

The Place of Reeds

Clive James

Kogarah (suppress the first 'a' and it scans)
Named by the locals for the creek's tall reeds
That look like an exotic dancer's fans
When dead, was where I lived. Born to great deeds

I stripped the fronds and was a warrior
Whose arrows were the long thin brittle stem
With a stiff piece of copper wire or
A headless nail to make a point for them.

The point went in where once the pith had been
Before it crumbled. The capillary
Was open at the other end. Some keen
Constructors mastered the technology

For fitting in a feathery tail-piece,
But they made model aeroplanes that flew.
Mine didn't, and my shafts, upon release
Wobbled and drifted as all missiles do

With nothing at the back to guide their flight.
Still, I was dangerous. My willow bow
Armed an Odysseus equipped to smite
Penelope and let her suitors go.

The creek led through a swamp where each weekend
Among the tangled trees we waged mock war.

At short range I could sometimes miss a friend
And hit the foe. Imagine Agincourt

Plus spiders, snakes and hydroponic plants.
I can't forget one boy, caught up a tree
By twenty others, peeing his short pants
As the arrows came up sizzling. It was me.

Just so the tribesmen, when our ship came in
Bringing the puffs of smoke that threw a spear
Too quick to see, realised they couldn't win.
It was our weaponry and not their fear

Defeated them. As we who couldn't lose
Fought with our toys, their young men dived for coins
From the wharf across the bay at La Perouse,
Far from us. Now, in age, my memory joins

Easy supremacy to black despair
In those enchanted gardens that they left
Because they knew they didn't have a prayer:
Lately I too begin to feel bereft.

Led by the head, my arrow proves to be
My life. I took my life into my hands.
I loosed it to its wandering apogee,
And now it falls. I wonder where it lands.