

THE UNREACHED



Iain Bamforth

I can still see him, the emperor of atolls, King Taufa'ahau Tupou

IV

about to take his yearly flight from Tongatapu
to the port of refuge at Vava'u;
the king and his umbrella, the king and his retinue
of advisors, emissaries, cabinet ministers and umbrella holders...
Clambering back into my mind, my son resumes
his prolonged study of Little Hans,
a German Australian who has just rediscovered his mother
after many years of peregrination.
Underneath us, Tonga is so many islands, reefs and lagoons...
In the same plane a commercial vanilla grower,
so corpulent he sits beneath his Majesty on one side
counterbalancing
the six of us on the other (it is a small plane),
practises civility on my wife.
Ears popping, I keep a look-out for the Ha'apai volcanoes,
vents of the trench
deeper than the Himalayas are tall,
where the Australian plate eats the Pacific
at ten centimetres a year...

A week later, the Lord's Day brings rain from the Cloudrider
and we are learning to subsist on taro, manioc, yams,
buckets of red snappers from the coral reefs—
the only fish that still shows hurt.
The only thing to avoid is that dread delicacy, corned beef,
ranged in 57 varieties in the local store
with its peeling weatherboard
and planetary bass-note spilling out onto the street—
corned beef, that grows in cans in papalangi-land.
I am brought to know many things, not least by fishermen
who smell of tobacco and flying fox:
the two-hundred year old gifted tortoise from Captain Cook
that remembered to die only in the 1960s;
the fabulous incubator bird

found uniquely on the crater lakes of Niuafo'ou
whose eggs hatch out, fully-feathered, from their steam-vent
burrows;
typhoons, lava, and the first day of the world.
Those, and other fully-fledged stories—
Tonga itself created by Tongaloa, whose whalebone fishhook
got stuck in the sinkhole called Deep Thought.

All it takes to be a friendly islander is to cherish the island names:
Fofa, Nuapapu, 'A'a, Mu'unu, Kapa...
to call in on Tongans in their soft and hairy houses
while the atoll emperor's at prayer
and the Tongan pig (genus: street-urchin) squirms on hot coals;
to admire the carnal red of Neiafu's hibiscuses
petulant on the skin
when the rain comes down and blows them crazy.
You don't expect someone to ask: what's the *real* difference
between the Latter Day Saints
and the LMS? What's a Mission to the Unreached?
If I knew once, I've forgotten now,
since the body-song of the deeply inset navel
takes us all *toto vaca*
back to the primal tree at the Cabaret Voltaire—
the Pacific islands spread out
like clipped toenails in a great blue bath of Wesleyans
where news still reaches me
of an isolato family caught on the Minerva Reef's swell tide,
water to stand on and nothing else around.