

# ZEST 3

STORIES, ARTICLES AND VERSE

*THE THIRD ANTHOLOGY  
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## TO THE READER

Not for gain, and surely not for glory,  
We set ourselves aside to contemplate  
A sheet of plain white paper; and our story,  
Tells itself; our fantasies exfoliate.  
Not merely for the ego's satisfaction,  
Nor only for illusory escape,  
Do we perform the solitary action  
Of giving to our dreams a settled shape.  
It is the joy of making and the wish to see  
Another smile or weep at works we've fashioned  
That stimulates us to activity;  
We hope to please, to give ourselves unrationed  
To our unknown reader. So we invite you: look  
At this our offering, enjoy our book.

## THE ROSE

*Joy Dettman*

At the age of two or three, I placed on file in my memory the image of a straggling, dusty shrub, reputed to bear a flower of peerless beauty. The plant had little impact on my youthful mind, for it had ever been in the yard where my small footprints were held captive.

Close to the earth then, my eyes compared it to the enthusiastic tecoma, covering a side fence with its wildfire blooming. The rose bush could not compete. It was a careless, untidy thing with no bloom, nor even a positive form. It sprawled, it leaned, it groped for things to cling to.

A fence grown old and grey supported it for a season. A painted wall, a chimney slick and tall; and, of course, the vigorous Moreton Bay fig tree that also offered to me its umbrella of shade on those long summer days of childhood.

Unlike the scarlet climbing rose, clambering over the front veranda, thwarting my raids with its razor-sharp thorns, my back yard rose's thorns were undeveloped. They were never designed to fight for survival. A subservient thing, the bush lived to fall, to tumble down in a tangled heap of twisted vine, sometimes touching me with its helpless, yet frenetic obstinacy for life.

As year followed on after year, I began to doubt its right to the name of rose, and I watched it with the suspicious eye of one who now dared to doubt even the existence of Father Christmas. I sought the supposed blooms relentlessly, ransacking the bush for a bud, for the merest hint of its reputed beauty, only to find communes of green aphides clustering there, sucking sap.

They angered me, the aphides. I crushed them between my fingers, feeling the satisfying slip of a parasitic life-form re-

duced to liquid, and I wiped their juices on to the seat of my pants while scouring the new growth for their relatives. It gave me excuse to search again for a blossom hidden deep, which might prove that prayers offered nightly to God and Father Christmas were not in vain. But slowly my footprints grew and soon my feet were shod and away.

Forgotten by all, the Moreton Bay fig extended its domination of the back yard. As for the rose, it had ever been where I had been: thus life continued to scurry by and I grew tall. No more did my bare feet venture into the back yard—now strangely cold and uninviting beneath the dark blanket of shade the fig had flung over all.

I heard in passing that the white Easter daisy had vacated her corner, close to the chimney; and the red geranium, grown long and rangy in quest of sunshine, one spring refused to struggle on. The tecoma, always a wanderer, left home to colonise a neighbour's yard, and I left home to wed. The rose remained.

Sprawled in the dust, its life spent in shadow, it warranted no second glance from me when I came to call, releasing the child on my hip to the sanctuary of the back yard, where, unopposed now, the Moreton Bay continued to create its moonscape of slick grey roots. Through the years my children assumed many identities in their struggles against Martians and Moon monsters over the alien terrain. I noticed though, that they left no footprints in the yard. The earth was sterile.

Still the rose survived. Each year it crept closer to the fig, cringing against the grey roots, clinging to a second-hand existence, as I too clung to my children. And then they were launched into life and I was free, a born-again gardener with time on my hands.

I walked the back yard of my childhood. I loosened the earth around the root of the rose and nourished it with growing dust, and I hacked at the Moreton Bay's smooth granite roots and sprayed them with the poison of my contempt. I would know what others knew. Raised on tales of the rose's beauty, I'd believed the old ones. So many dreams, too many of life's

promises now dust, this one had become my passion and I refused to surrender it.

I studied books, seeking the identity of this plant. Was it a rose or was it just some common thing? Had I wasted my prayers, my care, on a nameless thing? Yet the leaf, though small, was that of a rose, and didn't the stem, when crushed, carry the odour of the standard beauty gracing my own front lawn?

I cut it back the following autumn. I dug its roots from the earth and untangled the twisted tentacles that grasped the Moreton Bay fig, and I planted it in a sunny corner. Through the long winter I tended it well, feeding it with rose food and with love.

And Lord, it grew! Slow at first, it's true, but its new growth was strong. It reached out for life and grasped at the wooden stake I'd hammered deep into the earth, and for once it stood alone.

I saw the first bud in spring. I watched it swell until it blushed with the merest hint of pink or burgundy, of lilac, of gold. Truly, it would be a thing of peerless beauty. The old ones hadn't lied to me. I could wait, for the years had lent me patience. Hadn't I already waited half of my lifetime to see this rose in bloom, to know its colour, its perfume, the secrets of its heart?

But the Moreton Bay fig tree had been too long in possession of the yard. It had an invincible network of roots governing every corner. Perhaps it resented the wooden stake. It seemed to pulsate, to swell, to suck the moisture from my rose and gather in her strength. Then the wooden stake I'd hammered there fell, and the rose fell, and it turned in fright and it bowed down before the root, entwining its new growth in mock adoration along its unforgiving surface.

Tender new leaves began to wither and to fall and the bud I had nurtured now bowed its head too low in shame—or fear of ridicule. It snapped. It fell at my feet, the wilted scrap of a dream.

The bush is dying. It will be gone one day soon, never having been. Still, in my memory a place will ever wait, blank, spare; a special place saved from childhood for my rose that never bloomed.

**CHRISTMAS, BEECHWORTH 1983***Judith Buckingham*

It's hard here.  
Something to do with how the land  
Looks as though it grew granite more easily than grass,  
And something to do with the colour of the trees:  
Grown up shades of grey and purple, olive greens,  
And a sky so obdurate  
It's hard here  
To believe in lambs in snow,  
Oxen lowing,  
and gentle Jesus, meek and mild.

It's hard here.  
Even the pagan symbols look false  
When the sunlit tips of gum  
Glisten with more intensity  
Than the tawdry tinsel  
Hung on foreign trees,  
And iridescent beetles  
Green and gold  
Buzz from branch to branch  
To greater purpose  
Than a plastic star.

It's hard here  
To believe  
Where dust and dried grass  
Meet more dust,  
Except perhaps in one who also  
Scratched His name in dust  
And screwed His eyes up tight  
Against the midday glare  
Before He spoke.  
And then the twisted spikes  
Of a dead gum  
May say what it's like to die  
In pain  
In that infernal heat.

There's another tale  
Where the images won't fit.  
There's not much renewable about this land.  
It speaks more of endurance  
Than resurrection,  
Unless you can believe  
That they're the same  
Once the spectacle has gone.

## THE GREAT RACE

*James Farrar*

The tortoise thought he'd race the tram  
From Malvern Road to East Prahran,  
So off he set with fulsome heart  
A crowd on hand to watch the start.  
The green machine quick showed its power  
By hitting fifteen miles an hour,  
That gave the Met mob cause for cheer  
And left the tortoise well to rear.  
But passengers screamed, "Please let us off!"  
As the tram careered past every stop  
In drunken lurch 'cross every road  
For lights and dogs it barely slowed.

Till finally it paused, a change of crew,  
And the tortoise quickly hove in view,  
Courageous, keen to make up time,  
Running on free to tram stop nine.  
Neck and neck they sped as one  
To Williams Road in the sinking sun,  
Where the Premier stood with anxious eyes  
On hand to award the Spyker Prize  
"Here they come," the mob declared,  
As street lamps showed the mighty pair,  
Flashing wheels and flashing paws  
That heaped contempt on traffic laws.

Down to the line 'twas oh so close  
But the tram proved victor by a nose,  
Its bolts askew at every thread  
Its passengers spent, now all but dead.  
Streaming out from every door  
Passed others fainted on the floor,  
Survivors from the jubilant Met  
Who'd made its fastest journey yet.  
The tortoise lay 'neath shadowed walls  
And watched the humans standing tall,  
Feeling pleased that he'd done so well  
Till sleep arrived in his house of shell.

## SOREL'S MOTHER

*Deborah Rouse*

Sorel's mother was almost sixty. She was thin, hard-boned and abrupt and she lived alone. Sorel visited her regularly on Thursdays, listened to her scathing reports of the neighbours' doings, ate moist cake with weak tea and left exactly two hours later, promising to return at the weekend. Sorel's mother watched her go from behind lace curtains, watched her scuttle to her car in the rain, listened for the first gasp of the engine, then disappeared into the shadows of the house. On Saturdays, at lunch time, Sorel phoned to invite her mother to Sunday lunch, or dinner, or for a drive, or . . .

On Sundays, Sorel's mother ate alone.

David said he was the reason she would not come. He said Sorel's mother did not approve of him, of them; he said she liked him but did not approve. Sorel said nothing, but she found things to do on Sundays, things which kept her near the phone in case her mother called. She washed curtains and windows, she cleaned and polished. She read magazines and cooked elaborate roast dinners. She waited for the phone to ring, but it never did. David ate well on Sundays.

On Mondays, sometimes Tuesdays, Sorel visited her father. His flat was spacious, white-walled and light, and cluttered with photographs and pictures. He piled books on chairs, newspapers in the spaces between chairs, and there they festered until Sorel collected and shelved the books, stacked the papers by the door. Once he watched her square their edges, patted her on the shoulder and smiled awkwardly.

"You're so much like your mother, love," he said. "You're so very much like your mother."

Sorel went home to the mirror and searched it for traces of her mother's shapes, searched her light hair for strands of her mother's redness, hunted in her eyes for flecks of her mother's

colouring. She washed the make-up from her face and scanned the scrubbed flesh for freckles; she cleaned the polish from her nails and mapped them for traces of her mother's squat fingers. David stood behind her and rested his hands on her shoulders.

"You look like your mother, peering at your reflection like that," he told her.

He dropped his hands to her waist and hugged her to him.

It was her father who reminded Sorel of her mother's birthday.

"I never forgot, love," he said. "In all the time we were married I never forgot her birthday, nor our anniversary. I still remember. You get her something nice, love, and don't tell her I reminded you."

She scoured the shops, rejecting books and music and china and glass. She visited plant centres and rejected roses and chrysanthemums and African violets—her mother's garden was full anyway—and outdoor shops where she rejected earthen pots and summer chaises. Thursday came and, like a gift, her mother planted an idea.

"This teapot's growing worse than useless," she said. "Look at how it leaks: it stained two of my table-cloths this week! I hung them out and that woman next door had the nerve to suggest some powder or other to clean them! As if I didn't have the nous to fix them myself. That woman gets more senile every day."

The neighbours of Sorel's mother had no names. They were "that woman", or "him from down the street", or "that one at number thirty"—distanced, all of them.

On Saturday morning, with three weeks to spare, Sorel bought a teapot of white china, patterned with tiny violets and laced with delicate green vines and leaves. The store gift-wrapped it in snowy tissue paper, and Sorel covered it again with clear Cellophane with butterflies scattered over it. She placed it on the coffee-table, and when David innocently stood a half-full mug of tea less than an inch from its wrapping, she shouted.

"Do you have to be so picky?" he demanded, even as he

moved his cup. "You get more like your mother . . ."

Sorel fled and did not hear the end.

She was smiling in the car on Thursday, long before she reached her mother's street. She was smiling as she turned the corner and parked beneath the bare trees in which she had played as a child; and as she climbed the steps to the front door she thought she was even grinning—"Cheshire catting," she decided as she rang the doorbell. She felt oddly like bouncing.

"For heaven's sake, Sorel, you're twenty-six, not fifteen," said Sorel's mother.

Sorel's mother made tea. She made it in the kitchen while Sorel sat in the lounge, in her favourite chair, gazing out into the street and listening to the play of the children next door. Framed by the window was the tree which had always been Sorel's favourite; she stared at it now, intrigued by odd wooden arches that seemed not to belong to the branches themselves.

"What are they doing to my tree?" she called to her mother.

"There's no need to shout, Sorel."

Her mother spoke from behind her.

"Those infernal children from next door have been mucking about in it for days; I shouldn't be at all surprised if they electrocuted themselves in the power lines. They're probably planning a tree-house. I shall have to ring the council."

"I used to have a tree-house in that tree," Sorel said wistfully. "Dad built it for me, don't you remember?"

"I remember you broke your ankle coming down from that tree. Your father was responsible for that too."

Sorel's mother bent low over the telephone table, making yet another note to herself. She spelt it out for Sorel's benefit: "RING COUNCIL."

"Shall I pour the tea," Sorel said.

"You might as well. It'll be far too strong now, though . . ."

Sorel did not mention that she liked strong tea, that she preferred coffee for that matter. She turned to the tea-tray, stopped. Stared. The old pot, that one that leaked and was stained, was gone. This pot was scarlet, rimmed with gold.

"Isn't it lovely?" said her mother. "So much nicer than those

awful flowery things.”

“You always said you liked the ones with flowers.”

Sorel’s fingers trembled as she reached for the gilt handle. Her voice had a whiney edge.

“And after fifty-nine years, I think perhaps I’m entitled to a change. For heaven’s sake, Sorel, it’s only a teapot.”

On Friday night, after work, Sorel returned the teapot to the store; and later, when David asked if he could use the table now, her eyes began to water.

“It’s only a teapot,” he said.

“You don’t understand,” she told him.

He followed her to the bedroom, sat behind her on the bed and massaged her shoulders.

“Tell me.”

“I’ve never got it right. One Christmas I saved for months to buy her a necklace with an opal—she’s always loved opals—and Dad bought her an iron. We compared notes on Christmas Eve, like we always did, and I thought I’d finally done it.”

“And?” He sprawled sideways to look at her.

“She did the ironing on Christmas Day. Dinner was late because of it. It was this cordless thing, and when my aunt rang from England, she told her all about the iron before she mentioned my opal.”

David reached for a long strand of her hair and brushed it back over her shoulder.

“Well,” he said, “it’s understandable, if it was cordless . . .”

“You don’t understand.”

“Sorel, it was an iron when you were a kid. You’ll find something else. What does she need?”

Sorel did not answer.

“What does she want?”

Sorel looked away.

“What hasn’t she got?”

Sorel combed the shops. She found bookstores and chain stores, music and glassware stores, she found hairdressers and photographers. Briefly she contemplated a portrait of herself and Davi- . . . herself and her fath- . . .herself. She remembered the year she was overseas and had sent back a portrait of

herself sketched by a street artist.

"It's very nice, dear," her mother had written. "But who is it?"

And Sorel's mother displayed no photographs in the house; Sorel had never seen even a wedding photograph on the mantelpiece.

"She has pictures," said her father. "Old ones, some of them. She has photos of her parents when they were young, photos of you when you were a kid, one of her mother taken at a photographer's studio in the Twenties. Now that one's a real beauty . . . She used to have albums galore hidden away somewhere. You should get her to show them to you, love."

Sorel asked her mother if she had pictures of Sorel as a child.

"I wouldn't ask to borrow them," she said, "only it's a seven-up party, and you have to take along pictures of yourself at seven, and fourteen, and twenty-one and so on. And I don't have any. I asked Dad and he said you—"

"You might look in the hall cupboard," her mother said ungraciously, stirring her unsweetened tea with vigour.

"Take what you like, but don't touch the old ones—those children are back in that tree again! This time I *will* phone the council."

Sorel watched her dial, heard her begin to speak abruptly. She browsed through shelves filled with cardboard and plastic, eventually located a box of albums buried at the back beneath blankets and pristine tea-towels. The blankets tipped and fell against the back of the cupboard. Sorel straightened them, returned to the lounge and her mother. She surrounded herself with open volumes, and when her mother's conversation with City Hall was terminated by the slam of the phone, Sorel was engrossed in turn-of-the-century faces.

"Why do you keep these hidden?"

She raised an ageing sepia portrait.

"I told you I did not want those opened," replied her mother without a glance. "They're the only ones I have of my parents and they're far too valuable to leave out. Put them away."

But her voice softened for a moment and Sorel closed the album slowly.

“Go on. They’ll be lost in a moment and then I’ll have nothing.”

A sound in the street distracted Sorel’s mother and she pulled the curtains aside with a sharp movement.

“Those children! Well, I warned them down at the council — put those away, Sorel.”

She disappeared through the double doors to the hall and Sorel heard her raised voice descend to the garden. With a glance at the doorway, another at the street, and another at the imposing figure of her mother ordering the neighbourhood children out of the trees, Sorel slid a photograph clear of its plastic-coated sleeve and into the pocket of her blazer. She returned the albums to the shelf and when her mother returned she was innocently turning the pages of a magazine.

She found the photographer’s studio the following evening. Behind the counter, a petite girl with bleached hair and crimson nails happily trotted out samples of restored photographs.

“So you can see the sort of work we do,” she chirped.

“You will be careful?” Sorel said.

She laid down a group-shot of 1870s miners and focused on the half-closed door opposite the counter. Behind it the moving form of a man was just visible amid a field of mulled lights and looming equipment.

“It’s the only one, you see, and my mother doesn’t know I have it. She’d be livid if anything went wrong.”

“That’s fine, dear.”

She was easily five years younger than Sorel.

“We’re used to valuables; the picture doesn’t leave the building and it’s locked away every night. If you like, you can collect the original in a couple of days and the copy in about a week.”

Tuesday evening, on the pretext of needing one more picture for her party, Sorel went back to her mother’s house and replaced the picture in the album. The following weekend, she collected a perfectly restored reprint from the photographer’s studio and bought an oak frame she had seen in a gift shop

window the week before. In the same store she bought silver wrapping-paper scattered with green and pink and blue, and a card showing a Monet garden. There were nine days before her mother's birthday.

"It's perfect," she told David, slipping the picture into its frame for a final inspection before she wrapped each separately. She had decided to present her mother with the frame first, and then, as a sort of afterthought, to give her the photograph.

"Don't you think it's perfect?" she said.

"You get so worked up over things," said David.

He volunteered fingers and thumbs until the ribbons were tied and curled and spread to Sorel's satisfaction, and he placed the two packages, one neatly box-shaped, the other paper-thin and curling slightly, side by side on the coffee table. He moved his tea.

Sorel's father had a gift for her mother. He placed it on the seat of her car as she left the flat: a plain white package, book-sized and without a card. He told Sorel to set it on her mother's chair when she was leaving, and he told her it was a travel book.

"She's talked about Greece for years," he said. "I think she'd like a book about it."

Sorel's father patted the surface of his parcel twice and backed away from the window. Sorel put the book with her own two gifts and smiled. Beside them it looked drab and dull, and she was convinced her own presents were perfect.

The birthday was Thursday. On time, Sorel knocked, and with the clockwork precision of several years of Thursdays, her mother was there to open the door and usher her through to the lounge.

"I'll put the tea on," she said.

Gazing through the window, Sorel was aware of something different in the view beyond.

"My tree's gone!" she called suddenly. "Why's it gone?"

"I told you I'd take care of that," answered Sorel's mother. "And I have. That tree was always too dangerous for children to play in: it was rotten through."

Silently Sorel placed the first gift on the arm of her mother's chair.

"I hope you haven't spent a lot of money," was all Sorel's mother said as she slit the tape and prised the layers of foil apart. "When you get to my age you don't want to be reminded you're getting old. Five more years and you'll be trying to put me in a home and sell this house, and then what will I do with all the bits and pieces you've been giving me for years? I'll be left with my memories and nothing else. You'll pack all this up and give it away. That's what they do to old people, isn't it?"

"Mother, no!"

Sorel watched as her mother lifted the lid of the box, saw the sudden lowering of a smile cross her mother's features.

"But this is lovely, Sorel! And so timely, too . . ."

She moved away, opened a drawer in her desk.

"You'll never guess what I did last week. It was you gave me the idea, with your poring over those old pictures."

She tipped from an envelope the photograph, smelling subtly of new fluid, of a familiar woman, flaccid and round, no longer young.

"My mother," she murmured, "exactly as I remember her. I thought about getting one of her younger ones done, but I didn't know her like that . . ."

She smiled, slipped the picture into Sorel's frame.

"I don't know how you knew, Sorel."

The plump stranger beamed out of the smooth pewter framework, mocking. In her pocket Sorel fingered the wrapping of her photograph, the stranger's picture, the one of a young girl with slender arms and liquid eyes. She reached into her bag for her father's gift.

"Dad told me to leave this," she said. "I don't think he wanted you to know who sent it."

Her mother loosened the paper in silence, turned the book over and over in her hands.

"That old fool," she said.

David dropped in after work with a crystal vase for Sorel's mother. He gave it to her at the door and followed her through to the lounge, sat on the arm of Sorel's chair to watch her unwrap it. "But this is lovely," said Sorel's mother. "And you must look at the book Sorel's father sent, the most wonderful thing. I've always wanted to go to Greece and this may just be

## THE PAPERBARK TREE

*Jean DeBaere*

In the quiet times when I am alone  
And that is often now,  
The tree beyond the upstairs window  
Means much to me, its top  
All feathery ruffled by the wind.  
In summer its frothy flowers  
Crown its head so the cream  
Sways against the window pane,  
Its rough-textured trunk below  
Belies the feathery top.

In an inner suburb where all  
Is urban and "Tiger Team"  
The feathery tree top and the  
Azure sky beyond and above  
Give a promise I will mend  
And when the season comes around  
In inevitable order of life  
And the feathery flowers appear again  
I will once more walk strong.

## THE SECOND-BEST FRIEND

*Robert Dalvean*

Summer came at last, but for all the joy I had of it the sun could have remained in hiding. I had grown too fat to parade in the near-nudity of the young. To expose my skin would have been a crime. Yet to rug up was out of the question. I'd have cooked.

My late wife would surely have disapproved. She had disapproved of everything until disapproval matured into a cultivated style. Then she went too far, lost patience with life itself, and died, leaving me to do the cooking.

Obesity had crept up on me, matching its stealthy tread to my dogged lumbering, and then seizing me and wrapping me in blubber. Six months of nibbling and tipping, aided by inertia, had entombed me in flesh.

I now understood the function of fat. It was armour. In a world seething with assassins one could feel safe in one's adipose cocoon.

I tried to become a gourmet. I read the right books, bought ingredients from the right shops. It was surely no fault of mine that my taste buds betrayed their plebeian origin. No matter what kind of wine I drank I found I could not sip. I simply had to empty half a glass at one swallow. Then I would shudder deliciously, my eyes watering, and utter the one word in my wine-lover's vocabulary: Wonderful!

I soon gave up trifling with feeble reds and whites. Fortified wines worked faster and they saved on food and fuel bills. Why spend hours preparing food that would be wolfed down in seconds? And why heat the flat when one's own blood could be made to burn like a furnace? I could make do with snacks. Port and snacks—I couldn't understand why everyone didn't live on them.

And hating tea, I grew to love coffee, my own kind of brew. Two heaped spoons of instant coffee, half a cup of boiling water

topped with half an inch of sweetened condensed milk—that was a man’s drink. It would sit in the stomach for hours, burning away hunger and fatigue and helping the port to do its work. I threw a sop to the nutritionist in me by eating a few oranges every day. I didn’t want to come down with scurvy.

I was richly unemployed. The ledgers and filing cabinets, the typewriter, desk calculator, paper clips, stamps and envelopes that had cluttered the flat when I ran my business from it were gone. They had been part of the assets of my company, and when I sold it I sold them too.

Getting rid of everything had given me pleasure, but now, I had to admit, there was a slight but troublesome urge to fill in time. Thinking about how to do this, I lost a good deal of energy. Half way through the day my eyes would droop. During rare forays in the car I would go to sleep in traffic jams and wake to the music of horns. I came to think that someone was getting at me, putting things in my food, poisoning my water. When I could stand the torment no longer I called on my old doctor, who had also been my wife’s doctor.

Fat and naked, I put up with probing and questioning. Then, as I dressed, I listened to the lecture.

“I can’t find anything definitely wrong with you,” he said. “But you’re carrying far too much weight. You can get rid of that with diet and exercise. Your throat’s a bit raw from smoking, you’re badly out of condition. You’re on the way to having an old man’s body. You can at least slow the process down...”

Yes, yes, yes, diet and exercise, moderation, good sleep, sensible occupations . . . yes, yes, yes . . .

By the time I left I felt ten years younger. It had been good to talk to someone who understood. Now all I needed was a savage tussle with black coffee, perhaps sweetened with glucose, and a session with the port.

Being locked up alone in a dark cell would not have troubled me—so long as I had food enough and wine to fill myself—for I had learned to live much of my life inside my head. I found a world in there, cities and fields and mountains, armies of

giants, swarms of monsters. I discovered that, like the whale, I could live submerged for a long time. But I had to remember to come up for air. To stay under for too long was likely to introduce complications into my simple life. I had to find a way of floating on the surface while I breathed deeply. Or I had to find a companion who would serve to remind me of the existence of a world outside of my head.

In the shopping district near my flat stood many shops I had never entered. One day, on impulse, I strolled fatly up to and along the busy street that led into the heart of the city and fingered my wallet. A new watch, perhaps? Clothes? A set of chessmen fashioned from pine cones? Mild panic threatened when I asked myself what would become of me if I turned out to want nothing.

I soothed my nerves by studying the legends on shop windows. I tried to penetrate their foreignness (no more alien in this part of the city than I was in any part of it). And then, to my horror, I came across a shop that simply said, in the plainest blue lettering, Smith's Pet Shop. Shocking! Who gave Smith the right to publicise his British ancestry in this district?

I peered through the window at cages of puppies and kittens, glass tanks of fish, shelves of animal medicines. But it was the solitary cocker spaniel puppy asleep on its bed of straw that I bought.

"How much?" I said, once I was in the shop and pointing at the dog.

"Ah, that one's a beauty, mate. You'll love 'im."

As I did not immediately reply, the shopkeeper went on to say that the dog was purebred. He named a price and set himself for a bout of haggling.

"He's not very big," was the best thrust I could manage.

"Well, it's not the size that matters," said the man, presumably Smith. His tone was defiant. He was a very small man with a narrow bald head who looked up at me as a terrier might have looked at an aged St Bernard.

"That thing what counts, see, is breedin', and that's a well-bred, well-behaved dog there. House or flat?"

"Flat," I said, a little surprised by the speed of my response."

"Then all you have to do is train him," Smith said. Take him for a walk each day . . . not chainin' him are you? Don't like dogs being chained. Even a cocker's too big for a flat."

"He can have a room of his own," I said.

This pleased Smith so we completed the transaction. I then allowed him to sell me some accessories—a feeding bowl, a water dish, an open wooden box lined with straw, a leash, and several other items whose function I never did discover.

"Now remember," said Smith, when I returned after fetching my car, "He isn't a cat, he isn't a parrot and he isn't a kangaroo. He's a dog. Treat him right and he'll be yours for life."

Back at the flat I fussed about in the room that had been my office. I arranged the dog's sleeping box, gave it a dish of chopped meat and thought about naming it. My mind was a little foggy at the time and I could see nothing wrong with naming the dog Iris, after my late wife. When the unwisdom of this dawned on me I sought some other name and, finding none, called the creature simply Dog.

My wife had never permitted animals to live with her, so I'd had no practice in caring for dogs. Going very much by the book, I fed it, walked it and saw it settled for the night. The poor beast did everything in its power to please me. When I came home after a shopping trip it would welcome me with much squirming and tailwagging. I soon got used to having it about the place.

At first the dog performed one function very beautifully. It listened, the perfect confidant. I would get up in the mornings, walk the dog, then return for breakfast, which we took together, I up at the table, Dog under it.

After breakfast I was usually eager to talk, and when I did the dog's ears moved attentively. It was possible to speak complete sentences, even paragraphs, to this animal without feeling that one was taking unfair advantage of a captive audience. Day by day the sentences grew longer, and soon I was telling Dog about my late wife, my parents, my long marriage and my children—all my troubles and triumphs. The material did not disturb the dog but my manner of delivering it was not always to his taste. When relating a painful incident I would experience real distress, which I expressed by scowling and

snarling my words between clenched teeth. At such times the dog shrank from me. It was nice to know that someone took me seriously.

The days grew warmer and longer, the dog larger and I fatter. We were becoming known in the neighbourhood. Men and women of dark complexion who spoke languages I could not understand smiled and nodded as we passed.

But we did not live in an earthly paradise, and I was no Adam. The dog may, for all I know, have existed on a higher plane of being. Perhaps the angels are all dogs. Or bitches. Or some heavenly composite. What is plain to me now is that this dog, inhabiting a world ruled by cynical compromise, was an idealist. It had obviously been influenced by tales of canine devotion in which affection between dog and master had grown to alarming proportions, the animal at last performing some act of heroic self-denial to save its master and live on in fond memory thereafter.

Nothing of the kind occurred.

It happened merely that we got tired of each other. Dog lovers will insist that this is impossible, since a dog's affections, once engaged, are not disengageable. Well, perhaps I had a dog in a million. For I remember one morning, when I was telling Dog how disgracefully my son had once behaved, how he had flatly refused to show me any respect, it suddenly struck me that the animal was not listening.

This was not only unnatural, it was outrageous, as if I had bought a piece of equipment, taken it home, switched it on and found it wouldn't go. I tried to interest the animal in some other subject. It sulked. I used baby talk. I spoke in an even tone about nothing in particular. Useless. It just looked away. I tried to read it a few items from a newspaper but I lost my temper and could not read without shouting.

An experiment: I would lock up the dog and go out until it got lonely. I went out shopping, stayed away two hours and, on my return, opened the door in expectation of a welcoming display. The dog looked at me listlessly and then at the wall.

Clearly this beast wouldn't do. Our differences were irreconcilable. I explained as patiently as I could that when two

people were joined in a form of matrimony there came a time, inevitably, when each looked at the other and beheld a stranger. At such a time there were four possible courses of action: divorce, murder, suicide, desertion and inner migration (which involves staying where you are and going somewhere else at the same time). Now the dog, being but a dog, could not have understood a cold shoulder, and I was neither disposed towards murder nor partial to suicide. And I could not desert the dog without deserting my home. So only divorce would do. Gathering the creature up, I huffed and puffed my way downstairs and into the car. Within ten minutes I was bearing the inert animal into the shop from whence it came. Smith appeared and the dog went wild. It wriggled free, fell to the floor, ran to the little man and nearly floored him. After he had acknowledged the dog's greeting, Smith looked at me and said in a voice heavy with puzzlement, "Is there . . . something wrong? I can see there's nothing wrong with the dog but . . . is there?"

"I'm returning him," I said. "We are incompatible. From the beginning we were star-crossed. Our differences make chalk and cheese look like peas in a pod. Do I make myself clear? We don't get on."

"You mean—you don't like him?" Smith said, as one enunciating an impossibility.

"The question of liking doesn't come into it," I said. "I love oysters. I would give a kingdom for the ability to eat five dozen of the squishy little darlings. But they turn me purple and make me break out in pimples. So I say, 'Oysters, begone!' and I drive them from my door—out into the storm to fend for themselves. So it is with this dog. Fascinating brute. But not for me."

Then, without further explanation, I turned and strode out of the shop. Hindered by the wriggling dog, Smith could not follow me. Later that day I took pleasure in getting rid of the leash, the bowl and anything else that could remind me of the ungrateful animal.

Now I could revel in my solitary freedom, and revel I did. I was the very king of revellers. On close inspection the world

proved to contain other beings, and I even caught a glimpse of them from time to time. But although I had to deal with these . . . people (indeed, I had veritably to consort with them), I did not have to admit that they existed in the same way I did—richly, profusely, extravagantly and, if I may say so, with an enviable touch of style. I was happy. I danced to the music that played behind television test patterns. I stripped myself naked and rolled on the carpet, going from room to room of the flat at a good brisk pace and hardly ever injuring myself badly enough to need medical attention. Did ever a man live so full a life? Why, I'd be living it now if it were not for the calendar. It betrayed me by surreptitiously popping up a certain date.

I knew nothing of the day, the week, the season or the month until one unhappy day when relatives arrived. They laid hands on me and dragged me kicking and screaming to a blistering hot meal. Shoals of children, to whom I was apparently an uncle, swam about me looking joyful.

It was, so they told me, Christmas Day. Without consulting me they had decided to prise me out of my lair and give me a taste of family life. When I protested that I was familiar with every aspect of that condition a young woman purporting to be my daughter laughed and said, "Dad, what you need is companionship."

Then, as a great hush fell, my present was brought in. It was in a box. It stank. It was obviously canine.

Worse, it was a cocker spaniel.

I do not deign to offer a justification of my subsequent behaviour, which I can assure anybody who may be interested was grossly misreported in the press and most unfairly punished by the magistrate.

## THE SILENT SCREAM

*Eugene McCarthy*

Do you hear a silent scream  
Piercing the core of consciousness?  
Do you feel the ultimate agony  
From the uttermost limits of hopelessness?  
The silent scream wells out  
To pluck the planets from their paths  
And send them  
Crazy  
Spinning into space.

## CROESONIA

*G.M. Naug*

Croesonia was born on George Washington's birthday, so her parents gave her the second name of Washington in the hope that she would never tell a lie.

When I knew her in my childhood I kept listening for her lies, but I never discovered one. A pity! It led me to believe that other adults were like her and never told untruths. It took me many years to recognise mendacity. I am still unable to bluff successfully at poker. Would my life have been different had I been influenced by a normal lie-telling person?

Normal? People nowadays shrug and ask: "Well, who is?" But in those days clearly defined lines were drawn. If you did what your neighbours did, what the Church and Government told you, then you were normal. But Croesonia never observed any of these bastions of morality.

Somebody told me that the original owner of her first name, Croesonia, was a Russian princess. Somebody else maintained it was a pagan goddess. I am inclined to believe the latter, as Croesonia believed in a galaxy of gods—the friendly wind to disperse pollution, the cleansing rain, the vitalising sun . . .

Once, when I asked her were there fairies in the trees, she answered: "Who can tell?"

From her I learned that gypsies were friendly folk—all you needed to know was a shibboleth, a certain smile, and an ability to sit for an hour in cross-legged concentration and then join in a stroll through the bush for the herb collection. You went home with a bundle of herbs, the taste of dandelion wine on your tongue and the memory of tinkling tambourines.

There were times for observing sunsets. Sometimes these were viewed from trees, children on the high branches painting verbal pictures for Croesonia below to evaluate. And if you scraped your young limbs on the tree's bark, Croesonia pro-

duced a pepper pot from her crocodile-skin bag to staunch the blood and cleanse the wound.

Then there were sea days when she would sit on a sandcastle and watch while the children swam and collected shells that sighed for far-away places. As we were about to leave the beach, Croesonia would stand very still, and perhaps throw a wish across the sea for her sailor son to catch, or maybe she threw a prayer.

Sometimes she let one of the children brush her luxuriant dark hair, and she held it up while we festooned her tresses with ornate combs and pins. Occasionally she wore a flower in her hair on what she called “a special day”. No doubt she had a reason for the day—although reason was not really her strong point.

But strength she did have. She had borne seven children, lived in tents and received her education from her genius brother called Euclid. Apparently her family had no trouble keeping up with the Joneses; it was harder keeping up with your given name.

One of her sons went to South Africa and brought her back a handful of Kruger sovereigns, which she wore in a bracelet. The diamonds in her ears were given to her by an admirer who claimed to have mined them in Rhodesia. However, I don't think his second name was Washington.

A gown of scarlet bombazine, its long train sweeping her polished-pine hall, caused some comment from her conventional neighbours. I don't know why they disapproved of her wardrobe, because it also contained her decorous, ankle-length, black-taffeta everyday dresses. But I loved the scarlet gowns—they reminded me of yards of crushed raspberries.

I used to help her mix the starch for her voluminous lace-decked petticoats, which could be used as wind-socks to determine if it was a good kite-flying day to send aloft her homemade kites decorated with silver-paper eyes.

Once an autumn wind blew a runaway hoop across our path, and Croesonia stopped the hoop with her foot. Its young owner chortled at her old-fashioned, laced-up kid boots; but what he did not know was that the boots were worn not because she

favoured fashions from the Crimean War, but because she had a club foot and needed specially built-up footwear.

When Croesonia took me on tram rides I listened to a commentary of what had happened along the route long ago, and perhaps what would happen in the future; this was time-travelling at its very best.

Her mother, a genteel lady from a distant land, had taught her how to create vivid tapestry birds with a skilled needle which spread across a canvas and caught macaws and parrots on the wing. I often wonder what became of her unframed art. Once I thought I saw one behind the dusty window of an old shop. I rushed in only to find that the date of it was wrong.

Croesonia encouraged you to sleep out under the summer stars and look at the wonderful ceiling of make believe. The early risers were invited to share the fabulous dawn with her bantam friends who answered to their names as they preened their gorgeous plumage.

Picnics were held at the bottom of the garden on a lace cloth spread over a table of clover. A stone cherub smiled at us as we enjoyed paw-paw for starters, because this fruit was thought to have digestive properties—and perhaps we children needed them as we consumed large quantities of pickled cherries, which puckered the lips and tantalised the tongue, and bowls of beetroot stirred with giant cinnamon sticks, galantine of wild duck with oranges dripping honey and my favourite tomato pie sprinkled with sage and thyme. The salad was usually made on the spot from mustard cress and nasturtium leaves plucked from the garden.

Sometimes Croesonia would use words of another language; perhaps they were swear words, or curses, or maybe she just made up onomatopoeic words to suit her moods.

I remember stirring the seasonal jams: yellow quinces which turned blush pink in the pot, passion-fruit turned to golden seed-studded jelly. Croesonia taught me to make spicy apple pulp, used to enliven dull meat dishes. For her carrot cakes we thought crystallized violets a suitable decoration, and these we gathered fresh-washed by the morning dew. And for the kitchen decoration we dried vivid red and green chillies.

But not all of Croesonia's brews were guaranteed success. I recall the time when she decided to present acquaintances with home-made jasmine perfume, which unfortunately developed an odd aroma with age. Nor did friends appreciate being served jellied chicken's feet, sheep's-head soup, or nettles done in batter and washed down with jugs of liquorice juice.

In her household, gossip was frowned upon, borrowing considered a sin, and laziness a disorder of the brain. So, during summer, the astrakhan rugs and the Tibetan silk carpets were scattered with damp tea leaves, swept, sunned and aired before being rolled up until winter came. She also changed the curtains periodically, substituting a different weave, colour or texture which belonged to its rightful season.

Every now and then we would catch a train into a large city and visit the Chinese herbalist. And what a visit it was! Marigold tea sipped from dainty cups was my first introduction to the fragile beauty of Chinese porcelain. There were jars full of mystery, from which a strangely dressed Mandarin man and Croesonia selected various roots to be ground into a fine powder, weighed on jeweller's scales and then parcelled in coloured packages tied up with a silken thread. Sometimes I would catch the notes of a flute coming from the back of the shop and I would hold them to me and gaze at the beaded curtain waiting for a dragon to appear breathing fire. But even Croesonia could not produce a dragon for me.

Her father, a responsible storekeeper, one day met Peter Lalor. He then closed the shutters of his store, put on a different hat and decided to take up arms and fight for other people's lost rights. Her father did not become a storybook hero; instead he resided briefly in jail. There he looked out through the bars and mused that his ancestors would have been proud of him—they had a long history of fighting against injustice. They too usually lost!

Croesonia Washington did not live in an exotic country far away; yet her life style suggested many countries, various faiths and diverse philosophies; she was a citizen of time, space and the universe. But she lived for most of her life on the goldfields of Ballarat and in the suburbs of Melbourne.

I know, because she was my grandmother.

## THE TEMPEST

*Judith Buckingham*

Prospero, that cold old man  
Sails with all his art to Byzantium  
Where he might yet substantiate that insubstantial stuff,  
The rainbow weave that dreams are made of.

Old man, fabricator,  
Who knew too well the heyday in blood,  
Whither have you gone,  
Leaving the young to their sensual spring  
Till Sycorax can bind them in her cloven case of comfort  
and  
complacency?

See, the staff's erect!  
Would you quell the tempest, douse the storm  
To dwell in diamante dreams of peace,  
Wherein death lies?

Miranda beware! Listen not to Ariel,  
Who croons your father's tunes across the radio waves.  
Fix rather on the heart's own atavistic beat—  
Cal—Cal—Caliban.  
The beast's a beast, it's true, but still the island's his by  
right,  
And art grows small  
Like an iceberg in the sun  
Sans teeth, sans taste, sans all  
If it must sail away.

## WILL I LOSE

*Nuria Racine*

We all have our secrets  
But I have the deepest  
I want it exposed  
But I know I must keep it.

I want to tell all  
Or even just one  
It's the root of my problems  
But what's done is done.

I cannot change history  
But the future I could  
Should I tell everyone?  
Will it do any good?

If I don't speak out soon  
I will die of this pain  
Locked up inside me  
Will I lose yet again?

## THE NAIL

*Rudy van Tongeren*

The tolling of the bell of Regensheim church was interrupted by a clap of thunder that rolled in from the clouds, pressing heavily down on the river valley.

It startled the coffin bearers, and it slightly accelerated their shuffle. They cast furtive glances at the darkening sky, and then at the priest and acolytes leading the procession at a leisurely pace. They wanted to finish their task before the storm broke loose. But the thunder had also spurred the mumbling priest to a faster pace; and soon, amid the conglomeration of crosses and tombstones, could be seen the grave-diggers, lazily leaning on their spades.

Alongside the grave the bearers quickly let the coffin slip from their shoulders and into their hands, placing it gently on two solid timbers across the grave. The flash of lightning had revealed the name engraved on the brass plate which was screwed onto the casket lid. Within the oak box were the mortal remains of Junker Maximilian Friedrich August von Harras who, at the age of 20 years, had died on 19th July. 1891.

A few words were spoken at the graveside. Casting anxious eyes at the sky, the priest hurriedly concluded the burial service, and after the grave was blessed with holy water, the casket was gently lowered. Some mourners stepped forward to sprinkle some soil upon the coffin that lay deep down in the grave.

Then, when most of them were leaving the graveside, three young men and a young lady approached the hole. They stood in silence for a while. From his coat pocket one of them took out a long nail. Sadly he dropped it into the grave. It clattered down on to the brass plate, making a hollow sound.

“Why did you do it, Max?” he wept, “why?”

\* \* \*

“Ha-ha-ha!” laughed Peter Wolff, slapping his bare thigh that stuck out from under his tight Bavarian lederhosen.

His friends, sharing the table in a cosy corner of the inn, joined in the fun by beating a ruffle on the table top with the bottoms of their half-empty beer steins.

“You understand, that was the last time I ever crossed the cemetery at night. Never again, my friends. You can call me what you like. Not for anything in the world,” said Peter, casting defiant glances at the small circle of friends. Impulsively he brushed back a lock of hair that had fallen across his eyes.

With regular features, a nicely shaped mouth that showed pearly white teeth, steel blue eyes under a thick crop of black wavy hair, Peter was the idol of the young ladies of Regensheim, the Adonis of the town.

“That was a good story, Peter,” chipped in Hans Volker. “Surely, you didn’t make it up to amuse us. We know your tall stories, and you, my precious friends, wouldn’t dare to cross the cemetery at night. I know you too well, my boy, but for what it is worth, it was a funny story all right.”

“Absolutely true, believe me,” protested Peter. “Well, you could ask old Krause if you like, but I guarantee that the old fox wouldn’t admit that he was as hellishly scared as I was.”

The fun was on again as the four young men shouted “Four more beers, Heidi! Four . . . four . . . four!”

“All right, gentlemen, a moment, please,” pleaded the bar maid, hastily filling the steins. Grabbing them two in each hand, she hurried to their table.

“Having fun, gentlemen?” she said, placing the foaming steins on the table and removing the empty ones. Her eyes shone with mirth, as she studied the four, still chuckling in between their draughts of beer.

With more than interested eyes Max von Harras followed her movements. Heidi Schussler was beautiful, he thought; a real picture—too pretty to be a common innkeeper’s daughter. She was the rose at the “Roselein” that attracted the young

men of Regensheim to her father's inn. And quite aware of it she was. Her charm was her widowed father's asset.

Beneath the long eyelashes, blue irises sparkled in her lively face, and from the parting of her hair, dark brown curls cascaded, converging into a neat bun at the nape of her neck. Behind the whiteness of her apron, an embroidered Bavarian blouse, tucked into the narrow satin band of her black skirt, accentuated her slim waist and her comely figure.

Friendly to all her father's patrons, she was nevertheless very selective in her choice of friends. Most of the young men who frequented the Roselein were timber workers employed by the sawmills in the Bohmer Wald.

But, judging by their attire, the young men she was serving were obviously from the more notable families of the town. Peter worked in the office of his father, a solicitor, at Regensheim, Max studied commerce at the University of Heidelberg, while Hans Volker and Sep Heppner were students at the Munich Technical College. They had been friends since the days when they had shared the same class at primary school.

In the cosy inn, news was exchanged, jokes were told, old happenings retold and amorous adventures whisperingly confided. They greatly enjoyed their companionship on this, their first meeting of the summer holidays.

"Oh, it's only one of Peter's crazy stories, you know him, Heidi . . . real tall stories," explained Sep, a small man with an impish face.

"And what was it about?" Heidi wanted to know. "Not another one of those silly student stories that I could not help overhearing from the bar from time to time."

"Oh, no, Heidi," Hans answered, half rising from his chair with a grin, his eyes slitted with mirth. "You should've heard it."

"I'm waiting," Heidi teased. "Can't waste too much time. There are others waiting to be served."

"Well, a few weeks ago I was walking home from the boatshed. It was about seven o'clock, cloudy and rather dark. I wanted to be on time for dinner. You know how very punctual the old one

is. Anyway, at the cemetery I noticed the back gate open. I thought I could make a short cut to the main street. It was only a hundred metres or so . . . not far really . . . I could even see the street lights on the other side. So I entered the cemetery.”

“You didn’t!” Heidi suppressed a cry. Her pretty mouth fell open. “Surely not at that hour, Peter.”

“I did, Heidi, I did. I must admit I was scared, apprehensive if you like, but I had to be on time for dinner.”

“I would’ve walked round it,” she gasped. “Anyway, what happened?”

“I walked fast,” Peter continued, “and as soon as I was in, I heard footsteps behind me. It was creepy walking under those old trees all by yourself with silent graves all around. It was rather dark and my heart was in my mouth.”

With eyes wide open in apprehension, Heidi put down the empty steins, and, pressing both hands to her lips in horror, she cried, “Stop it Peter!”, but she really didn’t mean it.

Peter, leaning over the table, whispered mysteriously, “I didn’t dare to look back, Heidi”—he rolled his eyes—“I was too scared. I’m sorry, Heidi, but I’m no hero.” His shoulders sagged.

“The dead won’t harm you,” cut in Max.

“You might be right, Max,” Peter retorted, “but I was scared, and I started to walk much faster, hoping to outrun those horrible footsteps, but—you wouldn’t believe it—they kept following me. I was out of my wits with fear, Heidi, and I started to run, and those damned footsteps came running after me until I dashed out of the gate. A few moments later the gate creaked open and old Krause the game-keeper appeared, looking as relieved and sheepish as I was. I wished him a plain *guten abend* and strolled on.”

With a sigh of relief, Heidi let her hand fall lamely back on to the table. “Oh, what a horrible story, Peter. You were game . . . real daring . . . and you’re crazy!” she cried, shaking her pretty head in disbelief. “You wouldn’t see me at that hour in that ghostly place,” she said, radiating admiration for the handsome narrator.

“The dead won’t harm anyone. It is the living you should

fear,” commented Max drily, studying the effects of his remark on the young bar maid.

“I fear the dead!” snapped Heidi. “And I hate cemeteries.”

“They won’t deter me, Heidi, and I mean it,” declared Max.

“Good on you. Come on, drink your beer, Max. I know you’re fearless,” she said without real conviction.

Watching Peter’s unexpected rise to glory in Heidi’s esteem, Max said, “I would like to repeat the walk through the cemetery just for the fun of it—even at a much later hour, say midnight.”

His challenge shocked the group. Their eyes were fixed on the sardonic smile that broke through the surface of his rough-hewn face.

“Oh, Max! Oh, silly man! Come on, drink your beer,” Heidi begged.

“I’ll say it again. It is the living you should fear, not the dead,” said Max, a grimace causing the Mensur sabre scars of honour on his left cheek and his chin to deepen in colour. He watched them in deadly earnest.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, my friend,” warned Peter. “Do you know what it is like to walk in a graveyard at night—all by yourself?”

“Look, Peter, I know you must have had a scary time, because you allowed fear to get a hold on you,” explained Max. “But if you consider that they are all dead—dead, you know. They cannot move . . . they cannot stir . . . well, where’s the problem?”

His eyes darted questioningly from face to face. Heidi’s gaze was fixed on his mouth.

The three young men looked at each other. The challenge was very unusual. That much they knew. Max felt he had shot up in status and grown in Heidi’s esteem.

“Steady Max, steady,” said little Sep. “It’s only big talk, I hope”—he glanced at Heidi—“to impress our fairy princess, I suppose. You really don’t mean it, do you, Max?”

“Oh, let’s forget all this stupid talk,” cried Hans. “How’s your beer, Max?”

But Max, gripped by Heidi’s stare, boasted, “There’s really

nothing to it. I'm prepared to do it. I'll do it next Thursday night, and I want you people to think up some kind of evidence that I can use to prove that I've kept my part of the bargain. You can write a message on a card, or something, and I promise to deliver it at the place of your choice in the cemetery, round about midnight. Well?"

He cast glances all round and stopped at Heidi.

"Oh, forget it, Max," Sep blurted out. "We know you can do it, and we'll leave it at that."

"And what would you give me for it, my fairy princess?" Max teased.

"You're silly," she said.

"I know you're brave enough," said Peter. "Otherwise you wouldn't carry those Mensur scars. But what's the point? I'm sorry I started this ridiculous business."

"Well, Heidi, what is it worth?" persisted Max. "A kiss from you, my pretty rose of Regensheim?"

"Don't be silly, it's no good," pleaded Heidi. "If it's a kiss you want I'll give it to you right now."

Max glowed in the warmth of her admiration. She really cared about him, and that made him more determined than ever to prove that he was worthy of her affection.

"Well, that will make it two kisses you owe me, my pretty one," he said with a contented smile.

"We don't want you do it, Max, but seeing we can't stop you, I'll make the challenge even more worthwhile by promising you three bottles of champagne," said Hans.

"Three bottles of sherry from me," shouted Peter.

"And three bottles of schnapps from me on your return," put in Sep.

"And you will be the guest of honour at my party, my pretty maid, promise?" Max said.

"You, young gentlemen, are a bunch of idiots. I will be at your party if you insist—but idiots you are.

And with these words Heidi flitted back to the bar.

\* \* \*

In the shadow of the brick cemetery gate, the four assembled at midnight.

"You know where to go, Max?" asked Peter.

"Yes, I do. It's to the north of the cemetery chapel, isn't it, Peter?"

Hans detected a nervous quiver in Max's voice. "You can still pull out and we won't talk about it. Heidi will never know," he said.

"No, Hans, I must do it. It's for my own sake too," said Max. "Anyway, I'll be back soon."

He stood up straight, his muscular frame faintly silhouetted against the dark background. The darkness mercifully concealed his nervousness.

"Here's a card, Max. We've scribbled our signatures on it. Nail it to the ground so it won't blow away. Here's a hammer and the longest nail I could find in the shed," Sep said, handing him a fifteen-centimetre nail with a large head. Quite casually, Max let it slip into his cloak pocket.

"Thank you, Sep," he mumbled. "A good idea. I could use the hammer as a weapon against—who knows." His subdued giggle sounded eerie.

"Here are some matches, Max. You might need them. We'll be waiting for you right here. It wouldn't take you more than twenty minutes. And afterwards, think of it, Max. We'll open our first bottle of champagne. Good luck; I don't envy you." Peter gave his friend an encouraging slap on the shoulder.

"Well, fellows, I'll be seeing you," Max said. And, holding a lamp in his left hand and the hammer in his right, he left the group. The darkness swallowed him up. For a few moments his swinging lamplight was the only sign of life. Then it was out of sight and the blackness of the night engulfed them all. Most of the gaslights in the streets of Regensheim were out. The town had gone to rest a while ago.

Instinctively they turned their faces away from the ghastly gloom into which their friend had vanished, their minds feverishly imagining Max's progress through the dark necropolis.

\* \* \*

The object of their imagination was stubbornly striding on, following the weak glow that his kerosene lamp was casting on

the winding path and on the footends of the graves alongside it. Several times he nearly fell over, tripped up by a hidden stone or some other obstacle.

Suddenly an upright object loomed. He stopped aghast. It did not stir. He stood, unable to move. But then he realised that it was only a large statue of an angel with outstretched arms.

He raised his lamp high and was presented with a weird spectacle: crosses, tombstones and statues. The chapel was nowhere to be seen.

He lowered his lamp and continued his walk. With lessening confidence, he became aware that he was a lone visitor in an unearthly world, that he was being stared at by unseen eyes.

Suddenly he laughed. What was he afraid of? Weren't they all dead? His own words echoed in his brain: "The dead won't harm you, Peter. They are all dead—dead, you know. They cannot move . . . they cannot stir . . ."

How easy it had been to say these things in the cosiness of The Roselein. What had made him do this crazy thing? There was really no need for it. Or was there? Was it jealousy of Peter's success with Heidi that had driven him to this challenge?

He loathed being here, alone with the silent graves around him in the deep shadows of the rustling trees.

Resolutely he strode on. His foot caught in a root and he stumbled. Trying to keep his balance, he swung his left arm round, and with a loud, metallic clang came instant darkness. He had smashed his lamp against the iron railing of a grave. Cold sweat dripped from his forehead. His hand shot into his pocket to find the box of matches. With trembling fingers he lit a match and discovered during its brief glow that his lamp was damaged beyond repair. He could not go on without light, so he decided to return. The accident had terminated the challenge. His friends would understand.

The best he could do would be to nail the message to the ground, and he would do it now. He pulled the card from his cloak pocket, but where was the nail? His nervous fingers found a hole and pushed through it. The nail must have fallen through into the lining. He swore loudly. He bent over and,

terror-stricken, used both hands to feel for the nail along the bottom hem of his cloak. Suddenly he felt the nail's stiffness. Sweat was flowing down his face. He tried to get the nail out of the lining. In desperation, he ripped open the pocket lining and, thrusting his arm deep, wildly groped for the nail.

And while he struggled, he felt that unseen visitors were closing in on him. He could not stand this much longer, but he had to prove that he had gone as far as he could.

With a screech of anguish he wrenched the nail out of his pocket, and dropped it. In the flickering glow of a match he found the card, the hammer and the nail. The match burned out.

Trembling with terror, he squatted and, with his left hand, placed and held the card. His right hand brought the sharp point of the nail to the centre of the card, from where his left hand took over, keeping the nail upright.

He brought the hammer down once, twice, again and again, driving the nail deeper with each blow, until its point found some long-buried object to bite into and its head reached the ground. The task was completed.

Like a jack-in-the-box he sprang up, flinging out his arms and, his lungs bursting with agony, he let out a scream that cut through the night.

\* \* \*

An hour later, in the smoky glow of oil torches and lamps borne by a small crowd which was led by two police officers and the sexton, his three friends found his body lying grotesquely across the path, face upturned, eyes bulging and mouth distended in a stifled cry. His right hand still clutched the hammer. His cloak was partly torn but its hem was nailed firmly to the ground. The fastenings on the collar had broken his neck.

## PARADISE LOST

*James Farrar*

My story's set in Arctic wastes  
One dreadful winter's night,  
An igloo there on sad display  
Alone and out of sight.

Deep within an oil lamp showed  
the remains of some pickled moose,  
and Eskimo Joe in drunken swoon  
Enjoying some Greenland juice.

Then Minnie rapped the igloo door,  
So Joe peered through the crack,  
His lover keen to come inside,  
The night an inky black.

"Go away, yuv done yer dash,  
I'm here wiv Klondike Kate,  
Younger than you, prettier too,  
She's now me live-in mate."

Well Kate, I guess, was quite OK,  
Done up in her sealskin clothes,  
Body all smeared with caribou fat,  
She reeked from head to toes.

The world outside was deathly then,  
Some fifty degrees below,  
And Minnie yelled, "Please let me in,  
I've nowhere else to go."

But all she got was mute response,  
Some smoke that drifted high,  
Raucous singing, giggles and laughs,  
The smell of Eskimo pie.

So she clambered up the igloo wall  
To its chimney, black and hot,  
And threw inside some walrus dung  
That quickly sealed the top.

Then out they rushed, alive with soot,  
First Joe, then Klondike Kate,  
While Minnie slipped back down the roof,  
Ran in and slammed the gate.

She stoked the oven, changed her clothes,  
Now busy as a bee,  
Cleaned the joint from front to back,  
Then had some pie and tea.

But then, quite faint, she heard a knock,  
The wind an awesome moan.  
"Kate's ski'd off wiv me bearskin coat,  
An' I'm left out here alone."

So she dragged him in, though something snapped,  
Gone those wondrous nights of loving,  
Then, stiff as a board, she let him thaw,  
Full stretched before the oven.

## VOWS

*Gwayne Naug*

What did I promise you?  
It seems I cannot remember vows,  
Perhaps I do not wish to.

The word obedience is a favourite of yours,  
Yet I am an adult  
You talk so tritely of honour,  
I wonder if you know its meaning.  
You know the word of love,  
But only in its printed form.

At twenty these sentiments were surrounded by friends  
and set to music,  
While you played with the ice and fire of your  
diamonds  
Then you had a status, you had me to display.

I am tired of being a dummy in a window  
So  
I've come to life and thrown away my paper vows.  
At fifty I am skipping down a new road,  
paved with adventure  
and  
decorated with dreams.

I pluck a flower and to each petal  
I whisper vows anew . . .

## A CANADIAN IMMIGRANT

### John Kendrick Blogg 1851-1936

*Marjorie Morgan*

A few years ago I noticed a beautiful woodcarving of gumleaves and gumnuts in the office of the librarian of the Box Hill and Doncaster Regional Library. The carving, executed by John Blogg, was formerly owned by a Box Hill resident who had let her home while she went to the country to nurse a sick relative. On her return she found the carving was damaged. Anxious to ensure that no further damage occurred to the treasured carving, she presented it to the Box Hill City Council to add to the city's impressive art collection.

Several years later I became the archivist of the Box Hill City Historical Society and was delighted to discover some interesting information in the society's archives about John Blogg. There I found an article on the art of woodcarving written by him for 'The Argus' newspaper of 28 September, 1929, and three cards made from photographs of his carvings which he had used as greeting cards.

I was so captivated by the beautiful carvings, the skilled workmanship, the careful designs and the sensitivity with which the work had been executed that I began to collect information about John and his carvings whenever the opportunity presented.

The more I researched the more impressed I became with this man and his achievements in life, achievements I felt should not be permitted to disappear into the mists of time. As a result, I have written a book about him in which I endeavour to portray something of the life and work of this intelligent, sensitive man.

Born in Toronto, Canada, in 1851, John was the second of six

children in his family. He studied chemistry and after graduating he went to work for his uncle in a chemist shop. There he received a very good introduction to business practices and expanded his knowledge of chemistry.

When John was about twenty-five his father died and his mother later married her deceased sister's husband who had seven children. The reason for John's departure from this large family and a wide circle of friends is unknown, but in 1877 he decided to migrate to Melbourne with the intention of starting a business on his own account.

Having arrived with excellent references, he obtained work with a manufacturing chemist a week or so after landing in Melbourne and was soon under contract as manager for the firm. He later worked in partnership with two manufacturing chemists before launching out to form his own company in 1884.

There were eight shareholders in the company with John and James Tod, a fellow chemist, being the main shareholders, each with 1000 one-pound shares. The others had 500 shares each and several were well known Melbourne men. They included the Reverend John Bromby, Canon of St Paul's Cathedral, Henry Young and Thomas Jackson from the hotel opposite the Cathedral in Swanston Street. Officially The Bridge Hotel, it became famous when Young and Jackson purchased the much-criticised painting titled 'Chloe'. Another shareholder was Charles Pleasance, a former student of the Reverend Bromby at the Church of England Grammar School. He later became the Lord Mayor of Melbourne and was of the well-known firm of Martin and Pleasance, makers of homoeopathic medicines.

J.K. Blogg and Co., the business John founded, embarked on some innovative projects. They were the first company in Australia to manufacture acetic acid and liquid ammonia on a commercial scale. The company manufactured perfume equal in delicacy to the best in France, using many varieties of flowers and plants. They were the first to use Australian native flora in perfume and their perfumes became well-known

throughout Australasia. At one time they produced more perfume than the total of the perfumes made by other companies in Australia.

The company made a variety of products including shoe polish, varnish, cordials, vinegar and laundry blue. For the latter John invented a machine which was superior to anything available from overseas at that time. With the business proving to be successful, John's younger brother also migrated and joined the company and in later years their sons worked there, too.

John's first wife died soon after their sixth child was born, not long after they had moved from the City to Surrey Hills. At about this time John began woodcarving and in a very short time he was executing carvings of great beauty. Some of his early work was on furniture for his own home and for his children. His earliest known carving is a music cabinet dated 1901, made when he was fifty years of age. Most of his carvings are panels for wall hangings and his favourite subject was branches of gumleaves and nuts.

During the next thirty-three years John made at least 300 carvings. Their images are preserved on glass negatives. The carvings are not well-known to the general public as most of them are still owned by members of his family, which is quite large as he married a second time and had eleven children altogether and thirty-six grandchildren. He gave them carvings to commemorate the special events in their lives. There are a few in public places. The Australian National Gallery has one of his carvings which hung for many years at Australia House in London; after the First World War he sent a carving of a laurel wreath to be placed near the grave of the unknown soldier at Westminster Abbey. The National Gallery of Victoria and the Ballarat Fine Art Gallery each have one carving.

A carving was given to the Prince of Wales in 1920 when he visited Melbourne and also one to the Duke of York during his visit in 1934. A beautifully carved box was sent to the King of Belgium.

The largest pieces John carved are in Surrey Hills. After the

First World War he donated the memorial, known as The Shrine, in Surrey Park. It has some beautiful carvings of Australian flora and may be seen near the Union Road boundary of the Park. When St Stephen's Presbyterian Church, Surrey Hills, was built in 1910 John donated the pulpit, which is a wonderful example of great craftsmanship, containing 13 panels. A few years later he carved three panels for the pulpit in the Surrey Hills Uniting Church.

There are several First World War honour boards made by John in churches throughout Victoria, including those at Canterbury, Surrey Hills and Box Hill. An honour board he made for Surrey Hills Primary School has the name of one of his sons on it. He also made trophies for the three clubs he played sport with, the tennis, billiards and bowling clubs of Surrey Hills.

Throughout his life John loved poetry and never missed an opportunity to jot down verses. He frequently quoted Shakespeare, his favourite poet, and in latter years loved his grandchildren to read extracts from Shakespeare's works, and he took pride in being able to identify the source of any passages they could launch at him.

In 1927 a book of John's poems was published and sold to assist the Disabled Men's Association. In his book 'Modern Roses in Australasia', B.V. Rossi published quite a few of John's poems on roses. Many of his verses appeared in 'The Rose Annual' during his lifetime and for ten years after his death in 1936, aged 85.

John Blogg led a full and interesting life. He has left behind a wonderful contribution to our heritage through his wood-carvings and poetry.

Mark not my grave with stone or sculptur'd urn,  
I want no labour'd art where I repose,  
When life is past, and I to dust return  
I'd lie beneath the shadow of a rose.

Plant me a rose my resting place to hide!  
The crystal drops of dew her petals weep,  
Will seem like tears she could not brush aside,  
While at her feet her lover lies asleep.

*(Written by John K. Blogg.)*

## THE PENSIONER

*James Farrar*

I'm searchin' for a nice young bride  
Who'll pay me some attention,  
'cos now me workin' days are thru  
I'm paid the old age pension.  
With rosy cheeks an' smilin' lips  
She'd be me faithful maid,  
An' help me 'round on plastic hips  
An' charge me hearing aid.

Each day she'd cook an' scrub for me  
Then I'd switch orf the lights,  
She'd help a man of eighty-three  
Keep warm these winter nights.  
Then as me bride sets out to prove  
That I'm a lucky man,  
The nursin' sisters wake me up  
And lift me on the pan.

## FAMILY GAMES

*Jean DeBaere*

In my family  
We were tutored in parlour games,  
To follow and tread dark passages  
And find the threat-filled corners  
In wait for the hesitant step.

Hidden, the “King Lear” games:  
“Who loves me best?”  
But did not know  
He made the cruel bargain.

In the end easier to walk away  
And not look back  
Than it was to stay  
And play the ordained role  
In all the power plays.

## THIRTY-THREE AND COUNTING

*Gret Racine*

*(Story Five from 'Sefan's Year'. This excerpt deals with Lag b'Omer and the seven weeks from Pesach to Shavuot, including the counting of the Omer)*

"Bet it's a girl!"

"Bet it's a boy!"

"No, it'll be a girl. Sef's sister said so herself. By the way she was carrying it, she said."

The argument about Yehudit's coming baby was between Lisa, Bianca and Katy, who had gone to the nearby park after school to wait for their friend Sefan to meet them, following her frantic dash to the hospital after the phone-call in the headmistress's office that morning. Sefan had promised her friends that she would definitely not be long—this was her sister's third baby, after all! Hence the waiting in the park opposite the hospital by the excited trio.

"What was it Sef said today was?" Katy asked with curiosity, a frown passing across her freckled face while she absently propelled herself and the other two slowly on the spaceship-designed roundabout. "Something like larg barmy, wasn't it?"

"It's the thirty-third of the Omer," Lisa answered her, unexpectedly knowledgeable, digging her heel into the soft ground to continue the momentum Katy had begun. "Well, that's what Sef called it, anyway. She said 'lag' was short for thirty-three, lamed is thirty and gimel is three—L and G, you see, so you get 'lag'. There's another seventeen days after that; makes fifty. They count them every night. That's what Sef said, anyway."

"That's great, Lisa, but what about the Omer bit?" asked Bianca, lazily but rhythmically swinging a free foot against her defenceless schoolbag, perched with them on the roundabout.

“It can’t be a month, because no month ever had thirty-three days—or fifty, for that matter—Jewish ones or any others.”

“The way Sef explained it, it sounded a bit like Lent,” Lisa answered, pulling a face. “Sort of mourning, or something.”

“Lent’s not mourning, Lise! It’s just that we’ve got to give up certain things, that’s all,” Katy answered her friend impatiently. “Mum doesn’t let us have meat during Lent.”

“Gees, are you that strict?” Bianca asked in surprise. “We’re Catholic, and even we don’t have to go that far during Lent. You poor old thing, Kate!”

“I didn’t mean Lent and the Omer were the same like that, Kate,” Lisa cut in quickly before Katy could answer. “All I said was that I think there are some things the same. That’s the way Sef made it sound, that’s all. The Omer has something to do with the time between Passover and Pentecost, or whatever it is they call Pentecost; Shavuot, or something.”

“My, we have been studying, haven’t we!” cried Bianca mockingly. “The Omer, lamed, gimel, lag b’Omer, Shavuot! Someone wouldn’t be a little bit interested in a tall, dark, handsome male by the name of Michael, would they? Who are we trying to impress, huh?”

“Shuddup, Bee,” Katy cut in, before Lisa could say anything. “Sef’s cousin has absolutely nothing to do with it! We—yes, me too, drongo!” she cried, blue eyes flashing in defence of the tall, blonde girl; “we both wanted to know why there were so many festivals in such a short time, so there!”

“Cut it out, you two.” It was Lisa, oldest of the trio, who interrupted the rapidly developing argument this time, jumping off the roundabout suddenly and stopping it with a jerk. “Kate’s right, Bee; we really did want to know why, in only seven weeks, there’s so many festivals. I bet you didn’t know there were five in that time!”

Katy blushed and mumbled something that could have been an apology. “No, I didn’t Lise. Is there really that many?”

Once again, Lisa assumed the air of the most knowledgeable. “Well,” she said slowly, jumping on the roundabout and starting it up again. “They’re not really festivals, they’re cel-

ebrations and things. At least, most of them are.” She paused, then began to strike off the names rather ostentatiously on her fingers, as the roundabout gathered speed. “First there was that one at the end of April; you remember, when Sef went with her grandfather to that memorial thing at the town hall?”

“Her brother-in-law’s grandfather,” Katy mumbled again, but the others paid no attention. “Yeah, I know the one you mean; Sef said it was called Holocaust Day—the Shoah, I think she said.”

“Imagine, six million Jews, all killed!” whispered Bianca, obviously having difficulty visualising so many people. “Do you honestly think it really happened, or do you think that they just made it all up, to get sympathy?”

“Bee!” Lisa turned on her friend, horrified. “The records are all there, stupid! Films and photographs and shoes and clothing and . . . glasses and . . . and rings, and even gold teeth! You know, all sorts of things. The Nazis kept it all as a record; they *wanted* to keep it! Of course those people died! That’s why there’s a memorial day for them, to remember all those millions of Jews who were murdered by the Nazis! Don’t be an ass, Bee!”

“So what are the other days then?” It was Katy this time, who cut into what could have developed into the next argument. “I can’t remember them like you can; all those weird names and stuff.”

Lisa returned to counting on her fingers, as the forgotten roundabout finally slowed to a halt. “Well, the next ones Sef told us about were Memorial Day and Independence Day, which are always together. Let’s see, now”; she frowned in an effort of memory. “This memorial day is for soldiers, all the soldiers who have been killed in the wars since independence. It’s called Yom haZikaron, and I remembered that because of Karen,” she added, recalling another school friend, which she pronounced “Car-RAYN”. “Sef said they light a candle for her brother on that day. It’s a bit like Anzac Day is for us, I think.”

“And the other one? Independence Day?” Bianca prompted her. “What’s that in Hebrew?”

This time Lisa just shrugged. "I can't remember that one, Bee. Yom something-or-other. They're all 'yom'. Yom means day. Sef said."

"Okay, so what's after this 'yom', then?" Bianca asked next. "Yom . . .?"

"Jerusalem Day; Yeh-ru-sha-lie-eem," said Lisa slowly, sounding out the syllables one by one in the unfamiliar Hebrew version of the holiest city on earth. "That's to do with the Six Day War, in 1967, when the Israeli Army captured the Arab section of Jerusalem—the eastern part—and united it. You know, the Temple, and the Wailing Wall and all that."

"The Western Wall, Lisa," Bianca cut in, absently kicking her schoolbag again. "Even I know that since 1967 it's been that; it was only before the war that it was the Wailing Wall, because the Jews couldn't get to it. After the liberation, it was the Western Wall!"

"So who's Miss Know-it-all now?" Katy asked slyly, giving the roundabout a vicious jerk. "Who's impressing now, huh?"

"God! will you two shut up!" cried Lisa, becoming exasperated. "Who cares if it's western or wailing? The Temple's not there any more; it's the Dome of the Rock, you know, that blue and gold thing you see in pictures of Jerusalem."

"That's only four days, Lise," Katy interrupted her, abruptly changing the subject before yet another argument could begin. "You said there were five."

Lisa sighed loudly. "Yeah, I know I did," she agreed, rocking the roundabout but without starting it up again. "And that's today. The thirty-third day of the Omer. Lag b'Omer."

"Which was the one Sef took us to with all the dancing?" Katy asked, frowning. "That was a lot of fun, you know; I thought it was ace. All those new dances and things. Great stuff, that night."

"That was for Independence Day, Kass," Bianca answered her. "Yeah, I liked it too. The Jews have got some really good stuff when it comes to celebrating and all that. I'm going to ask Sef to teach me some more, Independence Day or not! And speaking of that," she suddenly cried, her attention momentar-

ily distracted by two running figures on the other side of the road. "Here comes Sef and Yasmin now. Gees, they'll get themselves bloody killed if they don't look where they're going!

"Stupid oafs!" she added, as both girls were narrowly missed by a speeding car. She turned to the other two, jumping quickly off the roundabout as she did. "Well, come on, you lot! If Sef and Yasmin are coming, that means her sister's had the baby! And I want to find out what it is!"

Galvanised into action by their friend's stinging remark, the three girls were presently racing up the slope towards the other two, now safely across busy Nelson Road, which ran past the hospital. A bus swung round the corner up the hill, even as Sefan and her cousin gained the safety of the wide nature-strip.

"Well?" cried Lisa, as the group met on the footpath, panting and breathless. "What is it, Sef? Tell us quickly. And how's your sister?"

Sefan's dark, pretty face was radiant with joy. So was Yasmin's. "You'll never guess!" she cried exultantly, giggling in her excitement. "It's twins! Huda and David are over the moon!"

The other three were stunned into silence for a moment. Then Lisa, recovering more quickly than the other two, asked somewhat unnecessarily: "What? Sef, I don't believe it! How could your sister not know she was having twins! She must've known!"

Sefan shook her head, the laughter abating. "No, Lisa. Sometimes they don't know these things," she answered more soberly. "The babies were one behind the other when they were inside, and the second heartbeat wasn't picked up until the last moment. I think the doctor was nearly as surprised as all of us!"

Just at that moment, David, Sefan's brother-in-law, walked quickly out of the hospital's distant main entrance and turned towards them. Sefan waved as the tall ex-Israeli Defence Forces colonel strode more safely towards them, looking up and down the busy road first. "David! Over here!" called Sefan, jumping up and down in her excitement.

He came up to them, a broad smile on his face. "Hello, girls.

How are you?" he asked, placing an arm casually around Sefan's shoulder as he spoke. "Sef's already told you our good news, by the look of it!"

"Is it really twins?" Lisa asked blushing, still a little in awe of this tall, suntanned ex-army paratrooper who had fought in the occupied territories against the Intifada. "Two of them?"

But David only smiled again. "Yes, young lady, it really is—a boy and a girl," he laughed good-naturedly. "Both healthy and both very loud! We're in for a few sleepless nights by the sound of it!"

Without even thinking about what she was doing, Lisa suddenly flung her arms around the big man's shoulders and kissed him resoundingly on the cheek. "That's terrific, it really is," she cried excitedly. "Congratulations—no, what is it you say, Sef?" she asked, turning quickly to her friend. "Mazel tov, isn't it?"

Sefan laughed, nodding vigorously. "Absolutely correct, Lisa," she answered happily. "You have a very good memory!"

"Well, I think this calls for a celebration," David announced, once the congratulations were all over. "Come on, get your bags then, girls, and into the car. Where would you like to go? Somewhere where we can all have something very sweet, very sticky and probably very bad for us!"

"Macdonald's?" suggested Sefan slyly. "Can we go to Macdonald's?"

David glanced at her in amusement, then threw back his head and laughed. "What would your sister say if she could hear you saying that now, Sefi? Why, she'd probably tear me apart for encouraging you!" He gave her a broad wink. "Still, I think that today we can stretch a point, yaldah! Macdonald's it is!"

\* \* \*

Yehudit came home from the hospital surprisingly quickly. She was very well, considering her ordeal, and so were the babies, and after all, she had Khalima, her sister-in-law, to help with them. David, too, would bear his share of looking after his new son and daughter when he was at home, to say nothing of

Sefan, Yasmin and the rest of David's dotting family as well. Twins, after all, didn't happen every day.

On the eighth day, the baby boy, named Eliav Yitzhak, was ritually circumcised by the mohel, the doctor religiously qualified to perform the operation. The baby was the second boy in the family, so it would not be necessary for him to undergo the further ceremony of pidyon haben, the redemption of the first-born. The family were Cohen, anyway. Ilan had not undergone pidyon haben either; it was not necessary for those born a Cohen— although the usual form of redemption these days was a symbolic monetary donation to the Cohen redeeming the child at the synagogue.

On the Friday night following the brit (circumcision) of her new son, Yehudit presented her baby daughter for naming at the synagogue, an occasion attended by all the family. Lisa, Katy and Bianca were unable to be there too, as they were away at a school camp with the camping club. Sefan was not a member of the camping club, so had not gone.

The baby girl was named Cherith Efrat, the Hebrew names of both babies being Eliav Yitzhak and Cherith Efrat b'nei David v'Yehudit haKohayn, born members of the ancient priestly elite. The proud parents each held a baby as the rabbi pronounced their names, David holding Cherith, Yehudit holding Eliav.

The Israeli-style kiddush—celebratory supper—which followed the joyful service was full of such things as falafel, pita stuffed with tabouli and salad, spicy chumas (dips) and vegetable sticks and cakes made from nuts and fruit. Monday morning brought groans of disappointment from Sefan's friends when they learned what they had missed, especially the food, until Sefan herself reminded them of another, but rather different, naming which was coming very shortly.

"Khalima will officially become a Jew at Shavuot, you know. She has finished all her studies and been tested by the Beth Din (rabbinical court). You'll just have to wait for that."

And wait they would have to do. Shavuot was barely a week away, after all.

## NO PARTING

*J. T. McPhee*

When oft-times I remember you  
I walk again the river's course  
I slide along the grassy bank  
And hold the tussocks strong,  
Then at the deep cool water-hole,  
Skimmed by the magpie's wing  
Where you so often stood with me  
Beneath the giant gums  
How lovely are their luscious leaves  
Their trailing bark hung down  
You said to me one bright spring day  
The trees to you did look  
Like beauteous ladies, velvet clad  
With ribbons wreathed about their hair.  
So when the setting sun shafts through  
I see your face in golden light.  
I feel your touch borne on the breeze.  
Then I am filled with boisterous joy  
With gaiety, with glee.  
Because I feel, because I know  
That you are there with me.

## THE FASCINATION OF THE ALIEN

*Wynne Whiteford*

From a writer's point of view, why have aliens in fiction? They seem to have been there as long as fiction has been in existence—creatures not quite human, from the hawk-men and jackal-men of ancient Egypt through the centaurs and the Minotaur of the Greeks to modern creations such as the yeti and Bigfoot, and hard-to-eradicate images like the flying-saucer “little green men” of Whitley Strieber and others

Surely, you might say, the human race has a wide enough range of characters to fulfil any fictional need, from a CSIRO scientist working at Culgoors to an Aboriginal fabric designer in Moree, from a Japanese electronics expert fired with the ambition to put Sanyo ahead of Sony, or vice versa, to a Fijian spearing fish with the help of his off-shore weir. They're all different, in some cases so different in background culture that some of them might have trouble communicating with the others.

Yet readers en masse tend to be fascinated by aliens—note the popularity of the many flying saucer books in the heyday of that sub-genre. Some have been best-sellers.

The best use of fictional aliens is to present possible alternative life-styles to our own, or as a framework in which an author can make suggestions for modifying the human experiment to make it a better show. Unfortunately, it's much easier to visualise happier lifestyles than to work out the difficult details that might lead to such utopias.

At the crudest level, in stories developed from the cheaper pulp markets of the 1930s, aliens are there simply to supply dangerous and unpredictable opponents for the protagonist and his team. This type of story, like the “fruity melodramas” of an earlier era, sidesteps reality by having its characters

divided sharply into “goodies” and “baddies”, which makes plotting easy, but leaves the final result unbelievable to any reader with an IQ higher than the date of the month.

At another stratum, equally artificial, alien “do-gooders” present the author’s recipes for a harmonious life for everyone on Earth, as in most flying-saucer contact stories. I know these are not classified openly as fiction, you can believe them if you wish. I don’t, so to me they are fiction. I don’t think the attempt to claim truth necessarily devalues the story—after all, Daniel Defoe, writing when Puritan England frowned on fiction, presented ‘Robinson Crusoe’ as a true account. And what about our ‘Picnic at Hanging Rock’?

But the main point that destroys the credibility of alien contact stories is the messages the advanced beings are supposed to bring to us. Mostly, they are noble platitudes—eg, “Stop making atomic weapons before you wipe yourselves out”, or “Return to the Golden Age”, before automobiles, guns or soap. I have yet to see a character in a “contact” book come up with a really original idea.

Motive played a large part in the creation of most of the menagerie of mediaeval monsters. Traders who had penetrated remote areas probably circulated reports of menacing horrors to discourage competitors—dragons, basilisks, anthropophagi, men “whose heads do hang beneath their shoulders”—hairy serpents, sea serpents.

Once, for a brief fraction of a second, I glimpsed a replay of a scene that must have generated the myth of the centaur. My wife and I were watching the sunset from the beach at Rickett’s Point. The sun was intersecting the horizon, and along a sand bar in the shallows came a black figure silhouetted against the glare of the western sky. Simultaneously, we exclaimed: “Look! A centaur!” It was a girl riding a horse, which at that moment had its head turned toward us, so that the effect was that of a six-limbed blend of human and horse.

Similarly, the unicorn probably originated from a profile view of an antelope like an oryx, and maybe the sea serpent was suggested by a distant school of dolphins.

Many of fiction's weirdos can be classified by the starting point from which their creator extrapolated them. H.G.Wells, for instance, must have developed his Martians from an octopus—he used another type of cephalopod in a short story, "The Sea Raiders", and in 'The War of the Worlds' he added the enormous brain. His idea of Earth being studied for centuries by "intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic" is one of the most blood-chilling in literature. Many people were no doubt relieved when NASA's Viking landers actually reached Mars and found only uninhabited deserts.

Most writers have taken the easier, more practical course of making their aliens humanoid. They're easier to communicate with, to visualise, to identify with. You can classify them as felinoid, caninoid, reptiloid, insectile. Admittedly, the odds are against such developments on alien planets, but from a writer's viewpoint they work better. Once described, they're easier to picture. And if the book spawns a film, they can be portrayed by human actors.

To look at the alternative, consider Howard P. Lovecraft's "cthulu", which he apparently created from scratch, unless he extrapolated a long way from a starfish or a sea-anemone.

Jack Williamson, in one of his early novels, 'The Stone from the Green Star', had some vividly imagined creatures like luminous dragons held together by electrical forces—when blown to pieces, one simply reassembles itself, first lifting its head in the air, then connecting the rest of its insubstantial body to the head.

But the difficulty is that it's impossible for the human protagonist to get far in dialogue with a thing like that, so the alien simply serves as an unpredictable "baddie". In his later books, Williamson concentrated more on character.

Timing is vital in presenting an alien life-form in a story—best achieved when the first glimpse is momentary, the atmosphere building slowly. Australian author Bernie Cronin achieved a chilling impact at the end of the first episode of 'The Star Germs', a serial in a Melbourne newspaper in the 1920s, where a hypnotic, three-eyed, triangular thing with tentacles

like spaghetti draws a human character against a window pane through which it is observing him. I was unable to get the following episodes, and later I decided they might have let me down. That climax would have been a hard act to build on.

I had several abortive pilot runs in trying to devise an alien life-form in my novel 'The Hyades Contact'. While I was ripping something unbelievable out of the typewriter and throwing it away my cat, dozing nearby, looked at me in protest for disturbing him. I looked at him as he went back to sleep. There, adding a few million years, was my alien! We are more similar than is generally realised. We have the same 206 bones, except for a difference in collarbones and tail, where he has twenty or so bones against my vestigial five. But forty million years ago, our ancestors were at about the same level—a tree shrew and a thing like a weasel. Only a series of evolutionary accidents put my line ahead of his—it could easily have gone the other way. Thus was born my kesrii.

I realized only later that many writers have evolved their aliens from a cat: Fritz Lieber, in 'The Wanderer', which I had not heard of at the time, and more recently Caroline Cherryh's lion people and Larry Niven's Kzinti.

Reptiloid hominids have been used several times, as in 'Star Trek' and the later TV series, 'V'. Another possibility, an insectile form of humanoid, featured in Whitley Strieber's 'Communion', supposedly a contact story, with an interesting character whose face appears on one of the best cover illustrations I've seen—a yellow, roughly egg-shaped head with a pointed chin, almost featureless except for the enormous, black, slanting eyes. Ted Jacobs was the artist. There's no need to read the whole book if you see it, but skim it until you find the description of the alien. It's the size of a small, fast-moving man, and its movements remind the narrator of an insect. Strieber plays around with the idea of a hive mind. Communication carried out by telepathy—he does not explain how. Nevertheless, he's given us an interesting non-human character, not particularly brilliant individually, but part of a hive mentality that combines to think very well, if slowly.

Everyone knows now about Luis Alvarez's theory of periodic catastrophes that almost extinguish life on Earth every 26 million years or so. (No need for panic—the next one's not due for another fifteen million years.) The incident that wiped out the dinosaurs 65 million years back has had a lot of publicity, but there have been many others—one, at the end of the Permian age about 280 million years ago extinguished all but about four per cent of the life forms then in existence.

The point is this: each of these extinctions, whether caused by the postulated "Death Star" or by something else, exterminated all the dominant life-forms on Earth at the time, leaving only the more primitive forms to "start over". It's a sad fact that Earth's longest-lived species are creatures like the shark, the scorpion, the cockroach, and some worms.

So the history of life on this planet seems to have been divided into chapters 26 million years long, each chapter evolving up to a peak. The dominant lord of all it surveyed at the end of the Cretaceous was the *Tyrannosaurus rex*, perhaps the most successful carnivore that ever lived.

Earlier extinctions ended eras in which the dominant creatures were quite different—the rhynchosaurus before the dinosaurs, the pelicosaurus or sail lizards before them. If you go still further back in time, you come to an era when the dominant life-form was a three-metre long marine scorpion.

What the top life-form at the end of our 26-million-year episode will be like, we don't know. We hope it will be a remote descendant of the human race, rather than a termite or some kind of fruit bat. But whatever it is, it will be nothing like the stars of the previous acts—the *Tyrannosaurus*, the sea scorpions, the giant dragonflies of the Carboniferous, or the monstrous fish of the Ordovician.

A recent 'New Scientist' reported a theory, supported by computer experiments, that most sunlike stars have similar retinues of planets to our system—about four solid inner worlds, an outer series of gas giants. So there are probably millions of earthlike worlds in the galaxy, at different stages.

So go ahead and design yourself an alien, together with its alien culture. Whatever you come up with, it probably comes pretty close to something that exists!

Somewhere . . .

## CADENCE

*Eugene McCarthy*

You're a moment born  
To die too soon  
Fallen leaves  
In a summer noon  
Hidden paths  
Thru' leafy glades  
Darkened pools  
And silver shades  
You are the shadow of a dream.

**FIFTY***Mavis Hullin*

My life is over, children gone,  
Two married, two overseas,  
I sink in black depression,  
I am not needed.

An empty, echoing house, my prison,  
Husband frantically ambition driven,  
No time to talk, no time for love,  
I am not needed.

Delinquent white hairs are born among my  
brown,  
My breasts droop—my womb is dry,  
Vitality sapped, enthusiasm gone,  
I am not needed.

That hysterical phone—who could it be?  
Oh mother, you've had a fall, and  
Can't get up from the floor?  
Yes, yes, I'll come at once!  
I am now needed.

## THE REGULAR CHECKUP

*James Farrar*

Ernie Kneebone dropped in for his regular check  
and the doc took a look and see,  
but in spite of the boozing, the smokes and the fights,  
the patient was as fit as can be.  
“I’m here not for me,” he quailed to the doc,  
“but for me wonderful cat, Bingo,  
who’s been checked by this vet, who’s done nuffin’ as yet,  
but say me cat has to go.”  
“I’ll do what I can,” said the doc with a scowl,  
“but before I check an inch of his hair,  
it’s cash on the knocker in cases like this  
with nothing on Medicare.”  
Then quick as a flash the tom was produced  
for a medical diagnosis,  
and as quickly the doctor disdainfully declared  
that the cat had halitosis.  
“Yet I’ve done what I can,” poor Kneebone declared,  
“like feedin’ ’im peppermints,  
but lacin’ ’is milk wiv Pine O Clean  
has sometimes made ’im squint.”  
“If you take my advice, you jibbering ass,  
you’ll get the mog put down,  
and choose from hundreds on offer for free,  
at the municipal pound.”

Moonbeams fill the room tonight  
to the bed where the Kneebones lay,  
together with Bingo in sweet repose—  
but faced the other way.

## TEACUPS AND CURRY

*Joy Dettman*

From the kitchen window she could see the small figure perched on the gate-post. Not yet six, more boy than girl in her brother's hand-me-downs, she was brown as the land was brown. Too much sun, too little rain, the land took its people's sweat in exchange for dust and bare survival, then coloured them brown.

Motionless as a tiny statue, the girl had watched a hypnotising square of green become a van with its muffled clip-clop-clip of a big bay mare's hooves in the dust, and the flash, flash, flash of playful light on the polished harness. The woman had been watching too. How the unusual teased the young, she thought, how it tantalised with promises of pleasures to come. Head shaking, she leaned on the window-sill, sipping scalding tea from a small china cup.

It was the last of her wedding set; she prized this cracked cup more than she had its five perfect colleagues, long-gone to the dust heap. Her eyes again on her child, she watched her climb from her perch. Small bare toes sure on the splintery stays, the girl unhooked the chain before swinging the gate wide for the old Indian hawker and his department store on wheels

If he nodded, she made no acknowledgement. If he spoke, she obeyed her mother and didn't reply to a stranger. Her eyes remained on her toes until he was safely inside, then gleefully she slammed the gate behind him, trapping him and his magic on *her* land.

His turban was white. It matched a beard skilfully trimmed to a chiselled jutting point. His long coat was white, as were the trousers beneath it. Only his narrow beaked nose and his fine hands, his sandalled feet and his black-bead eyes, had colour.

He was out of time, out of place in this post-war era of new

utilities and ex-army farm trucks, now frequenting the country roads. Still, he arrived most years with his calico and his curry, his tools and tonics, his fabrics and his fashions.

“He’s here, Mummy! He’s here, Mummy!” the child called as she ran diagonally across the front paddock to the veranda. “He’s not coming near the house, Mummy.”

The tea drinker moved slowly. “Nothing wrong with my ears or eyes. You stay well away from his van. He’s an old heathen.” Her voice was loud, nasal, her words sharp. She had no reason for harsh words this morning. They came from an inner anger, from a deep-seated, unscratchable irritation, her companion from dawn to dark.

The teacup washed, dried carefully then placed high on a shelf, she turned to the girl, who was waiting on the veranda, wriggling from foot to foot, eager for the showing to begin. The woman scratched at her head and shrugged her shoulders, attempting to rid herself of unreasonable rage.

A tall woman, square. Her large teeth, her jaw, the shapeless dress she wore, even the cut of her dark hair was square, short, sharp. Her skin, sun-dried for too long, showed last year’s fine lines had deepened into this year’s furrows. She was wrung out, squeezed dry, her softness stolen by unrelenting poverty.

With her sixth child, a toddling boy, at her knee, her seventh making its presence felt within, she tossed a soiled apron aside for a cleaner model of the same flour-sack variety. This one had been embroidered with hopeful pinks and greens. The work of a novice, it bore the signature of a dreamer.

She reached for her purse, wiped at the toddler’s face with the dish-rag, took two string bags from behind the door, then used them to hunt a fly and the tiny boy from the room.

The farmhouse was old but well-built. Its roof, once painted red, was faded now, and it groped for the sparse shade a row of sugar gums sprinkled niggardly to the earth. In the fifteen years since she’d come to the house as a bride, she’d filled it with sons. Three were old enough to cut thistles at their father’s side. The seven-year-old, judged too young, had been sulking in the hay shed. Now he stood beside his sister, who

watched in wide-eyed awe as the hawker's table was unfolded from the rear of the van and the hawker's wares placed carefully upon it.

He'd found a patch of shade behind the hay shed. His mare stood at ease between the shafts of his van. Her brown patient eyes nearly closed against the flies, she flicked her ears and snuffled oats from a hand-woven nose-bag.

"I seen in that van before," the boy commented, desperate to prove his maturity to someone, if only his sister. Bolder, with his mother close by, he sidled up to the van, then scurried back to the girl.

"He's got snakes in jars of metho, an' he pours snake juice all over his food, and if ya eat any of his food ya die, dead."

His voice assumed an evil quaver and he watched with narrowed eyes as his sister moved closer to her mother, now standing before the laden table.

"Fine china tea-set, Missus. Very cheap."

The Indian's voice was melodic and whisper-soft, and the woman eyed him for one horrified second as if he were a black-eyed devil with the power to see into her heart.

"I've got no use for gewgaws and folderols," she said.

She denied her need, denied even her hand its freedom to touch the pretty things. Dragging traitorous fingers to a small knife, she punished her thumb against its sharp blade.

"I'll take that, and some of your Indian curry."

Her words were curt as she turned her back on his table of temptations.

"Nothing but folderols," she scoffed. "What use bringing junk like that out here, I ask you? I could use mugs, enamel mugs, and black thread."

The tall wooden wheel was the step up to the van's floor, and the boy drew closer, his eyes daring his sister to follow, but she hung back, close to the toddler, who might retain the right to cling to the big woman's leg and to hide his face in her skirt for another month or two.

Speckled mugs, white and blue, their handles looped over the hawker's fine brown fingers, clinked against his many

golden rings with a merry jingle.

“Mugs, Missus?”

“How much?”

The woman waited until the mugs were placed on the table and well away from his fingers before she touched them, checked them for chips. A figure was quoted, settled on.

“Three,” she said, and her treacherous eyes slid away once more to glance at the fine china cups.

Pink things, they were, frail pink things. Violet roses and sprays of bluebells covered one side; rose leaves edged in gold grew into the handles. The girl’s eyes followed her mother’s. At peace, they rested on beauty, on colour. For a moment they forgot their lives were brown, and softness, moisture stole into their eyes.

“Thread, Missus?”

The voice without substance from deep within the van was gentle, strangely pleasing. It whispered of other worlds, kinder worlds.

“Black thread, Missus?”

“Yes, please,” the woman replied, her eyes lingering awhile on pretty things, reminders of better worlds, that filled her with yearnings to see the ocean again, to sit on the cool sand and watch the seagulls soar, to take her girl child—girl children?—from this place to the land where . . .

The unborn one turned within her and instinct stirred her blood. The age-old need to make preparations she could ill afford pressed her forward.

“Give me a reel of white while you’re about it, and I’ll need flannelette . . . Oh, and what about a bit of cheap white lace.” Such a small concession to an unwanted child, but lace was unnecessary.

“Get down from there, I’ll box your ears!”

Her threat screamed at the seven-year-old climbing the red-painted wheel. It eased the ache in her

Later, flannelette being measured by the time-honoured rule of chin to thumb, she drew closer to the van, her hand shading eyes that followed his measurements while allowing her to see into the dark interior, filled with heathen odours.

“Pretty dress for the girly, Missus?” he asked, the flannel-ette ripped straight, folded, placed in her string bag with the mugs.

The girl needed a Sunday dress, but with none to grow into her hand-me-downs, the woman resented money spent on girl’s clothing. Maybe this new one would be a girl. She wanted another girl.

“No harm in looking,” she snapped. Those were her man’s words. “No harm in looking”—he always said it with a smile and he’d end up spending more than they could afford. Once he’d bought her a brooch. It was only gold-dipped, and the ruby-red stone cut from glass, but for years she’d worn it proudly on the collar of her overcoat. It had been a pretty thing. . .

“Mind you, I’m only looking,” she stressed.

A city girl, she’d been ill-prepared for this life. Taken in hand, tutored in economy, trained, conditioned by a tightwad mother-in-law who had taught her everything she knew of meanness and bigotry.

“Don’t you encourage that Indian near the house,”

The old woman’s words had been delivered with a repetitious nasal whine.

“Don’t you let that black heathen near Billy’s sons.”

The old hawker had been travelling this road for twenty years or more. No-one asked him where he went when he left their district, or why his goods were cheaper than the small draper’s in town. Was he married? Did he have a house, children of his own? Her mother-in-law neither knew nor cared, yet her laws had been obeyed without question; and though the old woman was long-dead, her laws lived.

“Keep him away from the house”. Frequently now she caught herself repeating her mother-in-law’s words, and in the same whining tone reinforcing them by repetition. Words she’d once mimicked in humour she’d made her own. She flinched at that realisation, and stretched her lips into a hard, narrow smile.

“No harm in looking, though, is there?” she said, a tone lower, a shade less sharp.

The hawker placed a small dress on the table and the girl's thumb went to her mouth as she moved closer to the woman. Forgetting for a moment that she was beyond the age of closeness, she pressed her slim frame into the softness of her mother's hip. They stood together, two females in a man's world, their eyes fastened on the dress.

The fabric was unfamiliar. The woman looked at her hand. It was work-worn and rough but clean enough. She touched the pretty thing. Green it was and fine, so fine. Tiny white spots like goose bumps stood proud; its collar was edged with lace and a ribbon of apple green. Such a silly, fluffy thing, a silly city thing. The girl's eyelids were slowly drawn down and she hid her eyes behind a hand as she turned to her mother, perhaps sensing her moment of softening.

Eyes moist with yearning, the woman's fingers handled the fabric as if it had been woven from the last threads of a dream, then she caught the girl's eyes, too filled with naked hope. Her eyes hardened, killing hope before it grew.

"That's about as much use out here as those china cups there," she said tartly. "Show me something sensible."

The Indian's face was a mask. It gave no more away than the chipped plaster Madonna ruling the lounge-room mantelpiece. He took a brown flannel thing from the van and the woman tossed the green dress to his table. She peered closely at the second frock. She checked the length of its hem and she held it before the girl. It reached her ankles.

"How much?"

Again the question fired, again the satisfactory price reached.

"I'll take it. It's good material. You'll grow into it."

Ugly words to justify an ugly purchase.

Grey drill shorts for the boys, vanilla essence and bootlaces; and the children grew excited again, watching their pile of merchandise grow.

Then it was done. The hawker tallied the price in his head. It matched to a penny the notes and coins the woman had already counted grudgingly from her purse and placed on his table between the china cups and the green dress.

Perhaps the unborn one chose to kick, causing her accidentally to knock the cup; or was it a desire to destroy? Perhaps she hoped barely to chip it, to be forced to possess something of beauty.

It thwarted her as love and life had thwarted her. Her girl-child swooped. She caught the cup only inches above the hard-baked clay and she held it to her breast as she might hold a fragile breathing thing.

The woman snatched it. Dusty finger marks were wiped away with the corner of her apron while one ragged fingernail traced the pattern of leaves. Her little finger curved away from the others in memory of her youth and tea parties with fine china cups. Then she smiled her tight, narrow smile and tossed the cup carelessly on to the green dress. She loaded her children with her purchases, pocketed her purse and walked away.

“Don’t you go hanging about all day. And make sure you close that gate behind you.”

The words she flung over her shoulder to the Indian man belonged to her mother-in-law. High, they were, nasal, unnecessarily sharp. And she no longer cared. At that instant she understood why the old woman had whined.

## FROG

*Judith Buckingham*

A kiss completes the metamorphosis.  
The prince shakes off a final clump of weed  
And salutes  
His perceptive princess.

And now, what pool-gazing maids  
Press their soft, red mouths to green.  
Feeling with their tongues globuled lips  
Hanging, limp and wet until  
Amazed to quivering life  
They respond  
And remain  
A frog's.

And why should fairy tales come true?  
The frog may have as fond a heart  
As princes of the blood,  
Besides knowing more of natural things—  
And fairy stories too!

## PASTURES, PODDIES AND PIGS

*J. T. McPhee*

During the 1930s I lived in eight different country districts, and I often recall with pleasure and satisfaction some of the farm work I did.

I once drove a cultivator drawn by five horses around a hundred-acre paddock. It was necessary to put the steering lever in the go-straight position, and have one horse trained to walk in the furrow left by the previous cultivator round.

In springtime, the oat crops were starting to turn a pale yellow, so they were cut for hay and bound into sheaves by that clever machine the reaper and binder.

One of my jobs was to stook—to pick up sheaves and stand them upright, about a dozen at a time, and push them together to form a tent-like shape. This job I did in lovely spring sunshine amid the sweet scent of new-mown hay. It gave me a vivid awareness of the productivity of the land.

After a week in sunny weather, the stoked hay had to be carted on a high-framed wagon to a stackyard. The pitching of the hay up on to the wagon called for strength and skill. In the stack yard the wagon man had to build the sheaves into a haystack as I pitched them off the wagon to him.

On the run-down farm my family had bought, I learned about paddocks and posts. Nearly half the 350-acre place needed new posts for the sub-divisional fences.

The trees on the uncleared land were stringybarks, which are great material for fence posts when felled and split into posts, so we could produce our own fence posts.

The post-splitting called for skill with axe and crosscut saw, plus mall and wedges. When the tree was felled it was sawn into post lengths—about four feet long. The splitting of the logs produced was done with mall and wedges. The mall is a heavy-headed wooden hammer used to beat the six-inch tapering iron wedges into the logs to split them into posts.

On our farm we had twenty-five milking cows and two sow pigs. It was a cream-and-pigs farm. When the milking cows had their calves, each calf was taken before it had a chance to suck milk from her, so it had to drink milk from a bucket. The only way that newly born calves knew how to get milk was by sucking, so to feed a calf the dairy farmer had to let it suck his finger, then lower his finger into the milk bucket. Eventually, the finger could be withdrawn and the calf would be drinking by itself.

Yes, the poor little poddy calves, as they were called, got a raw deal. Not only were they taken from their mums but the milk they were given was skim milk from which the cream had been separated.

On that farm we had Sally the sow pig. She was able to produce two litters of ten piglets each year. Her piglets were playful little things. I was always sad when they grew up and were sold to produce ham and bacon.

Of all the farm jobs I did, bag-sewing, the sewing of three-bushel bags of recently harvested wheat, was the one I liked best. The bags had to be not only full, but have extra wheat rammed into them, so they would hold three bushels and be solid and rigid. The ramming was done with a three-foot spouting pipe with a billy-can container full of wheat at the top. The pipe was pushed into the bagged wheat and heaved up and down.

I did the bag-sewing as piece work at so much a hundred bags. So I was able to work my own hours and go at my own pace. At lunch time I used to knock off for an hour, have a cut lunch, and read those once-famous magazines, the 'Gem', the 'Magnet' and the 'Union Jack', now gone forever because that war-crazed scoundrel Hitler dropped a bomb on their famous publishers in London.

After harvest, I often had the pleasure of riding on top of a wagon load of a hundred bags of wheat to see them unloaded and stacked at the railway siding.

The years I spent on farms convinced me that country life was wonderful. In the country I was close to and aware of the pulsating, productive forces of nature, and friendly animals like the lovely creamy pony who used to come up to the kitchen door and eat bread from my hands.

## FIRST SUNDAY OF THE MONTH

*Mavis Hullin*

The old man was glad it was a silver train that sped into the station. He much preferred them to the outdated rust-red or blue models. Far more comfortable, gave a smoother ride, didn't vibrate as much and make his tired, atrophied muscles shake like half-set jelly.

He always chose a compartment in the middle part of the train, he seemed to meet a greater variety of people that way. There were always women and children, and he didn't come into contact with many these days. He always said hello to the tousle-haired paper boy who passed by on his bike most evenings, but he really only knew old Mrs Sparkes who owned the little general store at the corner of the street, where he brought his frugal requirements.

She had told him yesterday that she had sold up and was going at the end of the month. There was more than enough competition for her now, with the new shopping complex located close by and she felt too weary to vie with this rivalry.

He would miss her; he used to go into her shop nearly every day and she always had time to talk to him and never forgot to ask after his wife Elsa. The cool impersonality and indifference the shopkeepers at the complex had shown him, made him freeze up inside and, if possible, he avoided going there.

Struggling, he slid open a carriage door and puffed a little as he pushed it shut behind him and sat down at a window seat. He looked at the occupants about him. A teenage boy and girl, denim-jeaned and T-shirted, sat in one corner, laughing and holding hands. There was an Italian family sitting complacent near them. He supposed they were Italian, because of their vivid coloured clothes and olive complexions.

The mother was dressed in a bright purple suit, twin girls in salmon pink dresses and dazzling yellow socks. Father and son

wore camel trousers and brilliant orange shirts.

Sitting opposite him was a very fat young woman, spilling out of her black slacks and tight jumper. Her hair was dyed red. He could tell it was dye; he could see the dark roots. Her cheeks were blooming with crimson make-up and she had revolting black smudges around her eyes. Looked like a native escaped from some wild tribe, he thought.

She sat chewing gum, her jaws in continuous rhythm, interrupted only once when she turned to the restless, squirming little boy with her.

“Sit still, or you’ll get another one!” she rasped, as she slapped his skinny legs.

He then occupied himself by reading all the advertisements on the carriage walls: “Diamonds are Forever”, “Get Your Job through the Classified Columns”, “Use So and So’s Septic Finger-Nail Paint”. “There’s an Interesting Career for YOU in the Army”, “Jesus Christ, the same, yesterday, today and forever”.

They hadn’t changed, he thought; he had read them all last month. Then he looked out the train window as it sped past a flour mill, hosiery and carpet factories, a Baptist Church, a bowling green. He caught glimpses of children playing in the back yards of pastel-painted, single-fronted houses, saw snatches of washing on the lines and one or two prefabricated swimming pools. Then the train passed over the River Yarra, which today looked the colour of the cup of cocoa he’d had for breakfast.

He brushed dust from the frayed lapels of his only suit. He’d had it many years now. Yes, he remembered, it had been new when Elsa had gone to hospital. It smelt of naphthalene. He should have put it out on the clothes line to air it yesterday; he usually did, but this month he had forgotten.

Taking a box of glucose barley sugar from his pocket, he unwrapped one sweet. Wouldn’t hurt to have one, there were plenty left for Elsa. He wanted to offer one to the miserable boy sitting with his officious fat mother, but remembered the warning he had often heard anxious women harping to their

offspring: “*Never* take money or lollies from a strange man.” A strange man? All he wanted to do was to be friendly and have some company, to communicate a little.

As they reached the sixth station all the other passengers got up, collected children, baskets, cardigans and coats and got out. A general evacuation. Must all be going to the Sunday afternoon free concert, he thought.

A young woman and small girl entered the carriage and sat opposite him. The train had started again before she realised that she and her daughter were in the compartment alone with the old man. A fleeting look of concern filled her eyes before she sat calm.

Perhaps she had been accosted in similar circumstances at some time of her life, he contemplated. Good heavens! she needn't be afraid of him; he was no pervert!

The woman sat stiffly, a bunch of flowers in her lap, and looked out of the window as the silver train skimmed along the silver-ribboned kilometres. Her little girl cuddled up to her, squashing a black golliwog under one arm.

He studied them at leisure while the woman's eyes were from him. She would be in her thirties, smooth fair skin and short, shiny fair hair. She wore a cool, green frock sprouting pink daisies, in the new-style, longer-length skirt he had seen about on the younger women lately. It reminded him of the fashion Elsa had worn in the Forties, just after the war, when clothing coupons had become defunct and “austerity” a forgotten word. The New Look, he remembered she had called it.

Then he looked at the sweet-faced little girl. She wore a frock of blue, forget-me-not blue, and two blue satin ribbons on her long blonde hair. She swung her white-socked legs and sandalled feet.

When she looked at him he gave her a smile and she smiled back shyly, burying her face into her mother's arms. As she turned to her mother, the doll fell to the floor of the train. The blood rushed to his head as he reached down, picked it up and offered it to her.

Her mother turned from the window and took it from him,

smiling, "Oh, thank you." He noticed her eyes were the clear blue of her daughter's, but warmer.

"That's all right, she's a lovely little girl; is she your first?" he said, hoping desperately that she would continue the conversation. Just to talk to a sympathetic woman, that was all he wanted.

"No, she's the fourth and the last!" she laughed.

"My wife and I had a little girl like yours once," he reminisced.

"Once?" she asked tentatively.

"Yes, blonde like your little daughter too. We'd been married twelve years before she was born. My wife was only eighteen when we married, and I was twenty-three. Wartime, you know. We all tried to grab some happiness in between active service. She was very clever, ran her own hairdressing business. Gave it all up after our baby was born. I never really knew if she was glad when she was having that baby. Sometimes she seemed happy and excited and other times resentful."

The young woman sat silent as the old man's mind slipped back through the years and he re-lived the torment of uncertainty again. Then he continued.

"Elsa, that's my wife, was very depressed after our baby was born. Don't know why. She was a beautiful baby and good, and Elsa didn't have a bad time. But she needed treatment a few months after the birth. Now you would call it post-natal depression.

"She seemed to snap out of it for a year or two; but funny, when I bathed our little girl some nights I used to notice black marks on her body that wouldn't wash off. Elsa said she used to fall and hurt herself."

The woman's eyes had filled with sympathy which gave the old man the incentive to spill out the rest of his story.

"My wife seemed to love her. She was always buying her pretty things, but sometimes when I came home from work, I knew that my little daughter had been crying a lot."

"Getting her two-year-old teeth," Elsa would laugh.

"Then, one terrible afternoon, when our little girl was

nearly three, I came home to find the fire brigade and a police car parked outside. A fire had started in my daughter's bedroom. She must have been playing with the matches. I was always telling Elsa to keep them out of her reach. Her door was shut and had caught aflame and my little girl's hands were severely burned as she beat upon it and twisted at the handle to open it. She had run out screaming and the next-door neighbour rang for the fire brigade and a doctor."

"What about your wife, how did she take it?" asked the woman, quiet with compassion.

"She was sitting in the police car laughing insanely—it was horrible! She was taken to a hospital and was there a long time. Social workers cared for my daughter and for a while she was in a children's home. Finally I agreed to have her adopted. It was impossible for me to keep her and care for her and we had no young relatives to turn to, and I knew, I just knew that I couldn't trust Elsa with her again. She was adopted by people in the country, but they moved from the land and I never heard of her again.

His voice trembled with desolate despair as he continued. "What else could I do? I still loved Elsa, but knew I couldn't look after them both. It was hell, on and off, for the next fifteen years. She would come home from hospital and would be happy, really happy. Then she would start ringing me at work. I was a clerk in a warehouse until I retired. I had to work to keep her and our home going, and I was always with her at nights. God! it used to be embarrassing when she used to ring. She'd scream down the phone that she was sick and lonely and if I didn't come home, she'd kill herself. I knew everyone in the office at work pretended they hadn't heard.

"Finally she was sent away again and the doctor said she was committed. She's been in hospital nearly twenty years now. I go to see her the first Sunday of the month. Not much use going other times. Very often she doesn't even talk to me, but sometimes she asked me why I didn't bring our little girl.

They were stopping at a station and the woman lifted her daughter off the seat, in readiness to get out.

"I'm very sorry," she said with deep feeling. "Look, would you please take these flowers for your wife? They were for my mother-in-law, but I'll buy her some chocolate instead."

She placed the flowers on the seat beside him.

**LECHERY'S VASSAL: TIME'S FOOL***Robert Dalvean*

Why should I not buy love when love for sale,  
Like any other good must please to sell?  
Love's forgeries, well-crafted, cannot fail  
To give delight. The buyer cannot tell  
Where nature ends and art creates a spell  
That binds two beings in a mime of lust;  
Traded love, like all trade, lives on trust.

So reasoning, I sought my courtesan,  
Queen of delights, she of the many graces,  
Whose arts would free rather than bind a man,  
Whose passing would leave few but pleasant traces;  
Fair round bodies, I sought, soft-focus faces,  
Welcoming havens for my fantasies,  
Still harbours I could navigate with ease.

And so I passed my youth in fruitless quest,  
Until, forced from within and without, I was chosen  
To do what most men do; took second-best,  
Pledged my soul, had all my assets frozen,  
Traded my few dreams for woes by the dozen;  
Unwisely I had offered one my heart,  
And soon found how true love can make one smart.

So now, being old, set in my ways, sour,  
I look upon my youth, faded, distant,  
And then upon my lady; and the hour  
Of my death, and of hers, seems imminent;  
The white hair, the down-drawn mouth and the scent  
Of age define both of us. Now, too late,  
I am provided with a fitting mate.

## ONE DAY

*Joy Dettman*

Day disappearing,  
    Grey light is seeping,  
Darkness and shadows close out the view.  
Tomorrow, the stranger, is classified, cluttered.  
Hold fast old day, there is time yet for you.

Day disappearing,  
    Hear now her sighing,  
Caught on the breeze sweeping in from the sea,  
To harvest her last rays, her dawdling moments,  
To gather those hiding, attempting to flee.

Day disappearing,  
    Brief as a flicker.  
Trapped not is time by desire for delay.  
Watch now the moon rise with guardian star light.  
Certain, supreme in its nightly display.

Day's disappeared now,  
    Gone with the shadows,  
Into the ocean and washed clean away.  
And who will remember her one lonely sunset?  
Tomorrow awaits with her brash light of day.