

## *Mauli*

What is this centre thing that holds me to my life?  
This maui the cool Mānoa evening makes me contemplate?

Is it like the thin sliver of light I will remember  
after the last sunset slips off the Ko'olau?  
Is it like the just-there acidic taste of anti-cholesterol  
that promises a life after death without fat?  
Is it like the owl's sonar flight in the fearless dark  
though it doesn't know it is flying?  
Is it like the desire of grass to be lush in the Mānoa rains?  
Or the compulsive search by water for its apt shape?

Is it something you can crawl out off and bequeath  
to another creature which needs a shell from predators?  
Is it the memory of the sea womb out of which you surfaced  
into the despair of the light?  
Is it an invisible second skeleton of bone  
your grandchildren will wear like a uniform?  
Can you smoke it like pakalōlō and talk the air  
into giving up its secret elixirs? And is it 10 dollars a joint?

Can you smell it? And if you can what does it smell like?  
Is it the blood odour of the amniotic tide that cauled you?  
Or that of hot porridge on a freezing morning at boarding school?  
Or do you prefer it to be the smell of dead flowers?  
Frangipani? Moso'oi? Roses?  
Or fresh bread as the morning opens your house?  
What about the stench of unwashed feet?  
Or an aunt's noiseless fart as she pretends all is well with her life?

If you can touch it what do you prefer it to feel like?  
The long slick clinging feel of the black Vaipē mud  
out of which you have eased?  
What about the whole weave of your lover's skin as you burn?  
Or the searching feel of your father's Sunday sermons at Malie  
that woke you to the mana of words?  
Or the stinging bite of your grandmother's salu on your legs?  
What about the large embrace of her arms afterwards?

If you could taste it would it be  
like a hotdog with mustard onions and a lot of hope?  
A double cheeseburger with a lot of hope  
but without onions and mustard?  
Pork sapaui oka fa'alifu kalo palusami koko alaisa or fries?  
What about the taste of Marmite or Weet-Bix? (I bet only Kiwis know those!)  
Or the taste of hot fish'n'chips on a Friday night in Ponsonby?

Yes this centre thing that holds even river stones to their shape and shine  
that holds the owl aloft in the dark as it targets the hunger in its stride  
that is the rage and sparkle in my grandchildren's eyes  
holds me true and upright to the path of my life  
I did not buy or ask for it  
It came with me and won't let me forget it  
until it runs out

## *Garden 2*

Reina got up early and did some baking  
Now the rapturous smell of banana cake fills our house  
and weaves out and around the pot plants she's just finished watering

Soon she'll get the cake from the oven and we'll sit on the lānai  
under the beach umbrella and eat it and drink the coffee I'll make  
with the Kona beans our Hawaiian friends brought last week

For the first time the tomatoes are bearing fruit – tiny silver-green balls  
on which the clouds are reflected as they drag their shadows across the city  
The light is a healing balm on my skin as I stand at the lānai railing and watch

Mānoa hunting the daring flies cicadas and other insects  
in the tangled trees and shrubbery that border our back yard  
She'll hunt all day only resting to check if we're still there

I marvel at her sleek determination faith and purpose  
and remember it's the first Sunday of the new year

## *Garden 3*

It rained last night and the garden is now wild with the odour of growth  
At mid-morning for the last three days a pair of kingfishers fly in  
from the west and perched on our neighbour's TV antenna two storeys up  
they start a *TEESHEEK-SHEEK-SHEEK! TEESHEEK-SHEEK-SHEEK!* duet  
that repeats and repeats until they have our rapt admiration

Their long-billed heads stab forward and back as they chant  
Their crests and backs are the blue of the Pacific's eyes when it's in a good mood  
We watch from our lānai and wonder what the hypnotic mantra will fish out  
of the south: an endless summer? a cure for violence? our ancestors' world  
in which they were atua who could delay death?

When our teenage mokopuna join us we show them the birds  
What are they? one asks after a nonchalant glance  
What's for breakfast? the other demands  
Is it true that once kingfishers pair they love each other until death?

### *Garden 18*

Even my study is luscious with the smell of blueberry muffins  
I eagerly await Reina's invitation to come and eat  
Last night on TV I watched the Chiefs massacre my team the Blues  
Reina can't stand my addiction to the game and I have to watch in our bedroom  
so she can watch her preferences in the sitting room

When we lived in Hawai'i I watched rugby on Mediaspace.com  
We lived in a tight housing compound of apartments and our neighbours  
who didn't know much about rugby had to tolerate my loud commentary  
and told their friends 'Dis Noo-Zealand guy's crazy about dis crazy rugby!'  
Sometimes Robert and other friends and I watched the Tests at Dean's house  
Drank beer cheered loudly and called one another mate and clobber  
and loved playing true to the stereotype of the rugby-mad Kiwi joker  
though I know the practice and worship of the game in Noo-Zeeland  
is sexist downright brutal and mindless

### *Garden 19*

It's almost midday and the sun is brighter but the slow cold that moved in  
during the early hours of the morning is refusing to leave  
To warm up and ease my knee pain I've had a hot shower and dressed in  
warm clothes walked for fifteen minutes round our house and lānai  
Mānoa greeted me on the lānai and we butted heads before she squatted  
under the railing and watched Reina hanging up the clothes on the line

Everything in our garden is adopting a defensive posture as the cold advances:  
only one tomato is left on the shrivelled vines and the flowers are gone  
except for the new burst of blood-red blooms on the Tahitian pōhutukawa  
(Reina tells me it will continue to blossom through winter)  
As they do every winter the three orchids hanging from the pergola  
will soon thrust out red-pink and white blossoms

When I was a boy in Sāmoa every time my grandmother was cold  
she would in our evening lotu ask God to ban the cold from our 'sinful bones'

### Garden 33

Another warm Sunday and I've just walked round our deck garden  
sipping redbush tea with Mānoa weaving round my legs like a rivulet  
Brent next door has just had his house repainted: now it glows  
like the slow unleashing of a clenched fist

All week I've worked on a series of black-and-white drawings about the Galuafi that hit Sāmoa in late September and killed nearly 200 people. Last evening I spread out the six drawings on my studio floor: they said they were a family like the families who were lost in the Galuafi; they said I was never to separate them from one another; they said if I did they would sweep me away with their anger.

While I drew them with pen ink and water they buckled and curled  
To flatten them out I'll pile them on top of one another on the floor  
under my art table and place thick cardboard and two heavy barbells on them  
When they're absolutely flat and level I'll promise never to separate them

