

## Benita Le Mahieu

### Death of a Village Headman

Whenever I hear the Friarbird's poignant song,  
I think of you. The way you suffered. The way you  
endured. The way you died.

You were the village Headman – a title earned  
long before we met - when wild pigs were  
plentiful, and crocodiles bathed in the backwaters  
of the Gogol. But death dismissed status,  
defying the dignity you deserved.

The day it happened – the stroke - you toppled  
to the earth, like an aging eucalyptus relinquishing  
its roots. Prayers and petitions ascended,  
demanding demons to leave your soul. Suspending  
daily rituals, an entire village hovered.  
Weeping. Watching. Waiting.  
But the demons did not leave.  
I sat nearby, conscious of my place and culture,  
silently pleading, *Please, take him to town.*  
*Take him to a doctor. Go now, without delay.*

But Time and Urgency did not exist.  
Propping you up, they fed you pumpkin greens  
cooked in coconut milk. Eager to please, you choked  
on stalky stems, eyes bulging and watering,  
white liquid dribbling down the side of your mouth.

I tried to explain this anoxic event,  
-the thrombus, the blocked blood vessels-  
But they did not hear.  
Prophetically, they only heard the words  
I refused to hear. The words they've heard so many  
times before. "Take him back to the village.  
There is nothing we can do."

Whenever I hear the rooster's crow, I see the hut  
that became your prison. I see the smoke from a  
smoldering cooking fire. I see a window cut into  
the woven bamboo wall, through which you watched  
the world that last year. Carried from cot to chair,  
your eyes told me things you could not say,  
the words you could not form.

How desperately you wanted to flee  
this shrunken sphere.

That last night, long after the village had fallen asleep,  
you cried out over and over – tormented pleas  
caught in stagnant, sticky air.  
Each lament splintered my soul. Each scream I breathed  
as though my own.  
Tree frogs ceased their chorus.

Whenever I hear the Friarbird's poignant song,  
I think of you. I think of you, the village Headman,  
not as you were, but restored and resurrected,  
peering through eternity's window.

Benita Le Mahieu lives in the Eastern Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea with her husband and children. She grew up on a farm in Alberta, Canada. Benita earned a Bachelor of Arts degree, with a major in nursing from Augustana University in Sioux Falls, SD. Her fiction has appeared in *Cricket Magazine*, and her poetry most recently appeared in *Moonpark Review*. Benita enjoys reading, writing, and traveling.