

*preludes*

The mind of Man is framed even like the breath  
And harmony of music. There is a dark  
Invisible workmanship that reconciles  
Discordant elements, and makes them move  
In one society.

–Wordsworth

wandering jew  
never at anchor  
with the islands

in himself  
afraid of boulders  
abrading in the surf

on his hands and knees  
he questions the potential  
for green  
checks for placentas taking  
root in the niches

the hills are alive with prophesy  
a sea eagle on currents of fire  
plummets to pursue him through  
canyons of woodchipped dreams  
to the implacable dunes

a warning comes to him  
on tongues of acrid surf  
*islands are too low to the sea  
to embrace an art that seeks  
more than palm fronds and mist*

*Letters We Never Sent*

draped with uncertainty  
we urge our dinghy to discover  
a scenario of purpose  
between the reefs  
that channel of pure chance

then some invisible sandbar  
gridlocks us in a deafening loop  
chanting *black's a precursor to rebirth*  
*so take a draught from this shell*  
*and dive below your epilogue*

there's nothing to fear from coral  
your fractures are nothing special  
in this sector of bleeding colour  
they only drown who renounce  
the bloodline of speech

eyes closed you'll soon touch the floor  
where your toes will mingle in the slurry  
and you'll accept that breath was a mistake  
and that only those who master  
the epiphanies of death really matter

yet everything  
in this tempest of sperm  
around your head reminds you  
of a niggling resurrection

seen from the sea the prospect is magnificent  
shaded tints of green from beach to mountain-top  
diverse with villages ridges glens and cascades  
the peaks flinging their shadows down the valleys  
the waterfalls flashing out in the sunlight  
such enchantment breathes over the whole  
it seems a fairy land all fresh and blooming  
from the hand of the Creator <sup>1</sup>

I am a great artist and I know it

I came to Tahiti not  
to reinvent it but to find  
the savage under my skin  
to barter my French civility for rags  
of silence and in that interval  
to surround myself with the chords  
that must have struck Beethoven  
after he sank into the isolation  
of pure music.

I am tired of old planets.

At the end of this at the end  
of effort I will be codified  
by what I set out to seize  
and it will not matter if no one  
harbours my creations.

No man is an island  
yet a painter must be that  
and more —  
a counterpoint of fluid and solid  
intersection of thought and expression.

In that interrogation  
he finds an essence that teases him  
to voyage beyond the frame  
to the sweet risks of the sentient  
where each burst of colour  
is one more corridor  
between breath and death.

I too have a family  
which I must never forget.

As long as you wait for me, Mette.<sup>2</sup>

*Letters We Never Sent*

the way the islands used to be  
when the ships came in —  
bronzed fellows bigger than me  
strapping girls with moonlight teeth  
and glossy black hair reaching  
down to their midships

it's all gone now

currency  
instead of gold <sup>3</sup>

Yet I want to believe that someone  
out there is still listening  
a sympathetic intelligence  
of dancing light.

This is a tale of lagoons and islands  
lonely reefs and villages drowsy  
in the brilliant sun.

You write your impressions  
even as the future unwrites you:

listen to a brown old man  
rolling sennit on his bare wizened thigh  
tossing his words carelessly  
across the twilight  
curve of a country road

soon  
too soon  
that old man will be you  
though you'll remember  
more of his reflection  
than the mirror

you settle among the Takituma <sup>4</sup>  
where they say the fishing's best  
where there are seasons of *ka'i* <sup>5</sup>  
you can scoop from the sand  
with a coconut shell

you still conjure a winter wind  
or nightingales trilling in the dusk  
but safe in your sandcastle  
you'll forget you've been  
anywhere else.

*setting sail*

It's an unlikely gem —  
Gill <sup>6</sup> called it a lovely spot  
one of nature's fairest gardens  
where he wished for man to be

an incarnation of love and holiness  
not ignorant and vile and hateful  
a worshipper of idols a slave  
to carnality the devil himself.

The girls of Atiu were so warm  
with their sex that Cook almost  
forgot his marital vows.

He wrote in splotches  
of their 'elegantly formed limbs'  
fixing his nib  
firmly on the page

while his spine stiffened  
with saltspray.

Then in Tahiti  
a girl with laughing brown eyes  
cooked a dog specially for him  
'I never ate sweeter meat'  
he said and meant it.

She told him of her father's  
father's father's father's father  
and his crew who reached  
the Antarctic in a canoe

the fish were eager  
for their nets but it was cold  
so cold their coconut milk  
slurried with ice before  
it reached their tongues.  
Cook had already missed  
the peaks of Rarotonga  
in the mist.

Bad luck.

My dearest Mette,

Such a grand dinner at the Café Voltaire –  
so many painters and writers came out  
to wish me well in my passage!

Mallarmé recited a poem for the toast  
and all were inflamed by his words –  
if I can deliver but *one-tenth*  
of the promise he divined for me  
over the next three years  
it will be enough for us  
to live securely.

Maybe then you'll understand  
what kind of man fathered  
your children.

– *March 24, 1891, Paris*

The crossing so far has been smooth  
but I'm the only one who's actually  
paid for his voyage.

*Letters We Never Sent*

The other passengers are either  
servants of our kind government  
or their wives and children  
who've come along for the jaunt.

I should be more patient  
with such decent people  
who carry their family  
everywhere they go.

It's not for me to criticise  
them for their stiff collars  
and mediocrity.

When we are at table  
I do try to venture something  
about the tenderness of the lamb

or the sweetness of the pudding  
as you advised me but they seem  
content just to chew so I'm left  
to stare stupidly at the horizon  
in the hope some porpoise might  
disturb this canvas of dull waves.

It must be the length of my hair  
that makes me a pariah now  
or do they even know

of the name Gauguin?

— *May 4, 1891, Oceania*

he said good-bye to his children  
in slow-motion clips  
a counter-rhythm to the idling car

two kittens grappled in the driveway  
as he tried to make sense of it —  
sign agent signifier agency signified

*how to fabulate Australia*

*an ad for Bacardi Rum insists  
it's the world's biggest island  
so what's cool for sexy Jamaica  
must be cool for the suburbs too*

what if he'd said it with a Bacardi —  
would that have made the message  
any more tropical/topical for them?

*a satellite wakes in its slipstream  
scratches at the electrons pocking  
its skin before focussing its lens  
on the continents/islands below*

he could have told them distances  
are shrinking what with Concorde  
faxes and e-mail and virtual reality

the idea/image of a father  
can be as tangible as the father  
himself *take this microchip*

*on your tongue as my flesh  
press any key to commence  
the program once you scan in*

*Letters We Never Sent*

the face it's easy to manipulate  
the features and even put words  
in his mouth through a emulator

with the flash of fibre optics  
no daughter need be fatherless  
no father needs to compromise

(instead they exchanged letters  
report cards from grade to grade  
the ledges the peaks the obligatory

photos of unshared and uncropped  
experience absorbed  
then concealed from scrutiny

he never admitted that children  
could not be enough for him —  
we must test the boundary

extend the grasp quicken the pace)  
to *father* is the easy part of speech  
an urgent thrust and withdrawal

whereas *fathering* is clay on soles  
that refuses to dry and fall away  
when he wants/needs to set sail

washed overboard? drowned?  
no the artist's a fugitive  
and proud of it