

DAWES POINT

Eleven ships
A thousand souls
A pitching deck beneath his feet
Through the harbour Heads
On to an empty land.

Of all those new arrivals
Here now for punishment, evacuation or as a dubious career path
Perhaps the dream of William Dawes was the star brightest
to look out and up
To see stars, constellations, as no other Englishman had ever done

The land he took for the observatory was outside their new town
He picked his way past tents and lean-tos on a ridge so full of rocks that some were naming it so, out to
the point beyond the reach of settlement lights.
Here William Dawes built a hut for himself.
But to build an observatory, that took so much more:
Such a stable foundation, such perfect balance
To anchor a lens that would see far and true

Days of hard flat sunshine
with cries of seagull, cicada and convict
but nightfall is best, turning bush from grey to blue and sky from blue to indigo
the stars clustering close upon him
till he's brimming full of wonder and wondering

But he is not the only one who wonders
There.
A girl woman, tangled hair as dark as the leaves, arms arched like branches
As if she were the land itself made flesh
In those brown eyes the same feelings of awe, curiosity.

His too-sudden move - she withdraws
"use the brains god gave you Dawes!"
From his hut he brings her bread, pork, peas
Places them on a rock between them like an offering

Eyes on him, she takes the food
Back a little
A grin like a sickle moon on her face
(pats chest) Patyagarang!

When the rest of the Corps heard of this latest project, Dawes got a predictable drubbing.

Call this science, do you Dawes, the study of natives in their habitat?

No, no, we know how fastidious our professor is. No convict doxy for him – he prefers his meat dark!

You needn't think you're the only one learning the language, you know, if language you can call it. I know of at least two others taking note of their words.

Ah, but it is a language and quite different from any other I've encountered. Those lists of words are only nouns. When one converses with one of the Bidjigal as I am doing with Patyagarang one realizes – I realised – that everything changes with the position of the speaker, with the relationship between the two.

Good lord Dawes, you're sounding as if you are the student of some high culture!

Yes, young William was learning – more even than the language or botany he failed to share with the others.

His hut, his home, was always open to Patyagarang.

Night times especially she would join him

Her soft and often laughter over shared meals in the darkness.

She refused to take him as seriously as he took himself.

See how she wraps his white shirt around herself as she rises from the harbour waters.

He chases her to catch hold the ends – oh dear, she was too slow to get away

What now Patyagarang? In my shirt when you are still wet?

Perhaps you will catch a chill. Best for you to go indoors.

Dawes? I should go in – Dawes?

Her hands are on his chest, her face close to his, his shirt damp on her warm wet skin.

Patyagarang, do you – like me?

Oh yes (though eyelashes) - you give me food!

She darts out of his reach

A pang for how he had lured her to him like an alley cur with a plate of lefovers

Patyagarang, do you then think I am kind?

(shrug) kinder than others. That McEntire! (spit)

McEntire, the governor's gamekeeper? Has he been causing problems?

McEntire is very bad man. Takes, no gives. Hurts, no pay back.

Dawes?

Yes Patyagarang?

When are the white men going to leave?

Governor Phillip summoned half a dozen of his best and brightest to the prefabricated tent he was using till Government House was complete.

A most unpleasant matter has arisen gentlemen. You know it has always been my endeavour to be on terms of amity with the natives here. However this forbearance has now been returned with the barbarous murder of my gamekeeper McEntire. Punitive action must be taken at once.

Dawes did not allow his good manners to stop him

You'll forgive me, sir, but the barbarity was first on the part of McEntire. He has stolen, destroyed and raped from the first.

Be that as it may Mr Dawes I am hereby authorising this party to kill two natives in retribution and seize six. If this is not feasible, kill six.

Your pardon, Excellency, but have you considered fully? This action –

I thank you Mr Dawes but I have considered. Since you are so good as to question the morality of my decisions I can only refer you to Rev Johnson for counsel as to your first duty.

Rev Johnson's reasoned arguments of the duties and responsibilities of all members of His Majesty's services, of all citizens of the British Empire, of all Christians to the absolute moral laws were irrefutable. Dawes submitted.

But still...

From the beginning that expedition had a feeling-
Like a day that is humid, cloudy, swelling
Scarlet coats in the bush, scrambling up the rocky slopes,
Spiders and lizards flickering away from their boot fall.

They marched so for three days. Never saw a soul.

Dawes outside his hut at night
As it seemed he had been for as long as he had been himself
Just staring up into the night sky
Patyagarang smiling at this sight of him.

You are here Dawes

He was still for a long moment, just looking at her.
Came to himself and set about bringing her meat and bread

Patyagarang something has happened.
That expedition – you know how very much I repent of it.
It was wrong of us, wrong of me.

I know Dawes. You told me.

The thing is, you see, I told the governor it was wrong too.
When we returned I told him how much I regretted following an order I knew was wrong.
He, he was not pleased.
And now it seems he has had his revenge.
I would not have thought it of him
– have always had the highest regard for his honourableness and fairness.
But now – my commission to NSW has not been renewed.
I shall return to London, to all that bustle, to the life that was all I knew.
And you, well you always said you wanted the white man to go. Now I'm going.

Patyagarang's head was bent. He could just make out the curve of her cheek in the moonlight. Without another word, she left him, the bread roll still clutched in her hand.

A pitching deck beneath his feet again as once more he sailed through the harbour heads.

ahead an empty sea, Behind him a full land.
A brown eyed girl waited at the observatory
Watching him sail away
She watched as his ship vanished into the darkness of the night
Waiting for his return one day.
But he was gone from the land.
She remained.