

Manna

Six festive seasons ago in Malawi,
thousands of miles south in Africa,
I walked sixteen dogged miles down
from Dedza Mountain to a White Fathers' mission
at the bottom of the Great Rift Valley,
(on the fault that starts here in Sinai)
taking the whole of the day before Christmas.
Outside a village, where maize fields
give way to banana groves & then rainforest
with orchids, Tarzan vines & baboons,
I was dying of thirst at the valley brink
when I spot a sign on a hut by a *mankwala* "clinic"
where witchdoctors treat snakebite & curses,
announcing in English (sort of)
"Unity & Freedom Bottle Store."

Now, well into a day of four-wheel drive
up into the desert where the tribe of Moses
was misled for forty years,
a day after celebrating a different Christmas
with boiled ham, Israeli wine & sunstroke
on the beach of a Red Sea Bedu village,
near out of cigarettes & body fluids
we come round some rocks to a shack,
in a quasi-oasis by a feeble spring,
on which I spot another analeptic sign
announcing in English (sort of)
“Ye Olde Coffee Shoppe”.

Both the jungle & desert shops, I swear,
meted only & exactly the following stuff:
Nescafé; stale local brands & Marlboros;
thin sugar biscuits in cellophane;
mackerel in those tins with the key
that never works & bottles of warm Coke:

the coriander seed & honey wafer
we deal the tribes these days.

TERRANCE COX