CLIFF FORSHAW

Trucanini

The last full-blood Tasmanian Aborigine (1812?-1876)

Trucanini, Truganner, I'm not sure what to call you,
your name has grown vague and lost as *Trowenna*.

Trucanini, Truganner, last full-blood born here,
raped by whitefella convicts, sterile with gonorrhoea.

Trucanini, Truganner, still hanging round their woodsmoke,
you sell yourself to sealers for a handful of tea or sugar.

Trucanini, Truganner, they murdered your mother;
come again, a little later, killed your new step-mother.

Trucanini, Truganner, whitemen murdered your intended,
convict mutineers stole your blood-sister Moorina.

Trucanini, Truganner, there'll soon be no one left now,
so many sold to slavers just like your tribal sisters.

Comes another whiteman: comes George Augustus Robinson,
together with Wooraddy, loyal guide and his Good Friday.

This whitefella Robinson's a missionary like no other:
cockney builder become explorer, *The Great Conciliator*.

Trucanini, Truganner, help-meet and translator:
interpret, make word-lists, catalogue their customs.

Trucanini, Truganner—tiny, tiny, tiny—
married Wooraddy, also full-blood out of Bruny.

Trucanini, Truganner, with Robinson you both wander,
so long since you left your home on Bruny Island.

You go gathering them in now, most-trusted Trucanini.
Orphan-mother to the whitefella's blackface piccaninny.

Interpreter, translator, Truganner, Trucanini;
in your story I hear echoes of Pocahontas, La Malinche.

Traduttorre sono traditore: I heard an Italian say in Sydney.
And, for a long time, I thought, Trucanini, Truganner,
how lives fork when we live in a stranger's tongue.

My Lord's a Cockney Shepherd
who's bringing in His Flock
and we're singing Ba Ba Black Sheep
as we huddle in His Fold.

Some say I'm rounding up the black sheep,
like the shepherd's faithful dog,
but there's nothing left but pasture,
and my forest's turned to logs.

Now there's a bounty on the Tiger,
there's a fence across the land,
and they're grazing fluffy white sheep
while the Shepherd sings the hymns.

He leads us to the Promised Land
where we will all be safe,
and our Pen is Flinders Island,
though there's not many still alive.

But the Master's gone and left us,
least what was left of that last Fold.
Shipped us back from Flinders Island
to slums and rum in Oyster Cove.

Trucanini, Truganner, now you're dying on your own,
the doctors pick your bones like ghostly thylacines.

Trucanini, Truganner, your flesh and blood all gone,
your people dead as Dodos and they've stolen what remains,

Trucanini, Truganner, you're in the *National Picture* on the wall;
but, though your bones are raked in a big glass case,
you saved *No One* after all.

●

- **The Ballad of William Lanne**
-
- *Or, 'The Blackfella's Skeleton'*

Now there's a funny kind of Ballad,
Penned by your Boneyard Bards,
Of what happened down in Hobart
When the surgeons came to town.

The coroner's paper's white as bone
And the ink's as black as skin
And the seal upon the parchment's
Red as blood but not so thin.

-

Trucanini's final husband,
A bloke called Billy Lanne,
Died in 1869,
The last full-blood Tassie man.

If this was *Terra Nullius*,
Then William was No-One.
No Diggers could ever count or name
All the species that are gone.

Old Darwin, when he studied
Where Nature had gone wrong,
Found dead-ends merely croaked
And sang no great swan-song.

But the Dinosaurs have left
Fossilized Rosetta Stones,
So the doctors licked their chops
At the thought of Billy's bones.

Well, one night old Saw-Bones Crowther
Sneaked on tip-toes to the Morgue;
The lamplight glints on his case of Knives
Beside that laid-out Corpse.

Now the Surgeon's filthy cuffs
Are rolled back for Steel & Skill:
His Scalpel skims the Cadaver's scalp,
Peels back that sad black skin.

Now William's face falls like a mask
—Crestfallen, sloughed-off skin—
As Crowther teases out the skull
And slips a white bloke's in.

Now a new head fills that Death Mask,
Sewn into the blackfella's grin;
The Bastard wraps the Brain-Pain up
In a piece of old sealskin.

He'll send it off to London
To the Royal bloody Surgeons there,
So he tip-toes from the Morgue,
Sniffs Reward in the dawn-fresh air.

Skullduggery's soon discovered
(*reports our Hobart hack*):
Examining Our Cadaver's head,
"The face turned round," the M.O. said
and this new Saw-Bones "saw bones
were sticking out the back."

So, to stop the pommie Surgeons,
Getting their bloody filthy hands
On the rest of that last Tasmanian

they chopped off its feet,
and they chopped off its hands,
and they threw them away.

The cadaver was buried,
But secretly next night
Royal Society gentlemen
Dug it up by their lamplight.

Time waits for no Tasmanian:
The quick must be quick with the dead.
They dissected William's skeleton
(*sans feet, sans hands, sans head*).

Did grave doctors cast their lots
To perform their funeral rites?
They cut away black flesh that rots,
Redeemed the white bone into light.

Meanwhile, bobbing off to London,
Seal-skin begins to stink.
Sailors got shot of it overboard,
Flung Billy's skull in the drink.

It's a very sorry end,
To what became of William Lanne:
The butchers lost his feet and hands,
His head went bobbing far from land
—Do you think one day they'll find those bones?
Will his skull wash up on Tassie's sands?
Can he be buried whole again?

… *Yeah, yeah,*
but from Darwin down to Melbourne,
the learned doctors said:
"Let the weak fall by the wayside,
for the strong live off the dead.

To stay alive is to survive
against the bleakest odds.
Embrace your Fate. Know your Place.
Accept the Will of God.

His cards were always marked,
just like the thylacine's:
inevitable extinction's
written into defunct genes."

Course, it's a sad, sad end, this dead dead-end,
but, when all is said and done,
can't stand in the way of Progress
—Thank Christ they're bleedin'gawn.

We gave them a good shake,
but they just could not wake,
the Dreamtime had crusted their eyes.

So we left them for dead,
and strode on ahead,
and were blessed with this golden sunrise.

Our shadows are shortening behind us.
Our dead are all dead and all gone.
They couldn't come with us, they couldn't adapt,
their bones lie bleached by the sun.

It's dawn in the Lucky Country
and it's time, it's time to move on.
Let the women and the crocks shed tears,
but these fellas had been just hanging on
these last four thousand years.

Long time dreamed of falling,
Down through seaweed, silver shoal.
Up above the light was fading,
Waves tumbled, roiled and boiled.

Night presses down so heavy.
Down here's just salty sea-bed.
Empty sockets see nothing, nothing.
I need eyes like I need holes in my head.

Teeth shiver-shiver my jaw.
No flesh left to pad them all in.
The world has ripped up all its Laws,
Left us dismembered,

dismembered and bearing white grins.

Funeral Rites

"Don't let them cut me, but bury me behind the mountains."
Trucanini's last words.

i.

The Museum wants my body.
Don't let them cut me, please.
Maybe bury me behind big mountains
where unseen rivers flow down to the sea.

Or wrap me in a canvas bag,
with a stone to weight my feet.
Somewhere off Bruny Island,
please drop me good and deep.

Given half a chance, I think
that I could find some peace
in the Channel's chilly waters.
So just take a little boat, row me out,
slip me overboard and let me go,

let me swirl in the currents
of the d'Entrecasteaux.

Then, let me sink like something forgotten:
some quiet, fishy, best undiscovered,
spirit of that Channel's deepest part.

ii.

Now you're Queen Trucanini
and you're keeping lonely court,
crowned only by the whitefolk
of growing Hobart Town.

Trucanini, Trucanini, fearful of spirits;
Rowra's revenge for tribes long betrayed.
"Missus, Rowra catch me. Rowra catch me."

Come coma days. Come drowning dreams.
Come ghosts. Come bad memory stuff
of sealers and Flinders and wretched Oyster Cove.
Come Woorady. Come Moorina.
Come all tribal sisters.
Come Mama. Come Step-Mama.
Come all that is known.

Missus, Rowra catchme. Catchme. Catchme.
Missus, Rowra catchme. Catchme in dreams.
Come Robinson. Come doctors.
Come William's scattered bones.
"Don't let them cut me!
Don't let them cut me, please!"

Come words. Come silence.
Come whisper. Come scream.

iii. 11 May 1876

Crowned *Queen of Aborigines*
when you had no people left,
le tout Hobart's out to see
the Governor pay respects
to you, the great dead dignitary
of some awful far-off place.

As they watched your little coffin
borne through mourning crowds,
few knew or could suspect

the emptiness that bobbed
in that child-sized snuffed-out box

Not behind mountains,
nor sinking through water;
not in this coffin,
your body's elsewhere.

They've taken your tiny remains
and stashed them in a vault.
Hush your bones
in the Protestant's cool Chapel;
keep the secret shushed,
deep behind the Penitentiary's tall walls.

iv. The National Picture

Dug up two years later,
skin and fat flensed off,
my bones boiled and nailed
into an apple crate.

Once more left forgotten,
I'm in another dusty box.
Enough kinfolks' bones to make
the Museum our family vault.

Upstairs in the Gallery,
I'm in that big "National Picture"
That's life, though there I'm larger by far:
all eyes drawn to me, its dark star,

bringing my people all in
to George Augustus Robinson,
The Conciliator,
(our lost Messiah)
in his important coat and hat.

At our feet,
the artist's strangely painted
the wallaby in peace
with his kinsman's kangaroo hounds.

v.

… Years later,
rediscovered my crate:
put me together;

restrung my bones,
hung me upstairs
in a glass-fronted case.

Faces came, went,
breathed on the glass,
then rattled me down

for another thirty years
in the cellar's dank.

'76,
one hundred years dead.
Called it Centenary.

Called me *cremated*.
All those years since
my lying in state.

Smoke, ashes scattered:
grit pitting the waters
of the D'Entrecasteaux.

Surf explodes at Storm Bay.
Once in the channel,
you hope, but can never know,
if you're ever safely through.

Notes

Trucanini, the last of the full-blood Tasmanian Aborigines, was born on Bruny Island around 1812. After many of her family and tribe were killed or sold into slavery she joined builder-turned-evangelist George Augustus Robinson and his guide, the Aboriginal chief Woorady, on his journeys of exploration and "conciliation." During the early 1830s Robinson made contact with every remaining group of Tasmanian natives and carried out rudimentary anthropological inquiries into their customs and rituals, as well as compiling basic vocabularies of their languages. After the failure of the Black Line (1829) to pen the Aborigines in the Tasman Peninsula, in 1834 Robinson led the remaining natives to Flinders Island in the Bass Strait, where he attempted to Christianize them. The "National Picture" showing Robinson and Trucanini "bringing in" the remaining Aborigines is Benjamin Duttereau's *The Conciliation* (c.1835). By 1845 there were 150 Aborigines left. Robinson had left Flinders to return to the mainland in 1839; his successors treated the remaining aborigines in their concentration camp appallingly. In 1846 the survivors were settled at Oyster Cove on the d'Entrecasteaux Channel near Hobart where their keepers provided them with insanitary huts and rum. By 1855 there were only sixteen left, including Trucanini. The last man, William Lanne, died in 1869. Trucanini died in 1876.

There is of course a big problem about the concept of "the last of the Aborigines;" many Tasmanians are mixed-race descendents of Aborigines and immigrants.

Queen Trucanini
Last Aborigine of Tasmania
H. H. BAILY
1888
HOBART
National Library of Australia
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