mātea, god of hot air,
the gliders have descended at Omarama,
and open-tops of sports cars have closed at Oamaru,
for Tawhiri-mātea has begun to gallop along the coast
like Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse,
like the Hounds of Heaven, like the Grim Reaper,
and with pentecostal force divine on whirlwind tour,
become the twister travelling through Kurow
that picks up a herd of kunekune pigs
to transport them shuddering down the road,
while cats cartwheel to use up all their lives,
and trees dance fandangos branch to branch.

Tawhiri-mātea the dust-devil flings horseshoes,
scraps of rust, and howls outside doors of pubs,
and hurries off in all directions to arrive everywhere at once,
and with one last gesture dumps, like barrels of bowling club
champion rosettes, a ruddy sunset glow
over the ranges of the Province of O,
till the next thing, night turns off the light,
so the glow is stuffed and Tawhiri-mātea runs out of puff,
and no windmills turn, and no sails arc,
and the Province of O's becalmed, floating in the dark.

Colonial and Pacific Sketch

Whack of a machete splitting sugarcane fibres
thudding of a church's wooden drum . . .
in an old hotel on the waterfront,
sunlight steals through venetian slats and wooden shutters . . .
the melancholy twangs of a ukelele . . .
a dark smear of rubbed-out mosquito across the forearm . . .
cool breeze carries the noise from the town markets,
and the smell of drying mud beyond the mangroves,
fragrance of guava nectar mingling with copra shed coconut rot,
the room is permeated with that musky perfume . . .

some rum banana republic gone rotten in the sun . . .
a sizzle of chicken fat, cooling curries, big daddy yams roasting . .
rotten mango splattering on the coral reef . . .
ribcage slats of palm fronds rasp against the balcony,
spines dart towards the window and flick away . .
half-heard echoes from pawpaw plantation,
papaya odour, hibiscus decay,
in front of waves smooth as glass, dumping with a boom and crack . . .
freighters with flags of convenience, plying a course between
islands,
tourists in the Beachcomber Bar,
whom well-wishers in lavalavas offer leis, mango daiquiris . . .
the light's reddish-dull, like it's filtered through guava jelly,
the place is graced with Indonesian furniture,
spoils and booty of the old Dutch East Indies . . .
sticky fingers absently palpate a rotten mango, teeth scrape out a
pawpaw skin . . .
eye-slitting grimace at sharp light on a leprous wall,
flaky white like snow in hot sunshine . . .
yellow flowers decking the bushes like gold braid on a uniform . .
a young woman in raw silk green slacks,
and Club Med T-shirt boards a Pacific cruise ship,
murmuring something about the night air being like warm mango
pulp . . .
this time next week she'll be somewhere above Darwin,
the man in the colonial hotel's staring out to the grandeur of the
coral reef,
considering other built-up, stacked-up coral atolls ringed with
reefs,
lacework patterns vein the sand . . .
in that empty quarter of the ocean, only sea water is busy
rusted weals across the hull of a tramp steamer, cargo of green
bananas . . .
sweat-stained khaki . . . deserted beaches . . .
stray dogs nose the sweepings in the marketplace,
slim taro pickings, twirls of tangerine peel,
pulped mandarins, rotten guavas, speckled leprosy of mango . . .
on the hotel balcony he's a fire-stung dribbler,
staring at the sun until the evening light begins to vanish,
leaving a conqueror's helmet gleam
of coconuts bobbing in the shallows,
and an horizon the colour of dissolving blue stone . . .
the smell of seaweed and of the grey muddy sea,
along with the dying fragrance of heated blossom carried on the
breeze.