

# SIGNS IN THE SKY

Poems

by KUMALAU TAWALI



PAPUA POCKET POETS

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## SIGNS IN THE SKY

Facing the sunless western sky  
what was in his mind?  
What could he see in the sky?  
Like a man with his mind adrift  
he whispered to himself.

He looked north, he looked south  
then he raised his left hand to his face  
and counted the members.  
And he raised his right hand up to his eyes  
and he counted the fingers once more.

Ten - ten - yes, ten days!  
Ten days since the wind started blowing.  
Tonight shall see the end of the storm  
and the beginning of good sky -  
according to our ancient calculation.

And his mind remembered the days:  
when trees were falling  
canoes were sent adrift  
and houses blown down -

Tonight the skies are red  
from the west to the eastern horizon.  
The signs are in the sky. -  
The wind has been appeased -  
calm days return to us.

## THE OLD WOMAN'S MESSAGE

Stick these words in your hair  
and take them to Polin and Manuai  
my sons:  
the ripe fruit falls and returns  
to the trunk - its mother.  
But my sons, forgetful of me,  
are like fruit borne by birds.  
I see the sons of other women  
returning. What is in their minds?  
Let them keep the price of their labour  
but their eyes are mine.  
I have little breath left  
to wait for them.  
I am returning to childhood.  
My stomach goes to my back  
my hands are like broom sticks,  
my legs can fit in the sand crab's hole.  
I am dry like a carved image  
only my head is God's.  
Already I sway like a dry falling leaf  
I see with my hands -  
oh tell Polin and Manuai to hurry  
and come to my death feast.

## GRANDMOTHER'S LOVE

When grandmother died I was away  
cut off by the great expanse of the sea  
but when the news reached me that night  
the great expanse contracted  
the jungle of distance was cleared.

And then I saw grandmother  
on a bright morning  
bending over my bed, saying  
"Your food is ready, Kirokau."  
Always on time, never failing,  
I thought her love would always be there.

## THE OLD MAN'S EXPLANATIONS

Thunder roars in the sky:

"God is angry!"

The sea is rough:

"God breathes hard."

The sky rains:

"The angels are pissing."

## THE TURTLE

When light rain falls in early evening  
go out to the sandy beach .

You are sure to find  
that she who has four wings  
is already labouring there  
labouring to give you her eggs .



## A COCONUT IS A COCONUT

Disobedient child!

Whose stomach did you come from?

Whatever I ask you to do  
you refuse .

When other boys go fishing  
you sit at home .

When did you last hold the kual  
to beat sago?

All you do is "Stay at home",  
"Stay at home . "

Naw that your stomach is empty,  
why don't you eat "Stay at home?"

Oh! My head!

Alas the proverb is true:

"A coconut is always a coconut . "

A boy is always his father .

## MOURNING SONG

I sat and listened to him  
mourning his mother.  
The song's rhythm  
almost possessed me to tears.

There were peaks and valleys  
each peak a painful memory  
each valley the receding image  
of his mother.

I realised the thousand things  
which must have rivered through his mind.  
I saw his mother, looking at me now,  
his mother cooking food, his mother  
talking now in her soft voice . . .

And suddenly I understood:  
a phantastic process was taking place,  
a miraculous communication.  
A spectacular re-enactment  
took place on the vast stage in his head  
and my mind was the audience.

## MY CANOE

My canoe!

Countless voyages you made  
the rough ocean was your cousin  
the waves could not board you.

Those times are gone  
when you carried countless things  
heaped on your platform -  
sagoes uncountable  
coconuts uncountable you carried  
to the feast of the ear piercing.

You travelled to the end of the east  
you travelled to the end of the west  
like a flying fish.

O Liandra! You were like a girl  
with breasts standing up:  
a thousand glances came your way.  
Now we think you are nothing!  
But you have returned to log,  
your real self.

## FAITHS

Elijah prayed  
and from heaven came fire  
to consume logs, stones and all.  
Pomu called and tuna  
jumped out of the water.

Faith in front of us  
faith behind us  
power hides from us.

Pomu had faith, tuna came  
Elijah had faith, fire came.  
What is Faith?  
What is faith?

## TUNA

Tuna you are mirror of the blue  
Tuna you are the pain in my veins  
Tuna you are lord.

When I set out to catch you  
I am a prisoner of taboos.  
"Don't dangle legs over the side of the canoe."  
"Don't whistle for merriment."  
"Is your thought straight?"  
"Is your wife having her first pregnancy?"  
"Are you newly married?"  
All this awkwardness my duty.

But on the market you are the sun.  
You darken the eye of the inland man  
when he offers plenty in exchange  
without bargain - just to get you.

You are worth the pain in my veins.

## FUNERAL FEAST

Powesu you have flown away!

You have untied us two

O Powesu!

I am drifting.

You hands,

the axe hands!

Countless canoes they built,

canoes

that went to touch the west

canoes

that went to touch the east.

Your hands that fished the turtles

the turtles

that filled the ceremonial houses.

Those hands

no others were enough for them.

Those hands, which knew nothing:

the anger of the western sky was nothing to them

the anger of the eastern sky was nothing to them.

Now the hands fly . . . . .

Where will we go?

Where is our name?

Our canoes are gone

the turtles are gone

the sea is forbidden to us.

## AMBUSH

Outside the village they lie in ambush.

My child, may your anus not want to excrete

they lie in ambush outside the village.

May your penis not want to urinate

they lie in ambush outside the village.

My child, may you be easy to wake.



## HANDING DOWN THE SPEAR

This spear  
the spear of Tali Kumayon  
now I pass it into your hands  
your hands, these two  
whenever they throw it  
some man will die.

This spear  
once feared  
in the hands of Kumayon  
I hand it to you.  
Now take it and go to war:  
fight in the east and the west  
fight in the north  
you alone can destroy  
an entire village.

When people ask:  
"Whose is that spear?"  
You shall answer:  
"The spear of Tali Kumayon  
of the house of Lambulun."

And your name shall touch the sky  
and the drums  
shall spread your name  
across the islands.

## BETELNUT

Betelnut

you hang up there  
bunched up  
like baby coconuts.

When I chew you

you calm the waves of my mind  
you ruffle the waves of my stomach  
they batter against the reef  
of my belly.

Betelnut

what are you?  
You cure me from sickness  
make me forget my sorrows  
you redden my lips  
when I chew you with pepper leaves.  
You help my body  
when it is powerless to clean itself.  
You make me happy.

O betelnut!

Bunch of baby coconuts  
what are you?

NIU

You are the baby that crawls  
too long.

All the others are walking -  
what has your mother been doing with you?  
Have you been carried too long?  
Have you been fed too much?

Niu

don't crawl too long  
your legs will be weak  
like a cripple's.

Oh Niu!

stand up

you must try to carry weight.

One day nobody will be around  
and you will have to carry weight  
if you can't -  
you will fall.

Oh Niu!

Will you stand up?

Now?

Right now?

## THE SKULL

O skull

*a smoked old bone*

that's what you really are!

But you are the father of this house

*your spirit guards us*

we fear you.

When a child of this house is sick

*you are the cause*

when a child of this house is well

*you are the cause*

Oh skull

*you hang there useless*

*you hang there powerless*

Oh skull

*you hang there useful*

*you hang there powerful*

Oh skull

*my ancestor*

*mysterious skull*

*skull ...*

## THE RIVER FLOWS BACK

In my mother's womb  
peace was mine  
but I said "maping"  
I greeted the light  
and came into the world.  
saluting it with a cry.  
I paddled downstream  
drifting at ease  
like Adam  
before the fall.

But now  
a storm rises before me  
my canoe has swung round  
I paddle against the stream.  
The river my helper  
has become my enemy  
I fight the river  
until my veins stand out  
until the paddle blisters my palms.

Yet in this battle I gain glory  
I win fame  
I grow a name  
the true essence of it.

One day I will reach the source again  
There at my beginnings  
another peace  
will welcome me.

## THE DRUMS OF WAR

Their bodies painted in black and red stripes  
tell the story of their purpose.

They wait, tensely  
they listen to the power songs.

"Tomorrow will be the day  
when obsidian shall break  
when the inland men  
shall lose many  
and the beach shall chew betelnut.

The garamut answers their voices  
and a hundred agile warriors  
display their strength.  
They shake, jump, shout in procession  
to the rhythm of the drums.

They work hard.  
Their minds grow light  
and sweat falls like rain  
on their hands, legs and eyes.  
The treacherous spears  
tired of ceremony  
look hungry for the real thing.



## THE BUSH KANAKA SPEAKS

The kiap shouts at us  
forcing the veins to stand out in his neck  
nearly forcing the excreta out of his bottom  
he says: you are ignorant.

He says: you are ignorant,  
but can he shape a canoe,  
tie a mast, fix an outrigger?  
Can he steer a canoe through the night  
without losing his way?  
Does he know when a turtle comes ashore  
to lay its eggs?

The kiap shouts at us  
forcing the veins to stand out in his neck  
nearly forcing the excreta out of his bottom  
he says: you are dirty

He says we live in dirty rubbish houses.  
Has he ever lived in one?  
Has he enjoyed the sea breeze  
blowing through the windows?  
and the cool shade under the pandanus thatch?

Let him keep his iron roof, shining in the sun,  
cooking his inside, bleaching his skin white.

The kiap shouts at us  
forcing the veins to stand out in his neck  
nearly forcing the excreta out of his bottom,  
He says: you'll get sick.

He says: you'll get sick  
eating that fly ridden food.  
Haven't I eaten such food all my life,  
and I haven't died yet?  
Maybe his stomach is tender like a child's  
born yesterday. I'm sure he couldn't  
eat our food without getting sick.

Every white man the gorment sends to us  
forces his veins out shouting  
nearly forces the excreta out of his bottom  
shouting you bush kanaka.

He says: you ol les man!  
Yet he sits on a soft chair and does nothing  
just shouts, eats, drinks, eats, drinks,  
like a woman with a child in her belly.  
These white men have no bones.  
If they tried to fight us without their musiket  
they'd surely cover their faces like women.

KUMALAU TAWALI was born in Tawi village on Manus Island. He completed his primary education in his village. In 1963 he attended Keravat High School in Rabaul, where he completed his four year secondary education. In 1967 he came to the University of Papua and New Guinea where he is now a third year art student. One of his subjects is creative writing. Kumalau Tawali has written numerous short stories and two plays. His play "Manki Masta" was performed in Canberra by the Prompt Theatre group and will be included in the volume "Five New Guinea Plays" to be published by Jacaranda Press late in 1970. One of his short stories won the 1969 Territory short story competition, and his poem "The Bush Kanaka Speaks" won the 1969 Waigani poetry competition. Several of his stories have been published in "Kovave" magazine.