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Out of Eden: diaspora as a constant human condition

I am a diasporic subject: let me explain. I was a part of one of many post-WW2 people movements, the immigration of a fresh wave of British peoples to New Zealand from the late 1940s to the early 1960s. Just over two years of age in 1950, I sailed through the Panama Canal, crossed the Equator, met the great King Neptune - and arrived in my new home. Like the first man and the first woman in one of our oldest texts, the book of Genesis, I was expelled from the place I began and sent to wander elsewhere; like Odysseus in another of Western literature's formative ancient tales, I was launched out in search of something new.

In the interests of economy I will use my own poetry to illustrate what happened:

six poems celebrating the end of the mechanical and the dawn of the virtual

(i)

I was born the day
New Zealand was
but in England. It was
a terrible winter, but soon,
television.

(ii)

The ex-Royal Navy frigates
named after Scottish lochs
bought in 1948
we translated into
Tutira, Rotoiti, Hawea.

My father sailed for the new
world in 1949, leaving
us behind to follow. His ship
made land at Crete en route
to mihi to the dead.

(iii)

Later in the New Zealand Railways

we returned to the nineteenth
century: Ngahere, old Westland, timber
laden mill loikes creaking to the railway
yards. There was no television
but imaginary worlds.

(iv)

Memoir has a bunch of
issues: you half forget what
you're making up. Coronation
Street in black and white with
static. Mum was back in a kind
of Liverpool but really it was
1968 and the Wahine Storm
outside.

(v).

Yes, that storm. I was there and remember
it from the television: black hulk, black night.
Later, in Australia, ploughing way
out in the sticks on nightshift, men
were walking on the moon. They
had computers. We did not know
about computers, kangaroos ghosting
through the tractor headlights.

(vi)

Lived through three kinds of
centuries: cell phone, laptop, online families. Came
all this way from anchor chains to
Facebook. Tomorrow will shimmer
like a line gone missing.

Writing this, it was never my intention to create a thesis on the scattering of people and mass migration, but you may detect certain common elements here that literature often invokes when such journeys are recalled.

1. There are always memories of the homeland, carried away. 2. These tend to become mythical over time (Hawaiki for Māori). 3. The names of the vessels of passage are remembered (as are the canoes that brought Māori to New Zealand). The rites of passage too – in this case, the sailors visit Crete, a site of ancient Greek myth and legend, where many New Zealanders fought and died in WW2. 4. There is a new world to be discovered and new languages, fresh imaginations: the children quickly become a new race of people, cut off from the homeland. 5. The parents often remain rooted in the memories of the old world and live as divided subjectivities, henceforward. 6. New relationships with the host culture are formed, new technologies developed. 7. There is thus a redefined past and more uncertain future in such new worlds.

All this has a bearing on the practice and possibilities of literature: we only have to consider the vitality of post-colonial literatures in English today to see this. One of the greatest internal people movements in the 20th century took place in New Zealand. Prior to World War Two, over 80% of Māori lived in rural areas; by the mid-1960s, that figure had been reversed and the rural decline continues. This has been a significant factor in work by Māori writers: from the pastoral nostalgias of early Ihimaera to the brutal and violent cityscapes of Alan Duff, seen in the book - and the film – *Once Were Warriors*.

That film in particular, with its graphic depiction of domestic violence and alcohol abuse found a ready audience amongst marginalised First Nations communities worldwide, especially in North America. Novels of deracination and island depopulation such as the Nuiean John Puhiaatau Pule's searing 1991 debut, *Ko e Mago Ne Kai e La* (The Shark That Ate The Sun) are typical of this postwar generation and its inheritors. The poetry of Robert Sullivan's seminal *Star Waka* (1999) uses the metaphor of the canoe to trace all manner of Pacific journeys.

Peoples, once uprooted may continue this cycle of movement - this has been true for me. I went back to the fabled home of my parents' stories in 1987 and stayed in England for ten years. I was never comfortable, never intended to stay and was glad to go home in 1997 – but after this, “home” has always seemed a state of mind to me. It is where I remember and where I am remembered.

Let me conclude with another poem, aptly enough entitled “Diaspora” – it was part of a series written in 2009 when I visited my expatriate daughter in California, where she has married and will most likely now live and die.

9. diaspora

three nights sleeping under the roof of my
son-in-law's suburban mansion its white
cathedralish atrium to him quite normal
one more step on the upscale ladder child
of Italian and Polish rootstock baptised American
way way back by some frazzled clerk on Ellis
Island swamped in the roar of thick dark accents

out of his depth in the hordes of exiles minting
an instant New York coinage Rasala now was who
you were genes to be sent to Pennsylvania pulsing
later at MIT resting here in California over here
somewhere between Thomas Merton and Leonard
Cohen I go down the Bollinger Canyon Road to
Nat King Cole at Starbucks a slow beige bubble
of corner gossip settling down on the humming
MacBooks a very material kind of pilgrimage
passed on the left by Yoko Ono's anorexic older
sister with iPod drips that swing on her shoulders
facing the uphill grinning grills of Lexus after
Lexus where Miguel trims the edges in his yellow
safety jacket one more Mexican helper from across
the border who may or may not become rich in
this or the next generation perhaps one day he
will have a son on the way through college
a clerk at Costco scanning the beef and turkey
jerkies up from the fields where his mother picked
the grapes of Napa yes it must be obvious by now if you
have followed their fortunes this far that a fresh wave
of expectant displaced persons will huddle tonight
at the borders and descend

from Flight Path, in *Fly Boy* (2010)

This poem takes its life and energy from the experience of people moving over the earth, always and everywhere, in search of a myriad dreams. Perhaps I am attuned to such things because of being an immigrant and growing up in an immigrant family. Such formative experiences are the creative drivers in all that migratory peoples have written and will continue to write, as they move in search of security, prosperity and the mysterious changes that cause us to see anew in the act of leaving – and arriving.

