

Written in Leaves

For Helen and Iris
leaders and founders
of the Burnside Writers' Group 2013

Written in Leaves

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Introduction

Introduction - to the world of artistic expression

An artist uses a simple primary palette with endless combinations to express their meaning. Sculptors use blocks of stone or marble, while hammers hit chisels hundreds of times before a masterpiece is exposed. Musicians have eight notes to the octave with many combinations up and down the scale. But writers play with words, only 26 letters in the alphabet—but with millions of combinations.

We want to get it right and then our editors show a better way to craft our words; create a rhythm, they say, let it roll off the tongue. We try, but often fall short of the elusive masterpiece - but practice makes perfect.

We write for different reasons: to inform or justify, to educate or entertain, or for the love of the medium. Words set scenes, words tell stories—of fiction or truth, memory or fantasy, or set free a dark past. Whatever the reason, we write for pleasure - and to share.

At the Burnside Writers' Group we celebrate human difference, by respecting, encouraging and

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inspiring each other to keep writing. This anthology offers a view of our differences and how we have used words and ideas to express ourselves.

Enjoy!

Helen Anderson

Helen Anderson expresses her artistic flair through watercolours, home and garden design, appliqu  and travel scrapbooking, but now writes, weaving history and humour through real life stories. She aims to inspire others to write or tell stories; demonstrating this as she writes her legally blind husband's biography. She has other books to write - but there's a time for everything.



A Writer goes to Paris

I am a writer soon off to Paris. Should I take a literary tour? To stand gaping at buildings that supposedly housed famous writers like Hemingway and Fitzgerald, and to shuffle along with a gaggle of tourist - thinking we are writing next bestsellers.

In the 1920s, Paris housed many writers eking out an existence writing articles and short stories - until their novels and biographies became famous.

Ernest Hemmingway was known for his pared down writing style to allow the reader the freedom to create their own mental picture. One of his famous remarks was, 'Write drunk and edit sober; cut, cut, cut until there's nothing left to cut.'

However F. Scott Fitzgerald planned his work, every day writing in journals, documenting most of what he heard and saw, even descriptions of women - in detail. In his novels he wrote about real-life issues like those that dogged his marriage - alcoholism, his wife's mental illness and the resulting marital problems.

It has been said that Hemingway and Fitzgerald both used alcohol as their inspiration and constant companion as they wrote in the bars and cafés on Blvd. St-Germain.

Writers are still going to Paris; they blog, write articles, short stories and novels, just like the

Australian photographer and journalist, Janelle McCulloch, who wrote *La Vie Parisienne; Looking for Love—and the Perfect Lingerie*; published 2008. I love her witty style and sensitivity to the beauty of just being in Paris. She alludes to Hemingway and Fitzgerald and the great writers of the past, then sits with her colleagues on the same café chairs.

The great writers of the past left a patina on the bars and cafés of the Left Bank. Nowadays, writers and journalists frequent the same cafés and polish the chairs with their expensive jeans in the hope that some of the famous St-Germain inspiration will fall into their laptops.

I love how Paris is timeless - so there'll be no literary tour for me - I'll happily add to the patina on the Left Bank and polish the chairs in the cafés as I gather my own writing inspiration - and catch the waiter's eye, to ask '*La vin blanc, s'il vous plait.*'

A Writer in Paris

A soft breeze welcomed my curiosity, it was late afternoon when I opened the windows and folded back the shutters of our room in Hotel St-Pierre. Roof tops and chimneys held my gaze until I inched out onto the tiniest balcony and caught sight of an equally tiny view of the Eiffel Tower.

My husband said he would try out the bed and was almost asleep when I inched back into the room. Travelling is tiring these days. We had come from London on the Euro star, then sped in a taxi through the chaotic Paris traffic where I saw more rubbish and more people on the footpaths, dirtier buildings with more graffiti, louder sirens and more scooters—than I remember.

Later we wandered to the river and stood on Pont Neuf. The Seine was silent - sullen and moody I thought, as a despondent feeling crept over me, making me wonder if this trip was a good idea. My feeling lingered...

We made our way back towards the Hotel and saw a restaurant with its menu printed in English that had all our favourite French classics. I ordered a crisp Chablis to sip with escargots served in the shell, while Monsieur chose French onion soup.

My despondent feeling suddenly changed into a tingling sensation - one of anticipation. It happened,

just as I was savouring the tantalizing experience of dipping torn pieces of French bread into pools of garlic butter.

It reminded me of Marcel Proust - as he recorded in his lengthy journal - *Remembrance of Things Past*

...one day in winter...my mother...offered me some tea...She sent for one of those squat, plump little cakes called petites madeleines...Dispirited after a dreary day...I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me...An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses...Whence could it have come...this all-powerful joy...connected with the taste of the tea and the cake...

My feeling too, was an all-powerful joy. How could I have thought this trip wasn't a good idea? Everything I saw from then on was like magic - like the effect of love. I was in love with Paris all over again.

One evening at sundown and approaching 10 pm, I settled into the tiny balcony window, where laughter and the aroma of delicious cooking wafted up from the little Bistro below. Blackbirds offered their evening chorus and swallows darted about catching night

flying insects over the rooftops of this great city. I opened my journal and my pen flew across each page.

We were in Paris maybe for the last time – and we were sharing the romance...

A Writer Returns

My journal is full

And overflowing with inspiration.

Paris has rewarded me.

I am complete.

Yet I'll share what I have.

A travel journal? Yes, for sure I will.

Would word pictures be enough? Maybe not.

I'll add photos of macarons, in every colour choice.

Food for pleasure - at the markets - how can anyone choose?

And flowers in abundance - roses, peonies and more.

Pâtisseries full of exciting confections

Delectable memories - I've filed in my mind

To tell my writer colleagues, but they'll groan

And say - She's on about Paris again.

Iris Rowe

Iris Rowe is one of the foundation members of the Burnside Writer's Group. She enjoys writing Historical Memoirs.



The Aroma of Lanolin

Lanolin - the distinct aroma reminds me of and carries me to another time and faraway place.

It is springtime and the air is filled with the harmonising chorus that only comes at shearing time. Lambs are bleating with tremulous notes of anxiety and bewilderment that accompany the separation from their mothers and are answered in deeper soothing tones reassuring the lambs that the ewes are nearby. This is shearing time, a time of disturbance and unrest.

There is the constant ‘Ho Ho’ of the farmer, urging the milling sheep to move forward into the holding pens. The lambs bleat louder and in confusion dart here and there, backwards and forwards beside the railings; unable to reach their mothers’ side.

Sheep dogs are quietly watching and waiting for commands from their master, their moist noses pressed between the wooden rails of the sheep yards; they are alert and ready to spring into action.

The pungent smell of yarded sheep, lanolin and fresh manure is unmistakable.

Inside the wool-shed, the boys climb on the rails, counting the sheep, and jute wool bales are hanging stiffly from wire hooks suspended from the rafters. A fleece gathered up and lifted from the floor and expertly thrown onto the wool table, is skirted, rolled

neatly and then dropped into the bale. The girls excitedly jump in after it, gleefully bouncing up and down as they trample it down, feeling the oily softness of the fleece beneath their bare feet.

The rouse-about quickly sweeps the floor clean while the shearer catches and drags the next sheep to the shearing floor. He holds her securely between his knees, the click of the shears is swift, she does not struggle, is simply puzzled by the feeling of lightness and freedom as the heavy grey fleece rolls back and away from her revealing the crinkled clean white wool that was hidden beneath the dirty surface. The lanolin stained floor boards are covered with the billowing cloud of pure merino wool.

Released from the shearer's grasp, she struggles to stand. Ridiculously unstable, she staggers uncertain for a moment or two, then bolts to the safety and comfort of the pen. The woolly flock move back astounded at the gangly, undressed and strange apparition in their midst.

But it smells familiar. Lanolin. They accept her and calmly wait their turn!

Low Tide Kingscote, Kangaroo Island

Shrouded in mystical silence and with a sorrowful heart, I continue walking; aware only of the mournful cries of sea birds fossicking at the water's edge, searching for food in the rippling low tide and the crunch of tiny shells breaking beneath my feet.

Stooping for a closer look while gathering up some treasures in my hands, I wonder at the beauty of these exquisitely formed shells. These were once the safe homes of marvellous lively creatures of the sea, but are now empty and forsaken.

The evidence of the miracle of creation and re-creation directs my thoughts to my Creator and I find reassurance in my time of grief. How could I fear the future when the one who controls the wind and seas and who holds the whole earth in the hollow of His hand is watching over me.

Oblivious of my presence, a pair of gulls is sitting close together on a smooth worn rock at the water's edge, quietly crooning in harmony with the soothing, moving tide, while above the shallow water a cluster of guardian shags perch high on ancient jetty posts watching, listening and waiting.

The rugged shore and rocks bear silent witness to early pioneers and remind me of when brave men and women stepped from sailing ships with bundles on

their backs and anxiously ventured across the gangplank and into the unknown future. So many stories have been lost forever.

This seemingly gentle land, where gum trees, wattles, tee-trees and broom bush densely grow, provide shelter and undisturbed resting places: the natural habitat for free roaming wildlife. Once the kangaroos, wallabies, possums and countless birds knew no boundaries, until these settlers came to stake out their claim on the Island's un-spoilt land.

But what more did these early settlers find?

Heartbreak, poverty and endless toil with little joy, only the strongest and bravest found solace, survived then prospered while learning to love this land.

Their heritage to me: resilience and faith.

I turn again and watch the tide. It's never still, glimmering, rising and falling, shifting, swirling, foaming, constantly washing earth's doorstep clean.

My thoughts are calmed - my heart is soothed - I will return.

Joy Rodrigues

Joy Rodrigues is an Anglo-Indian, born in India. She immigrated to Australia in 1969 with her husband and two young children aged three years and three months. She is currently writing memoirs of her life in India.



Watching and Waiting

Dawn breaks on that fateful day.
The Oder-Niesse line has risen overnight,
the watch towers manned and in full sight.
An ominous barrier between imprisonment on one
side
freedom and normality on the other.

Why didn't I flee when thousands fled?
Why should I leave my home where I was born
and bred?
Is it my faith in humanity that never wavers?
I watch and wait.

Restrictions, darkness, hunger and cold.
The endless sound of machine guns roll.
My home, my farm snatched away from me,
this shoebox on the sixteenth floor feels
claustrophobic.
A glimmer of hope still burns within me.

I watch and wait.

The day has arrived. My heart leaps with joy.
The wall is torn down.
The seeds of freedom are sown.

People scramble to make their way over jagged
concrete and rubble.

Checkpoint Charlie beckons to
a new life free of despair, paranoia and trouble.

It took twenty eight long years,
to end my fears.

My hopes for liberation are realised.

There is no hesitation.

I take one last look
at my homeland.

You served me well
but in you I will no longer dwell.

Written on 9th November, 2014 the 25th
Anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Food for Thought

During the early years of my life when I lived in India, my family always had an abundance of food, but nothing ever went to waste. Meals were provided for the servants and the leftovers were given to them to take home to their families. There were three meals a day - a cooked breakfast; lunch, was our main meal which always included rice, and dinner, a light meal served with bread or chapatis (flat bread). Morning

tea and afternoon ‘tiffin’ were in between snacks with a cup of tea or coffee.

On the other hand, there were those who worked hard and earned enough to have only one proper meal a day. Then there were those who filled their stomachs with remains that were discarded from hotels, teashops and restaurants.

I remember standing at the bus stop on my way to work, watching urchins climb into a bin and eat the scraps that were thrown out from a restaurant. However, they always looked happy, with their beaming little faces peering from the bins. I stood watching them with amusement, accepting their plight and way of life.

When I arrived in Australia, I was shocked and dismayed to see loaves of bread, fruit and vegetables, pies and pasties etc. that went into the garbage from households and food outlets. There is no doubt that Australia is a lucky country. Unfortunately, not only are we a “disposable society” but we have become a “throw away culture” like so many other affluent countries.

Even now when I walk through a food court, it upsets me to see half eaten plates of food thrown into the bin. There are ‘All you can eat’ restaurants that tempt customers to help themselves to more than they can eat and consequently leave what they can’t eat. What a waste! Recently I was pleased to see a sign in one of these restaurants saying, ‘If you waste food,

you will be charged for it'. People are certainly thinking!

Thank goodness for people who freeze or use leftovers to create new dishes for the following day. It is also heartening to see an organization such as OZ Harvest which was started in 2004, and Food Bank, collecting packaged food as well as fruit and vegetables that have come close to their 'Use by' date, from supermarkets and other donors, which may have otherwise been thrown out. Places such as the Hutt Street Centre, Anglicare and the Salvation Army use donated food including unused food from planes, to provide meals for the hungry and homeless every day.

We are fortunate that Australia's food resources are plentiful, not only to feed its citizens but to even supply other countries, unlike India where there are so many who live in poverty and have such little to survive on.

I have always told my children and grandchildren what my parents and grandparents told me – 'Never waste your food. Always remember there are people who are starving all over the world.'

A Walk of Discovery

Looking down the cliff on our country property called ‘Rodacres’ in Big Bend, I saw a path less travelled, which ran along the edge of a lagoon formed by the mighty River Murray. Making my way down to a massive red river gum I noticed signs of Aboriginals having inhabited this area many years ago. A part of the tree trunk was cut out to make a canoe and at the base of the tree was a large hollow, its interior blackened by soot from the fires that cooked their tucker.

On my walk I stopped frequently to examine fossilised echinoderms and molluscs, remnants of an inland sea, and hollow roots petrified over centuries. Turning towards the limestone cliff face I was excited to see an opening to a cave about two metres above me. I climbed up and peered in. The middle of the floor was strewn with bivalve and yabbie shells forming a midden indicating that Aboriginals sheltered and ate there to get out of the blazing sun or rain. It was getting late and I decided to continue my walk the next day.

I woke up early next morning looking forward to what I might find. Following the path where I left it the previous day I found it wound its way through the next property. The only sounds I heard were the carp jumping in the lagoon, the rustle of the gum leaves or

the swooping of a pelican as it captured its prey. The scenery along the edge of the water changed as I took a bend. Besides gum trees there were weeping willows and basket willows planted by the first settlers to prevent soil erosion along the banks of the river, their branches trailing in the water which provided a calm and serene atmosphere. I saw a heron sitting on a branch and a long-necked tortoise climbing out of the river. I was hoping I wouldn't see a snake coiled up on the bank as I had a phobia for reptiles.

A few metres ahead there was a boat ramp and a large red river gum which stood tall and stately where the river met the lagoon. High above, nailed to the tree trunk was a board which read, "Flood level reached in 1956". Here was a bit of history. This was the greatest catastrophe in South Australia's history. The water level rose to 12.3m in Morgan and the hotels in Mannum operated their bars from the second floor with boats tied up to the balcony.

As I walked along the path, I came across ducks swimming on the water and moor hens foraging for food among the reeds. It was a peaceful scene until a flock of sulphur crested cockatoos broke the silence squawking as they flew overhead. I noticed a row of sand dunes on the other side of the path and decided to investigate any animal tracks left on them. There were bird, lizard and wombat tracks and one that swung from side to side leaving no doubt that, horror of horrors, a snake had passed over the dune. I quickly

made my way back to the path, my heart beating a little faster.

As I neared the last property I came across a long boat. I was excited. The first European settlers must have arrived in this boat carrying all their goods and chattels. How many times did it ply up and down this waterway carrying supplies or taking them to the towns along the river?

After some research I found out that this property was called “Devon Downs”, a name which went around the scientific world in 1929. W. Roy the owner of the property found the skeleton of an Aboriginal boy fossilised in rock on Tartanga Island in the river near the homestead. South Australian Museum Director Herbert Hale and anthropologist Norman B. Tindale, who examined the find, revealed a fascinating series of facts.

The boy had been a *Negrito*, a relative to the Tasmanian aborigines, considered to be a race apart. Found with the skeleton, were implements unlike any known Aboriginal tools or weapons, and the remnants of his meals showed he had eaten a species of mussel long extinct. Radio carbon dating showed that the boy, who was twelve years old, had been dead for about 6000 to 7000 years. It had been only a few hundred years before the Aborigines came to live along the Murray. These latecomers, called *Murrayians*, quickly killed off the tiny *Negritos* who Tindale named *Tartangans*.

How interesting and historically informative these walks turned out to be. I learned a great deal about our neighbouring properties and Aboriginal culture which I found fascinating and memorable.

We spent many happy and enjoyable weekends and school holidays on our property with family and friends, sitting around a bonfire, singing songs or playing board and card games, fishing and shooting rabbits. I even took my students camping there as it was ideal for biological studies on topics like adaptation, flora and fauna, communities etc. of the area.

Unfortunately, a mini tornado completely destroyed our timber frame house. To our good luck we were back in our Adelaide home when the tornado struck. It was then that we decided to sell the land.

There is always a time and place for everything and it was time to leave 'Rodacres'.

Marg Williams

Marg Williams has written many radio scripts over the years, loves reading and is thrilled to be with the Burnside Writers Group learning new skills to broaden her writing style.



It's all Relative

Exercise is supposed to keep you young. Not sure it does and I struggle to walk on a daily – or nearly daily basis. But I really do try. It's just there are so many things to do other than walking. Like... anything else.

I did give myself a severe talking to the other day though.

I was walking home from the shops, struggling, thinking I could do this, 'I know I can, I can, I know I can,' when a woman, probably younger than me, yep definitely younger, power walked past me. Bottom jiggling from side to side, arms swinging, not even puffing, she disappeared very quickly down the road, and really my only impression was of that jiggling bottom.

So I kept going, thinking nasty things about people striding past other people with not even an 'Hello' to soften the impact of a power walk. 'How rude,' plod, plod 'how rude' plod, plod. 'Bottom's too wobbly anyway.'

So there I was, willing my legs to keep going around the corner, when I saw 'them', in front of me; a man in his dressing gown struggling to take a few steps, leaning heavily on his walker and a woman, maybe his mother, whispering encouragement, 'Don't worry about her. She'll go round you.'

Well not that I could hear her, but with furtive glances behind her and his: I don't want to be here and I can't do this, radiating from him, it had to be something like that. It was obviously his first walk outside the house for a while. He was – he was walking, taking small wobbly steps down that footpath.

I wanted to stand and cheer him on.

Instead I crossed to the other side of the road to save him embarrassment and kept walking. Yep, walking, big long strides, powering down the road – I was walking and I could do it. How lucky was I.

Oops - think my bottom was wobbling.

Registration

‘It’s time to register Nick Dog,’ I said.

Geoff said, ‘Well you do it for once – why should I always do it?’

At the council offices, I was greeted by a surly bloke who didn’t look at me.

I smiled at the customer waiting at the other end of the counter for a document.

‘I want to register my dog,’ I said timidly to the surly bloke.

‘Name?’

‘Umm Nick.’

‘Surname?’

‘Umm,’ *Should I say Dog – Nick Dog - the bloke wouldn’t like that.*

‘Umm – Williams.’

Computers were new to the world and the council, so the surly bloke went cautiously and reverently over to the bench and the computer to search the name. ‘No he’s not here.’

‘Should be. We’ve registered him every year.’

‘Well he’s not entered.’ More surly, ‘I’ll do a new one.’ After a while of fiddling and huffing with importance, he managed to fill in all the details up to the last question.

‘Dog’s name?’

‘Pardon?’

‘Dog’s name?’

The other customer and I looked at each other with dawning dismay.

‘Nick,’ I squeaked and the comprehending horror – or was it fury – spread across his face.

The other customer and I started rolling our eyes. She left quickly. He didn’t say much – he just deleted it all and started again. I didn’t have the courage to tell him that all he had to do was delete ‘Nick’ and put the correct Christian name in.

Yep, our computer skills have come a long way since then.

The Senses of Freewheeling

Our group of twenty odd riders, heads down, peddling hard into the wind, turned onto the Kingston Road. All I could hear was ‘uhh hhaa’ – my own breathing. Gradually through the ‘uhh hhaa’ I became aware of other sounds. The hum of the bike wheels, the heavy breathing of the others.

And the smells! Fresh air, fresh gum leaves, fresh... But hold on, not always fresh – the road kill – dead magpies, cockies and crows.

The smells and sounds intermingled with the birds rising, calling, feathers floating, disturbed from their feast of road kill.

Then a thumping next to me: two kangaroos pacing me, bounding along beside me, on the other side of the fence.

‘Uhh’, thump, thump, ‘hhaa’, thump...

Now I was even more breathless as these amazing breathtaking animals, ancient as the land, raced beside me. Were they as intrigued with me as I was of them?

Eventually they veered off into the vast nothingness of the scrub, leaving me bereft, filled with a wonder at an indescribable connection.

It felt primeval riding this road, built over a million year old seabed, swerving to miss lizards, occasional echidnas, wombats and snakes.

Marg Williams

I looked back at the riders behind me. They were grinning delightedly through their own sounds of breathing and whirring wheels.

Now I needed to concentrate – watch the road, push those pedals, muscles burning, energy flowing, with all the senses melded into one glorious ride!

Anne McKenzie is a new member of the Burnside Writers' Group. Her interests are in writing poetry and learning the craft of short story writing.



The Unwelcome Guest

It's hard to say who is the more surprised - her or me. I've come from the bathroom clad only in a towel and there she is, sitting on the bedroom window sill, gazing out - rather wistfully, I think. Her pink nose is twitching and she's wringing her pink hands, clearly agitated.

In that instant she sees me. Our eyes lock in mutual horror, both of us frozen to the spot. Not a word is exchanged - hardly surprising on her part. Then she leaps off the sill and disappears behind the bed. I back out of the room as fast as I can and slam the door shut in front of me.

'That's it, I've had it,' I shout. 'Not content with bringing in moths, mice and birds - and dismembering and eating them all in here - that bloody cat's now brought in a rat and let her loose. And she's in my bedroom.'

My friend Sarah appears, trailed by the feline felon, Scallywag— both come to see what all the fuss is about.

'Now I know what that funny grating noise is that I've been hearing on and off at night for weeks,' I say. 'She's probably been gnawing on the wooden bed frame. Great! And to think I could've been in bed with her walking over me or sitting on my pillow looking at me.'

‘I think you’re over dramatizing things a bit,’ Sarah says, taking a cautious peak into the bedroom and seeing nothing.

‘Well, we’ve got to get her out. I’m not sleeping in there until she’s gone. I may be prepared to share the world with rats but not my bedroom.’

‘Why do you keep referring to her as ‘her’? Oh God, now you’ve got me doing it.’

‘Well, she looked sort of petite - the delicate pink paws and the pert little nose? I don’t know. I just know. Does it really matter?’

‘Okay, okay. Calm down. Well, we’ve got some Ratsak in the tool shed. Or we could lock Scally in there and...’

‘No way. It’s not her fault she’s in my bedroom. I think she just wants to get out and go home.’

‘And you know this how? Because you now have a degree in rat psychology?’

‘Maybe we can take the security screen off the bedroom window, open the window and just wait for her to go out?’

‘That means going back into the bedroom, you realize? The screen has to be unscrewed from the inside, assuming we can get it undone.’

‘Will you do it?’ I say. ‘I mean it is your cat that’s created the problem.’

‘But it’s your bedroom - and unless you plan to wear that towel permanently - you’ve got to go in there to get some clothes eventually. I’ll stand here by the door.’

I go back into the bedroom, clutching towel and screwdriver, making as much noise as possible. Sarah stands nervously at the part opened door.

‘If it runs this way I’m shutting the door fast’, she says.

‘Leaving me alone in here. Thanks for all your support.’

My hands are shaking but the screen comes off easily enough. I open the window wide and scurry from the room, closing the door behind me.

‘You forgot the clothes.’

‘Shit.’

I go back in again.

‘It might be a good idea to stuff a towel into the gap under the door,’ Sarah says. ‘I think a rat might be able to get out under there. We don’t want it to escape into the rest of the house, do we?’

We don’t want it to escape into her bedroom, she means.

We do as she suggests.

‘Just a thought - but how are you going to know if it’s gone out anyway?’ Sarah asks.

We stand there thinking while I dress.

‘I know,’ I say. ‘We’ll sprinkle talcum powder on the window sill and then we’ll see her paw prints as she goes out.’

I haven’t watched a thousand television detectives in vain.

Sarah looks at me as if I have completely lost my mind.

Back in the bedroom I sprinkle the powder liberally over the wooden window sill.

‘We’ll have to lock Scally in the back room. Otherwise it’ll be his paw prints you find. An open window is all the invitation he needs,’ Sarah says.

‘And we should go out for a few hours too. So the house is quiet and she feels less threatened,’ I say.

‘I don’t believe this,’ Sarah says, rolling her eyes at me.

On our return home we inspect the window sill from outside the house. There are no paw prints. The talcum powder has not been disturbed.

‘It doesn’t necessarily mean that it hasn’t gone,’ Sarah says, laughing. ‘It could’ve jumped over the talcum powder. Perhaps the sweet perfume was too much for it. It is a rat after all. Anyway, you can’t leave the window open much longer. It’ll be dark soon and we’ve got to let Scally out some time.’

‘Like I said, I’m not sleeping in there until I’m sure she’s gone.’

‘But let’s face it; the only way you can be sure it’s gone is to sleep in there.’

I lie awake all night, rigid with fear, and sure enough at about four o’clock in the morning, I hear what I now know to be a gnawing sound. She’s still there. I wake Sarah to share the news. She’s less than impressed.

I keep a solitary vigil until morning. No longer do I want to share the environment or anything with this

rat. It's time for the big guns. Bleary eyed at breakfast, I make my announcement.

‘Dead or alive but preferably dead, I want it gone!’

‘You’ve certainly changed your tune,’ Sarah says. ‘What’s happened to all that David Attenborough sanctity of life philosophy you were spouting off yesterday?’

‘It was just a phase I was going through,’ I say.

That night we lock Scally in the bedroom, briefing him carefully on his mission.

‘You brought it in, you fix the problem,’ we say.

No gory carcass or entrails greet us in the morning. There is just an indignant and hungry cat.

At the hardware store, we buy the most menacing looking rat trap we can find - one that summons up images of a guillotine.

We bait it with a very well regarded, fully matured New Zealand cheese. One’s last supper should be memorable, after all.

Two days and nights pass and nothing happens.

‘It’s got to be hungry and thirsty by now, surely,’ Sarah says. ‘Maybe it didn’t like the cheese. Not everyone likes a fully matured cheese. You don’t for instance.’

I suspect she’s laughing again but she’s hiding it well.

‘So now we’ve got a bloody fussy eater?’ I say.

We bait again for the gourmet rat, using an equally well credentialed brie, served at room temperature on

a bed of Cos lettuce and with just a splash of beetroot jus.

Two more days and nights pass and again still nothing happens.

‘Look, let’s go back to basics,’ I say. ‘What do we really know about rats? Unlike mice, maybe rats aren’t particularly fond of cheese, any cheese. Let’s ‘Google’ them.’ We have our answer in 10 minutes.

‘*Rattus rattus*’, the ‘roof rat’, is our unwelcome guest. Roof rats will eat almost anything available to them but prefer fruit - hence their other common name of ‘fruit rat’. They are nocturnal by nature. Tell me about it! They like to nest inside or under buildings but prefer high places. We have a rat with height issues.

This time we bait the trap with a medley of Pink Lady apple, it seemed apt, and cashew nuts - something sure to tempt even the most discerning of palates.

Two days and nights pass. Nothing happens. I retrieve the trap, toss out the browned fruit and eat the nuts myself.

By now I’m tired and fed up sleeping on a blow-up mattress in the spare room. It’s time for more drastic measures.

‘It’s time to call in the Daleks,’ I say.

‘The exterminators? But that’ll cost a lot,’ Sally says. ‘Anyway, they’ll just put a bait in there and then you’ll have the stink of rotting rat carcass to contend with. There’s one other thing we can try first. What if

we take out all of the furniture in the bedroom piece by piece and flush it out?’

‘Tell me you’re joking,’ I say.

‘Well, if you don’t want my help...’

‘No, it’s just. Oh, alright, come on then.’

We prepare methodically. The bedroom opens onto a hallway and the nearest exit is the back door in the laundry. The laundry opens onto the hall. We open the back door and close all the other room doors, shoving towels under each door to block escape further. The plan is to flush out the rat and chase it out the back door.

We open my bedroom door and move out the desk and the bedside cabinet. It’s then we discover two circular holes in the new carpet. The rat has been eating holes in it either for food or for nesting material or both.

Sarah has a five minute expletive-rich breakdown. I cry with frustration.

Dismantling and removing the bed reveals only more holes in the carpet. We are both baying for blood now but there’s still no sign of the rat.

Only the wardrobe is left and it’s too heavy to move without first emptying it. Soon the rest of the house looks like a disaster zone.

‘It’s got to be behind it. There’s nowhere else left,’ I say. ‘There’s a cut-away at the bottom on the back. I bet that’s where it is.’

I don’t need to ask who’s going to move the wardrobe.

The moment I move it the rat leaps out at me. We both scream - Sarah and I, that is. The rat races out of the bedroom and into the hall. We follow to the door and peer nervously into the hall. It's empty. We check the laundry. Empty too.

Success at last! We quickly close the back door and then high five and dance around the laundry.

'Let's go out to dinner to celebrate,' I say.

'Don't forget we've got all that stuff to put back now', Sarah says. I groan.

One morning a week later I go into the laundry to collect a hand towel I'd left on the washing machine the night before. It isn't there. As you do, I accuse Sarah who denies moving it. She suggests that I'm having another senior's moment. I consider therapy.

A few days later I leave my bathers on the washing machine overnight. I know, I know. I can hear my mother saying 'put things away dear, not down'. In the morning I find the bathers on the laundry floor, half under the washing machine. That's odd, I think. I give them a quick tug. They won't budge. It's then I know! The rat is somewhere in the innards of the washing machine and it's been trying to pull things up in there it for a nest or for food.

'Sarah, you're not going to believe this,' I call out.

We launch into action - our teamwork is a marvel. We close the hall door to the laundry, stuffing a towel under it to fill the gap. We open the back door. We're ready.

It's a very small laundry so this will be a very close encounter.

There is nowhere for the rat to hide once out of the washing machine.

'You're going to have to actually help this time,' I say. 'I can't lift and hold the washing machine on my own and, pull on the bathers.'

Together we tip the machine until the bottom is exposed. We can see my bathers wedged into a hole the size of a fifty cent coin in the middle of the base plate.

'You take the weight now,' I say. 'I'm going to pull on my bathers again. Are you ready?'

'Just get on with. I won't be able to hold this much longer,' she says.

'Well don't drop it on my head.'

I wrench the bathers with all my might. They spring free and I cannon back into the hall door. At the same time the rat leaps out towards me and then back towards Sarah who lets go of the washing machine. It crashes to the floor. We're both screaming. The rat is squealing. Then it sees the open back door and heads that way. At the very last second, it stops, turns to face us, calmly sits on its haunches and raises a finger - just the one finger. No, rats can't do that. Can they? Then it's gone.

Grief

Today,
my eyes were dry,
my smile bright,
my talk of new beginnings.
I was like one of those fine Winter's days
that start you thinking Spring.
But tomorrow,
I will weep again,
hide my face,
dwell on her
and love and loss.
I will need you
to understand,
and not ask for Spring until Winter's done

***.

Mushrooming

'I love you Mummy', she says
and reaches up to take my hand.
We step out into the still, misty grey morning,
carrying our pans and knives,
to go in search of wild mushrooms,
singing and skipping our way
over sparse green speckled paddocks.

We share the disappointments
of those plump pretenders,
their pink and poisonous gills revealed.
'You can't eat them, they're toadstools,'
she tells me, proud of lessons learned.

We shriek with joy for every find
of white capped, edible, brown flesh,
until our pans filled brimful,
we sit a while astride a mallee root
and dunk biscuits in our tea,
galahs shrieking overhead;
until bull ants have us leaping,
laughing, and setting out for home.
When tired little legs will no more,
I carry her to the back door,
brush dirt from her hands and feet,
and lay her down to sleep away
the remains of the day.

I skin and slice and fill the kitchen
with the smell of cooking mushrooms,
damp, like freshly spaded earth.
'We'll go again, won't we?' she says,
stirring, while still asleep.
We will, we will, my sweet.

On Reading Feminist Theory

Last week I took Freud to bed,
to appear well read on the psychoanalytic school.

And although I'm no fool,
this royal tragedy of sexual identity,
near rendered me, unconscious.

For Oedipus wrecks the mind and Electra's far too
complex.

All that, about a lass and a lack!

This week, in my bed was Irigaray.
'When our Lips Speak Together' is this what they
say

that French feminism's all the go but I just don't
know...

The new holy trinity: I, you, we, must
speak female and impale language
peel off the skins of patriarchal sins
on meaning and being; and,
if we can't grasp it, at least say we feel it,
and weep for ourselves.

Alas and alack!

Mine

Today,
lunch in your home,
seated on my lounge.
You have it all, don't you?
My things, my lover and my life.
Tonight,
in the shell of our home,
seated by a fire that no longer warms,
desperate for answers that won't come,
alone in a bed love has deserted.

Christine Christopoulos has been with the Burnside Writers' Group since shortly after it began. She likes writing reflective pieces and short stories, and very occasionally a poem.



Dawn Service

April 25, 2015 was the 100th Anniversary of the landing of Australian troops at Gallipoli in Turkey. I went to Dawn Service at the Soldiers' Memorial Gardens at Unley.

I had never been to a Dawn Service; never even commemorated Anzac Day. My family did not have any tradition of war time experience and I do not know how the male members of my family escaped war service but they did. Anzac Day was just another public holiday as far as my family was concerned.

When I suggested to my husband George that we should go to the Dawn Service because our granddaughters were singing with their school choir, he grumbled a bit about it being so early complaining that it would probably be freezing. But his argument failed in the face of my more powerful one: that he wouldn't be grumbling if he were getting up at the same hour to play golf.

We were up at 5.10 am but as we approached the Gardens it was clear that we should have left home earlier. The car parks behind the shops on Unley Road were filling up and there was no parking available along the road.

Parking some distance from the Gardens, we joined hordes of people walking from the side streets and funnelling onto Unley Road. We were an army with

one mission in mind: to secure the best vantage point in the Gardens.

The air was chilly; thick beanies and parkas the order of the day for most. Babies were rugged up, protected from the breeze in the cocoon of their prams and strollers. Bleary eyed toddlers clung to parents' necks and older children, abuzz as though it were Christmas, dragged at parents' arms. Three layers of clothing on my legs, four on my upper body, gloves and a scarf wrapped tightly around my head kept my body a few degrees above freezing. George more acclimatised to early morning cold starts to the day - thanks to golf - pulled his beanie further down over his head and thrust his hands in his jacket pockets.

The crowd was about 6 or 7 deep around the perimeter of the small garden marking the site of the cenotaph. Those not lucky enough to make it that far, or who perhaps perceived that they had secured a better position, had climbed trees and were perched perilously on limbs and in forks of branches. The rotunda was another prized spot with its slight elevation compensating for its further distance from the cenotaph. So too the Artillery; clothed in grey paint, hiding the scars of war and time. Was it a relic of glorious war or a warning of the folly of war to those straddling its barrel?

We had no idea where the girls were so we walked around behind the crowd and eventually settled on a spot looking straight into four brightly lit spotlights beaming down on the Cenotaph. Not the best spot to

be, but it was close to the action. My hand, sentry like across my forehead tamed the glare.

I felt a movement to my right: someone was about to push in front of me. My defences rose as I heard a voice behind me say, “Mum you won’t be able to get through”. Too right I thought - you’re not pushing in. I turned to look at the usurper and saw a woman, a little younger than me, in a tailored bright red coat; the colour of poppies and her hair pitch black as the centre of a poppy. But my eyes quickly travelled from her to the old woman in front of her. She too was wearing a poppy coloured blazer, buttoned up through the middle, a smart white blouse and a beige broad brimmed hat. A woman of style. She was hunched over her wheeling frame, steadfastly pushing it through the crowd, the umbrella over the seat a bayonet announcing to all her intention to battle through the crowd. On her chest was a row of brightly coloured medals. She clutched a small bouquet of rosemary very tightly.

Her daughter looked at me with a sense of resignation as the old woman ignored her and shuffled through the crowd. I moved to let her through. If anyone had the right to a place in the front row it was her. The crowd parted to let her through.

When it was clear that she had made her way to the front row I turned to her daughter and said, ‘She made it through.’ The woman looked at me and replied, ‘Yes just like her father did one hundred years ago today.’

Synchronicity. I shivered a little – and it wasn’t because I was cold.

The bell in the St Augustine’s Church across the road from the Gardens began to toll. I looked to the bell tower. It was silhouetted against a cloudless light blue and grey sky, blushed pink from the dawn sun. There were no sounds other than the slow toll of the bell. Even though I was surrounded by hundreds of people I felt that moment was mine alone – a moment of absolute peace. Oh that it could last.

Perspective

Charlotte and I were driving to the Maritime Museum at Port Adelaide. Our special treat is visiting museums and art galleries.

She lifted her head from the ipad screen which was encased in purple and pink, and angled her head towards me. She lifted one ear phone – also purple and pink: fluffy like winter earmuffs. ‘Yiayia how old are you?’

I thought: You little monkey you know how old I am. You asked me the same question this morning when I picked you up.

‘65,’ I reminded her.

65! She squealed exclamation marks. Turning back to the ipad she said. ‘You look 50.’

I smiled.

Later, after exploring the Museum and climbing 75 steps to the top of the lighthouse, we ate lunch at a nautically inspired cafe. I was gingerly trying to avoid the tooth I had fractured that morning eating a piece of toast. The broken cusp hung on by a thread and flapped whenever my tongue veered near it. Lunch was to be followed by a trip to the dentist.

Over a mouthful of shared gooey chocolate caramel slice Charlotte looked at me (why is it when a child looks at you it's a look of portent) and said, 'Yiayia, you know why your tooth is broken don't you?'

I didn't hold my breath – I knew what was coming.
'It's because you're old!'

He Brought me Red Roses

I brush the little mark on her cheek 'Nothing,' she says.

I wonder?

What lurks behind the sunglasses?

She smiles at me,

'Did I tell you Richard brought me red roses?'

'The marks around your neck?'

She looks at me. Is it pain I see?

'Allergy,' my new wool scarf.

'He brought me red roses'.

Her lip split: the dried blood like red roses.

‘Yes,’ in a hushed voice. ‘He hit me.

My fault.

I burnt the dinner.

Said he was sorry,

 said he loves me,

 said he won’t do it again.

He brought me red roses.’

She looks at me. Is it fear I see?

Leave!

My exhortation cannot compete

 with the scent of red roses.

His voice slurred, ‘She fell down the stairs.’

Dead

My voice,

 full of loathing,

‘Will you put red roses on her grave?’

Roger Monk, writing as Beresford Rogers,
is a former banker, academic and Riesling
maker, now crime writer, book editor and
Riesling drinker.



Cardigan Blues

'Going away, eh?' asked the assistant.

'No,' she replied, glancing at her husband. 'He's retiring.'

They stood at the counter, under the 'Woollens' sign. Uncomfortable.

His suit coat lay on the counter while he stood in front of the mirror in a brand new blue cardigan, turning this way and that as she waved her hands.

'You see,' she added as she helped him into a dark grey with lapels, 'He finishes up next week and we want to get a few things first.'

She stepped back, her head to one side. 'Makes you look old, dear.'

And it did. His shoulders stooped, his pot stuck out and the hair he tried to pat down seemed to be greying by the minute.

They tried on a brown and he wilted even more, smiling wanly at his reflection in an effort to look cheerful and glancing back at her for support.

'Wish I was you,' said the assistant. 'Nothing to do and all day to do it in.'

'Yes,' she said vaguely. 'Of course he's got a few things to do around the house ... painting and ... things, and it'll be nice to have him at home.'

She told the assistant why they weren't going overseas, even though they could if they wanted to, of

course, and she mentioned the painting again, and how busy he'd be. And she almost convinced herself.

'Take the blue one, dear,' she said at last. 'It makes you look... um...better.'

The assistant started to wrap it up, and he reached for his coat. Suddenly he was different. As the coat went on, so did authority. Where an old man had stood, there was now an executive. Taller, with handsomely greying hair. Distinguished. In charge.

She smiled up at him, handing back responsibility.
'Now for a hat,' she said.

My Summer

I love a sunburned shoulder
A back of searing pain
Of reddened, throbbing blisters
Of overheated brain.
I love my peeling forehead
My ulcerated knee
My freckles and my swellings
The hot, red sun for me!

I Like to Hang the Socks Out

I like to hang the socks out,
The blacks and blues and red,
Or mix them all together
Or alternate instead.
They stand there, just like waiters
Trying hard to please,
I like to hang the socks out
And give each one a squeeze.

But underpants are ... underpants
Flapping in the breeze.

I like to hang the towels out
They take up lots of space,
Five seconds in with Martha's and
They think they own the place.
They make it look as though you've worked
Quite hard to get them there,
I like to hang the towels out
And spot the signs of wear.

But underpants are ... underpants
And I loath every pair.

I like to hang the shirts out
And straighten each wet cuff,

I feel I should say 'cuse me'
As I pick off bits of fluff.
They look so much like people
As they wave their arms about,
So we discuss the weather as
I hang their hangers out.

But underpants are ... underpants
And always inside out.

I like to hang the sheets out
Like sails in the sun,
You only need a couple
And half your day's work's done.
They fight and wrestle all the way
From basket to the line,
I like to hang the sheets out 'cos
The Victory's always mine.

But underpants are ... underpants
Windy, wet or fine.

And then I hang the handkerchiefs,
They look so sad and wet,
They hang their heads despondently
And wish we'd never met.
But what a difference when they're dry
And full of cheek instead,
I like to hang the handkerchiefs
And pat them on the head.

But underpants are ... underpants
There's no more to be said.

Elastic-Sided Sheets

I'm quite a dab
At household tasks
And good at many feats,
But oh, dear me!
I cannot fold
Elastic-sided sheets.

I'll cook a duck
Or pigeon pair
And slice assorted meats,
But bless my soul
I cannot fold
Elastic-sided sheets.

I'll bake a cake
Or dust a room
While coffee water heats,
But heavens above
I cannot fold
Elastic-sided sheets.

Beresford Rogers

I'll wash the towels
Or fold the clothes
And make them look quite neat,
But a crumpled lump
It is for an
Elastic-sided sheet.

Georgette Gerdes is very new to writing and a recent member of the Burnside Writers Group. When she is not working as a busy mum she does ballet and plays Irish traditional music on the accordion.



Dead Tree, Green Bush: The Legend of the Gum Tree of Burnside

The ancient Celts believed that trees were sacred. The most revered was the Oak tree. The Irish word for Oak is *daur*, the basis for the word ‘door’. It is called door as the oak was thought to be the gateway into the next life. Its deep roots penetrate into the underworld of the fairies and its lofty branches spread to the sky. The Hawthorn or faery tree also sits on the threshold between earth and the netherworld. The Ash is recognised for its healing properties and the Beech renowned for wisdom and knowledge. As these trees spread their swaying limbs up into the ether they are like heavenly bodies. Their skin, a little crinkled, is to be expected at their age.

Adelaide, in South Australia has its own special trees. Here is the tale of one of them, from a small suburban shopping centre.

If you venture into Burnside Village, a posh and shiny place with even posher and shinier cars in its car park, you will be greeted by a diverse tapestry of shoppers in various shades of black. They wander the gleaming corridors. Old money, Botox and pearls. Designer wraps and sunnies. Stilettos and gold chained handbags and expensive, damaged jeans. There, between the trendy jewellery and the branded garb, you may find the last remnants of an ancient tree.

The 100 year old Red River Gum. It has now been fashioned into a square, wooden sculpture with its smooth red trunk imbedded in a nearby bench.

The Red River Gum is known as *Karra* by the local indigenous Kuarna people. Suited to riverbeds and floodplains, it can grow to up to 45 metres in height and live for as long as 1000 years. It can be home to possums, bees, kookaburras, parrots and the occasional vagrant! The Kuarna people used to boil its leaves in water to make a liniment for chest and joint pain as well as using the bark for the walls of wurleys, canoes and shields. They see the tree as a living, breathing and listening entity worthy of respect.

During an upgrade to the shopping centre, several heavenly bodies needed to be sacrificed. These trees were adored by the local populace and a sense of outrage ensued. Letters to the local newspapers, MPs and councillors were plentiful.

One particularly large Red Gum was the centre of the furore. She was a very attractive tree caught resident in the innermost part of the building proposal. She was 18 metres high. She had a strong, smooth, white trunk with changing, coloured ribbons of bark and thin, dancing, grey-green leaves. The tree was unaware of the chaos and expense it caused. The developers agreed to build an extravagant glass canopy with air vents to save this important beauty. There was relief all round - tree huggers, environmentalists and ladies who lunch were all

unanimous in celebrating the victory of nature over Capitalism.

And so it was, fresh and vibrant, resplendent and tall. The Red River Gum lovingly towered over the cafe diners seated in little red chairs with matching black tables. Lattes, macchiatos, affogatos and skinny caps were consumed under her slender, graceful arms. So sophisticated and natural, what a triumph! The glass domed and vaulted ceiling was worthy of any cathedral spire; its breathtaking glass panels, radiated out purple, blue and red lights into the dimness of any twilight sky. At Christmas, the gum's branches were carpeted with sparkling decorations, glittery lights and a star above. She was celestial, the jewel in the crown of the Eastern suburbs. But not for long!

As days went by something happened - so the story goes. Tree experts from near and far were consulted. Lack of UV light or the air-conditioning was blamed. The tree started to droop and wither. Not only did she droop, she started to lose her leaves. They became shrivelled and curly. No amount of daily injections could improve her condition. She became dry and brown; a figure of fun, intrigue and fear. Coffee revellers were no longer safe with her brittle branches overhead. She gradually succumbed to her glass coffin. We all have our suspicions. Was she poisoned? If so, by whom? Was it loneliness that drove her on a path of self destruction? Did she miss the wildlife living within her trunk or the friendly plants to converse with? Did she die of a broken heart?

No amount of waiters with their five o'clock shadows and pony tails could make up for the misery of her unnatural life. She became sicker and weaker, dying slowly and painfully, until such a time as she was pronounced brain-dead by gum tree intensivists. The decision was finally made to safeguard the public and put an end to her suffering, to switch off the machine.

On a very sad day in August 2013, accompanied by many tears, Burnside's famous wilting gum was felled by the surgeons. She was chopped to small pieces. Killed. Her spirit entering the otherworld or was it hanging around to trip up unsuspecting waiters? Her trunk was gone but her roots remain. To this day they are hidden underneath some plastic-looking ferns - the Muzak of the plant world. A far cry from the Red River Gum's previous splendour. The green bush remains for patrons to observe and ignore. Never again would a tree be treated so well. The question is: was it worth it? The millions spent?

Today, a huge domed empty building remains to worship her. Was it insanity or maybe the people couldn't see the woods for the tree! Perhaps Celtic devotion continued but it was no match for technology.

*

One day when all the buildings are gone, maybe, with exposure to air, sun and water, having laid dormant for many years, the roots may spring forth a green shoot.

Barrel Bomb

One, two, three, four
Two fingers on the sternum
100 compressions, rescue breaths

The kiss of life
The baby is limp,
pale
lifeless

Lifted from his mother's damaged body
A dangerous place

Aleppo

Even the hospital is a target
Dead doctors , dead patients, dead children
Fingers point
Nothing done

The baby is still
Mother unconscious
Her face is bloodied
Broken arm and leg
Shrapnel riddled belly
Faint pulse
Losing blood

Georgette Gerdes

Cameras rolling
Bombs falling
Another day at the office

Twitching umbilical cord
Heart pumps
Upside down baby
Bottom slapping
Pink
First breath
Eyes open
Nature's triumph
A green shoot in the rubble
Cry
Aleppo baby

The mother's name is Mayissa. She was 9 months pregnant, in labour, walking to the hospital when the barrel bomb hit.

Mayissa and her baby miraculously survived and are doing well. Their fate still lies ahead.

*Based on Channel 4 news footage in Aleppo,
Syria from film maker Waad al Kateab, July 2016*

Gweneth Leane loves writing short stories; she believes they are slices of life to be served up as lamingtons served on a fancy plate. Her work has appeared in numerous anthologies and Town & Country Farmer and Grass-Roots. She worked briefly as journalist for a local paper, The Transcontinental.



Meet Drago

‘Look that’s a lizard isn’t it, sitting on the guide’s shoulder?’ The children stared in fascination and amazement, having never seen such a creature before: an Inland Bearded Dragon that looked like a prehistoric creature. He didn’t look very handsome and was downright fearsome when he puffed out his body and beard.

On Fridays, people, who take a tour of the Australian Arid Lands Botanic Gardens in Port Augusta, have their tour co-hosted by the lizard sitting on the shoulder of his owner Jenny Broadwood.

Jenny has recently become a volunteer guide at the Garden. She loves the outdoors, ‘The tour guiding is just the best thing I’ve ever done. I love it. It’s wonderful out there.’

Jenny cites an incident when a couple, members of a camera club in Victoria booked a tour of the Gardens. When she arrived with the lizard on her shoulder, he instantly became a film star. The gardens were forgotten.

On another tour, a family with five children were fascinated by the lizard. They clustered around Jenny and wanted to know: ‘Does he bite?’ ‘Can we pat him?’ ‘Why doesn’t he run away?’ ‘What’s his name?’

‘Drago. Short for Dragon.’

*

Jenny and Drago teamed up countless years ago when Jenny was living on a farm near Quorn. Mr. Ron Hilder, the farmer, knew of Jenny's love for all things wild and brought her the young lizard. Its back was broken.

‘Do you want to try and bring him back?’ he asked Jenny. ‘He’ll die otherwise.’

With tender loving care, Drago survived and although it was Jenny's dream to return him to the wild, with a back leg out of action she realized he would never make it so Jenny kept Drago, pampering him.

In late autumn, Drago looks to sleep the winter away and Jenny places him in a shoe box with carpeting and soft material. When Drago burrows in the shredded paper he is placed in the wardrobe until warm spring days dispel winter cold and when days are long and hot Drago is back to his entertaining best.

*

Every inch the gentleman, when Drago is inside he seeks out Jenny when in need of the toilet, she takes him outside and soon everyone is happy.

Drago's diet consists of meal worms, bits of liver and kidney, mushrooms and squash. The time he loves most is being able to hunt slaters and other crawlies when Jenny goes out to tend her many plants and pot plants. But Drago didn't love it when he swallowed a black wasp. It bit him on the way down and he had to be rushed to the Vet.

It was the first lizard the Vet had ever treated and he had to look up the information in his books. Jenny can smile now but she didn't laugh at the time. She was sure she was going to lose her best friend. After Drago received an injection in his tail he began to recover.

Jenny wrote to Doctor Harry to prove that Drago is the exception to the rule. Dragons are supposed to have a lifespan of ten years but Jenny thinks, 'He's good for many more years yet.' As it turns out, Drago is still going at age thirty. He is a credit to his species and Jenny's pampering.

The Case of the Sticky Notes

Jenny found the sticky note on her computer monitor when she returned to her desk after morning tea, 'Nice dress you're wearing.'

She looked around. Every eye concentrated on computer screens; keys tapped overtime. Who in this office would do such a thing, she wondered, was someone playing a joke on her?

Next morning Jenny sat down at her desk and reached to open the computer. There, on the monitor, was another sticky note, 'You have beautiful eyes.'

'I have a secret admirer,' she exulted, 'and it isn't even Valentine's Day.' Her spirits lifted, it had been a

long time since anyone showed an interest in her. All her life she'd felt like a piece of furniture, functional but not beautiful and sought after. Someone must think of her as more than functional. Who could it be?

In the tea room, Jenny made some discreet enquiries, 'Who is the latest lady's man in the office?'

'It's Robert Marr, he thinks he is God's answer to every woman, but everyone knows what he is. The other men are happily married,' Suzy, the Girl Friday of the office, remarked.

So it wasn't a joke, but could it be him? Robert's arrogance repulsed her and when he passed her cubicle and gave her a leer she froze him with a glare.

Jenny couldn't wait to get to work next day, hoping for a note. There it was! 'The blue colour suits you. You should wear it more often.'

For a whole week, there were no notes. Jenny's emotions plummeted to zero; someone was playing a joke on her, but who? She didn't think there was anyone in the office with such a grudge against her.

At the end of the week just when she thought she had overcome her disappointment a note appeared on the monitor, saying, 'Can we have dinner at the Golden Grill?'

Jenny fantasised about the mystery man, would he be dark or fair? He'll be dark, she decided and tall; he must be taller than me; she was adamant about that. He'll be a heart stopper but not a flirt, kind, oh yes, with a kind heart and as well, husband material; not like Ken of last year. She dreamed about the meeting

and what they would say to each other. ‘I’m in love with him. I know he’s the man for me,’ she smiled to herself that night when in bed. What if it was another woman? Oh no, I hope not. I’m not of that persuasion; a woman would not compliment her in the same way as the writer of the notes.

‘You’re setting yourself up to get hurt, Jenny,’ Suzy warned when Jenny could no longer contain her excitement and confided in Suzy.

But Jenny was in no mood to listen to Suzy’s advice and replied, ‘Yes, I would like to meet you at the Golden Grill. How will I know you?’

When a week went by without a note Jenny grew angry and wrote saying she had another date and couldn’t come, but the paper she had stuck on the monitor blew off under the overhead fan and fluttered un-noticed under the desk.

Next morning there was a note saying, ‘I have booked a table for two at the Golden Grill tonight at 7 pm. I will be wearing a red rose.’

Jenny rushed home to shower and consider what to wear. The little black dress was short and showed off her long graceful legs and low enough in the neckline to be chic without cheap. Maybe the navy blue, there was nothing ‘come on’ about that dress, with its white collar and shirt front. Oh, what about the black skirt and glittery magenta top and pearls? Oh yes, that’s perfect.

Jenny called a taxi; she was going to go in style. She saw a very handsome man at a table wearing a red

rose, ‘It’s him!’ she whispered to herself and rushed up to his table, her hand extended, ‘I’m Jenny, I’m so glad to meet you at last,’ she gushed.

The handsome man looked around in surprise, ‘Who are you?’

‘I’m Jenny! You’ve been posting little notes on my computer.’ Doubt overwhelmed Jenny, and her voice dropped away to a whisper, ‘Haven’t you?’

‘I think you have the wrong man; this is my husband,’ chimed in a female voice. Jenny turned to face a beautiful woman seated beside the man and blushing with embarrassment quickly walked away. She wanted the floor to open up and swallow her, I’m such a fool, I should’ve been more careful and made sure he was alone.

Suzy had warned her about being hurt and not to get excited about meeting this man, but she refused to listen and now she was paying the price.

She wound her way between the tables towards the door when she realised someone had moved to her side. She glanced sideways at an ordinary looking man with a small beard. He couldn’t be called handsome with his thick-lenses and thin mousey-coloured hair but he was tall and slim and well dressed, and he wore a red rose in his lapel.

‘Good evening, Jenny. I’m the writer of the sticky notes.’ He had a soft voice and smile like an angel as she’d dreamed, but he wasn’t quite the dreamboat she’d visualised.

‘But you’re the office cleaner!’ She blurted out.

‘Does that make a difference?’

Jenny threw caution to the wind and threw her arms around his neck. He could’ve been a street sweeper or a prince; it didn’t matter. She already loved him. She had seen his heart in his notes.

‘I love you!’

Along the Track

Molly Walsh and Lilly Costello left Oodnadatta midmorning, heading for Marla Bore. They were travelling along the Oodnadatta Track in a Toyota Land Cruiser belonging to the South Australian Housing Trust for whom they both worked.

The brown ribbon of road wound through weirdly eroded flat-topped hills of brilliant red, yellow and white sandstone. These hills marked the personal Dreaming of many of the Aboriginal elders and were known by the white people as the Painted Hills.

Both women were the offspring of white fathers and Aboriginal mothers. Both had spent their childhood with their Aboriginal family in their traditional lands before being taken into a Children’s Home to be ‘civilised’.

In later years when they returned to their people, they found they were aliens because they didn’t know the language or the culture. Civilization hadn’t given

them the rites of passage in their Aboriginal family or the white family either.

At noon they pulled up in a patch of scrub growing between high red sand-hills. ‘There was a big fight here,’ Lilly recalled. She’d heard the story many times around the campfires. A brooding deathly silence lay over the scrub and both women felt it.

A shiver ran up Molly’s spine. She didn’t believe in the Dreamtime, having been Christianised, but she sensed something.

‘Men from a tribal clan in Western Australia came across the desert and tried to steal our women,’ said Lilly thinking she could hear the clash of spears and cries of the dying. ‘They went away without the women and a few less of their own.’ There was a note of familial pride in her voice.

‘If the raiders had been successful, we might have been Western Australians,’ Molly mused.

Both women chuckled.

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With Molly now driving, they bounced over the rutted road that hadn’t seen a grader for many months, their progress pinpointed by a dust plume.

‘We used to travel everywhere by camel. I even had my own camel,’ Molly recalled. ‘My father made a box and harnessed it to the saddle. I used to sit in it and go to sleep.’ Molly’s face was soft at the thought of her father. ‘Dad was a good man. He kept us well clothed and fed but when he died that’s when I had to go into the Children’s Home.’

‘I don’t remember my father,’ Lilly sighed. ‘He was always away. My mother couldn’t look after five of us so the Police came and took us away.’

The women searched the past for rare gems of memories of their families - trying to rediscover what had been taken from them.

‘We’d better find a place to camp, Lilly.’

They were travelling across undulating plains and the long shadows stretched across the landscape. The mystery of night was beginning to fill the gullies and washes.

‘Something dead over there, Molly. Eagles circling. Lilly pointed skyward to her left. Her eyes mere slits against the glare of the sun as she took in the sights and smells along the track the ancestors had walked for millennia.

‘Let’s hope it’s an animal and not someone lost,’ Molly murmured. As the wind through the open window cooled her face the scent of the bush filled her nostrils and heightened her perception to the presence of the elders. Were they trying to tell her something, she wondered?

‘Hey! Look over there in those trees, a car!’

‘What’s a car doing out here? Maybe it broke down.’

‘Better stop and see if they need help.’

Both women sat wondering if it was a trap for the unwary traveller.

‘Wonder if anyone is around?’

‘Don’t see anyone.’

The women got out of the Cruiser, still hesitant to leave the safety of the vehicle.

‘Halloo, anyone there?’ Lilly’s call rang across the desert.

‘No one seems to be around,’ Molly agreed. ‘The car’s not stuck.’

‘Wonder whose it is? The car’s not familiar.’

‘It doesn’t belong to any of ours,’ Lilly laughed, ‘it’s in much too good a condition.’

Molly began to circle the car looking for tracks. She called, ‘Over here, there are two sets of tracks. They went this way.’

‘Maybe they ran out of the water and went to look for some.’ Anxiety sat heavily on Lilly’s heart.

‘It looks like they sat down here? Wonder if they were hurt or something?’

‘Welbourne Hill Station is the closest place, but it’s still a long way off and in the wrong direction.’ Lilly looked across the rolling plains of red gibbers and stunted blue bush, trying to catch a movement.

‘It’ll be dark soon. We should see if we can find them.’

Their tracks lead back toward the painted hills. Why didn’t they follow the road?’

Molly pointed to the east, ‘Over that way. They’re over there somewhere.’ The two women set off at a steady pace and covered two or three kilometres before Molly muttered, ‘Around here somewhere.’

‘Just hope we’re not too late, Molly. We don’t know how long they’ve been out here without water.’

‘Coo-eee,’ Molly yelled.

‘Here! Over here!’ The faint cry alerted the women as they stumbled across spinifex, stones and stunted salt-bush. A man and a woman were lying with arms around each other under a metre high shrub. They appeared to have crawled under the bush trying to find shade. The young man had taken off his shirt and was red as a fried tomato and blistered; his lips dry and swollen.

‘Are you all right?’

Molly and Lilly knelt, wetting the couple’s mouths with drops of water from their bottles.

‘Thank God!’ the young man breathed, and reached for the bottle but Lilly held it away from him.

‘You mustn’t drink too much at once or you’ll be sick,’ Lilly warned and dribbled more water into his mouth.

‘Jenny. Is she all right? She just gave up and lay down,’ the man croaked.

‘No, Jenny’s unconscious. We’ve got to get help for her.’ Molly stood up, her heart crying as she admitted, ‘I hope we’re not too late.’

‘What were you doing roaming around out here in this country without water?’ Lilly wanted to know.
‘What’s your name?’

‘Jamie Barnes. We came from Melbourne. We wanted to see the outback and were advised to take this road.’

There was a question on Lilly’s face as she looked up. Molly’s brown eyes held the answer.

‘We stopped to have lunch. We took our sandwiches and went and sat down behind a sand hill. The view was magnificent. We thought we knew the way back.’ Jamie sounded like a croaking frog.

Night had fallen by the time they placed Jenny beside Jamie on the back seat. As Jamie grasped Jenny’s limp hand in his he sobbed, ‘It was our honeymoon. Thank God you found us.’

‘How did you know where to find us?’ Jamie’s voice was strengthening.

Lilly spoke softly wondering how her words would be received. ‘We saw the eagles circling they were a sign that something was wrong. Then we found your empty car and began to search for tracks.’

The women smiled at each other. It had been reaffirmed to them that they were the children of the land and still belonged to their Aboriginal family.

Winding Rivers

Jake and Annie Winters sat astride their horses on a high rocky outcrop. From this vantage point they could survey Winding Rivers Station knowing that from horizon to horizon, the land was theirs. The Station was a quarter the size of Tasmania.

‘It’s been a good year, Annie,’ Jake exulted. ‘You’d better start planning an overseas itinerary for next year.’

Annie’s eyes rested on the homestead. She loved the old house that sat amid green lawns with a backdrop of tall gums that sheltered the house from the hot northerly winds. A landscaper had been hired and native shrubs lined winding paths that led to secret gardens and secluded corners.

Only that day a letter had arrived on the mail plane. Annie turned to Jake. ‘I had a letter-’ her words died as a look of horror suddenly crossed her face, ‘Jake, look, the house is on fire.’

Don’t tease, Annie’ Jake turned and caught a glimpse of smoke billowing from the homestead.

‘What the - !’ Jake exclaimed, spurring his horse into an instant gallop, Annie right behind. They were pushing their horses beyond kindness in an effort to cross the several kilometres to the homestead.

The horses were in a lather as the couple slid to a stop amid dust and smoke but Jake and Annie had eyes

only for their beautiful home. Water gushed from large hoses attached to the station fire truck into the heart of the flames. Jake was glad he had invested in a fire truck. It was worth the investment if they could save the house. The building was old. It was the original homestead and tinder dry and the flames hungry.

‘How did this happen?’ Jake yelled but nobody was listening. Men were running every which way, setting horses, dogs, calves, chooks and geese free.

‘Jake, come back,’ Annie screamed. ‘You can’t go into the house it’s too dangerous.’

Jack tied a hanky over his mouth as he ran onto the veranda and through the open French windows stumbling instinctively to the safe in the wall. He fumbled the combination, squinting in the smoke to see if he dialled the right numbers, 57 10... The skin on his hands was peeling off onto the hot steel but he was too intent on opening the safe.

The safe door swung back and he grabbed the little box, but just as he turned, an inner wall caved in. Clothes alight Jake raced for the door. ‘All the data about our stud cattle breeding program is on that hard drive. I had to save it.’ Jake collapsed at Annie’s feet. If only he had listened and backed up his work and placed a copy in the bank vault.

The station foreman and a jackaroo threw buckets of water over Jake to put out the flames and cool his body while Annie, fearing the worst, put through a call for the Flying Doctor.

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‘This is the last straw, Annie; the bank will not stand us finance anymore.’ His hands bandaged Jake stood looking at the blackened skeleton that was once the pride of the outback. The boastful pride that had earlier cloaked his outlook was gone. Jake was a broken man. ‘What are we going to do, Annie, we have nowhere to live now.’

‘There’s the bunkhouse,’ Annie suggested. ‘Remember, we lived in the bunkhouse when we were first married. We can do so again until we rebuild.

‘Rebuild?’ Jake snorted, ‘What with?’

Annie laughed, ‘Jake, I was going to tell you when we were up on the outcrop last week but the fire put it out of my mind. Mum left me her estate. I’m the sole beneficiary. We’re not finished, Jake, Winding Rivers will be free of debt, in fact, we, can build Winding Rivers into the best tourist destination ever. We can build bush cabins over the wetlands. Bird lovers, fishermen and anyone else wanting to sample life in the outback will come here in droves. El Questro, eat your heart out.

Don Sinnott has been with the Burnside Writers' Group since its inception. He enjoys experimenting with different writing styles and genres.



A Sampling of Turkish Delights

Turkey is in the news. An attempted military coup and a harsh government crackdown on those labelled as dissidents are fodder for press photographs of demonstrating mobs in public places. Most of the demonstrations seem to be in support of the government and its measures - a strange situation for westerners more accustomed to seeing protesters targeting governments rather than supporting them. But coups and civil unrest in a country are not an encouragement to tourism, so tourist flights into Istanbul must be less heavily booked now than they were five years ago, when we visited Turkey. Then we found a country of happy, contented people living in a land with proud traditions founded on a history of earth's most ancient civilisations and overlaid with an accommodating form of Islam. Foreigners, as we were, met warmth and smiling faces that cut through language barriers. Today Turkey might not be such a happy place, with a more assertive Islam abroad and a less relaxed, more stressed, populace.

In 2011 it all seemed rather different.

Istanbul and Amasra

Istanbul was a sensory overload. In a very full day; our tour group had been ferried around this city of empires. Sights, sounds and aromas competed for our

attention; gaudy modernity overlaid reminders of Istanbul's roots in antiquity: first as Byzantium from the 600s BC and as Constantinople from 324 BC.

We had wandered the Topkapi palace compound from where, for over 600 years, successive sultans had ruled the Ottoman Empire. Later, we had been equally dazzled by the city's earlier history as Constantine's capitol of the Roman Empire. A subsequent Roman emperor, Justinian, commanded construction of the awe-inspiring Sancta Sophia which was, for 900 years, the greatest church in Christendom, then for 500 years a mosque and now, since Ataturk's post World War I secularisation, the Ayasofya museum. It left us reeling: the massive domes, exquisite geometric tile-work and Byzantine mosaics.

Today we are leaving the city behind us. We cross the Bosphorus and drive until, late in the afternoon, our minibus heads north to the small town of Amasra on the Black Sea. Stopped at a road-side vantage point, we gaze over a town of jumbled streets embracing a sheltered harbour dotted with fishing boats. It could be a Cornish fishing village—with minarets.

It's been a long day; our bus-bound tour group needs exercise. Out around the promontory that juts into the Black Sea we look back across the harbour on a village glinting in the setting sun. The call to prayer begins to roll around the town, its amplified cadences echoing through the streets and from the cliff-faces. For we tourists, not of the Muslim faith, the oft-

repeated call to prayer as we travel around the country is to become a ubiquitous intrusion, the Arabic verses of its Qur'anic content lost on us and its chanting melodically jarring. But in this setting, in the golden glow of day's end, it is the most magical of sounds. It is a time for quiet reflection, whatever faith or non-faith you hold to.

Sinop

The town of Sinop has the twin distinctions of being the most northerly town in Turkey and, because of its siting on an isthmus, having the only south-facing harbor on the Turkish Black Sea coast. Our bus arrives after a tedious afternoon of crawling through long stretches of road works and we are grateful for the opportunity to stretch our legs exploring the streets and the coastal fortifications of the ancient town. It's a hot day and some enterprising locals have set up a beer stand within the fortifications that attracts our tourist group for a cooling ale.

I am late on the scene, finding my fellow travellers with cans in hand, and most surprisingly, our guide Besim also imbibing. 'Besim', I say in mock surprise, 'you are a good Muslim man and here you are with a beer in your hand!'

Our thirty-something guide smirks conspiratorially. 'Yes, it is a sin. But there is forgiveness...' Whether or not we call on forgiveness we all enjoy the cool liquid as we sit reflectively in the

shade of walls that have seen Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar pass by.

The next morning, we discover a statue of a famous son of Sinop, the fourth century BC Greek cynic philosopher Diogenes, and the group poses for a photograph at the foot of the memorial. We cooperate when we are recalled for a second photograph by a local TV news team, for whom a group of foreigners sitting at the feet of Diogenes might make a newspaper story on a low-news day.

The Paparazzi

Within a few days we leave the Black Sea coast and head south through the rugged Taurus Mountains. Tourists are few in this area and we attract curious but friendly stares wherever we emerge from our bus. We are curious in return, but townspeople are happy to invite us into their tiny shops even when it is clear we are not potential customers. A baker proudly invites us in to see how he makes his traditional bread and a group of men, enjoying a mid-morning break over tulip-shaped glasses of tea, exchange smiles and greetings.

In one town we are seated street-side at restaurant tables for lunch when a group of teen-age school-girls spots us. We are instantly the subject of a giggling paparazzi attack, facing flashing phone cameras and a cascade of questions in halting English. ‘Where are you from?’ ‘How many children do you have?’ ‘How old are you?’

Urfa and Haran

Judaism, Christianity and Islam venerate a common ancestor, Abraham, and all three faiths recognise his birthplace as ‘Ur’, associating this with Turkey’s modern-day Urfa, or Sanliurfa—the city of Abraham—as the Turks now know it. For Muslims it is a place of pilgrimage focussed on the traditional cave of Abraham’s birth. There is no bar to non-Muslims visiting the cave, which we do.

The town is thronged with the faithful and our group disperses widely in the crowd as we navigate the points of interest, climb the 200 steps to the top of the castle and stop off for refreshments. Besim is insistent his group must reassemble at his designated point and we eventually do, before heading off on the 30 km drive south to Haran where, the book of Genesis tells us, Abraham stayed for some years on his journey south to Canaan.

We do not journey further south: Haran is disconcertingly close to the Syrian border across which comes a flow of refugees into the border refugee camp established by Turkey. Haran is a sombre prospect, contrasting starkly with the festive atmosphere we left in Urfa. We are glad to head back north.

Ephesus

The ruins of this Greco-Roman city record a procession of humanity over three millennia. Despite

the throng of photo-snapping tourists we are moved by a sense of history as we walk down the marble-paved street over which so many rulers and emperors have marched their troops. Tumbled columns by the wayside tell of opulence and we picture ancient shop fronts and awnings, markets and rowdy commerce. Saint Paul lived here for a while and we imagine that a Christian cross carved on a lintel depicts where he fostered a congregation.

Preservation and restoration of this UNESCO-listed site has returned some of the buildings to recognisable form - the partially reconstructed great library of Celsus, one of the greatest of the ancient world, still evokes a sense of awe and we are quiet as we contemplate the wall-niches that stored so many scrolls. A bonus is a visit to the earthquake-ravaged terrace houses, once the preserve of the city's upper-class: Austrian archaeologists have been working on restoration for over a century on what must be the world's largest three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle, and a guard allows our group privileged access - for a small consideration.

Gallipoli

Gallipoli, and ANZAC Cove in particular, are magnets for Australians and New Zealanders and the annual ANZAC Day dawn service at the site has become a rite of passage for many young people. We visit when there are no crowds and most of the tourists are Turkish. They have more right than we do to see

the Gallipoli peninsula as their memorial site; for every ANZAC death eight of their people died here and the Turkish memorials are as moving for us as are those to the dead of the western allies. At one point of our explorations we mix with a Turkish tour group and Besim acts as interpreter between the groups: smiles and tears come in equal measure as we all acknowledge the futility of war. It is quiet in our bus as we leave this site and head north to return to Istanbul.

And so we leave a country so rich in history, so warm in welcome, so promising as a tolerant land with a declared secular government. Five years on there are changes but our memories remain. Turkish delights indeed.

Isaiah

'In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up... '

Carl turned wearily and looked at the clock. Why, he pondered, are these words I learned as a memory verse in bible class so long ago rattling around in my head? Why do I need to revisit this vision that the Hebrew prophet Isaiah recorded as evidence of his call by his

god? Why can't this ancient prophet leave me alone to sleep? Isaiah be gone!

It was 3.00 am and the warm breath of a stifling day still enfolded the house. This is ridiculous, he decided. If I can't sleep, I'll get up. He glanced over at the barely-visible shape of his wife Ella beside him; she was sleeping soundly, the sheet thrown off her naked body. Slipping off the bed he padded, similarly naked, out to the kitchen. He didn't need coffee; perhaps a glass of water and maybe a biscuit. As he set a glass on the bench a faint slapping sound from the study at the back of the house caught his attention. Did I leave the French doors open to let some air in and now something's flapping? He grunted as he turned to investigate.

Snapping on the study light and blinking in the glare he fell back in surprise. There at his desk, with a torch in one hand and his laptop in the other, was a black-clad figure methodically filling a sports bag with Carl's belongings. In alarm and confusion Carl could only stammer, 'Hey, who are you? What are you doing?' As soon as he uttered his inane question he realised the answer was blindingly obvious.

The figure turned to face him, showing no more reaction to the appearance of this naked figure standing before him than he might to a shop assistant approaching him to inquire if he had made a purchase decision. 'Good evening, or rather good morning', he began evenly. 'In reverse order, the answers to your

questions are that: I am robbing you of some of your possessions and my name is Isaiah.'

Carl felt a tingling sensation in his scalp at the mention of this same name that had interrupted his sleep - was he really awake or was this some extension of a dream fuelled by that persistent biblical verse that had haunted him? 'Isaiah?' His croaking voice betrayed his confusion. 'How can that be?'

Isaiah the intruder continued to regard him evenly. 'Yes, that's what my parents called me. I believe it's an ancient biblical name but it has a certain contemporary ring to it, don't you think?'

Carl didn't know what to think, he seemed incapable of thinking, at least clearly. Gradually a sense of reality began to break over him. He'd confronted a thief in his house, the thief could turn violent, he should do something to protect himself and his property, find something he could use as a weapon, find his phone to call the police, call out to Ella... Isaiah had shifted his attention from Carl to his sports bag and he had begun to empty out what he had put in it. Carl watched dumbly as his laptop, his Waterman pen set, his mobile phone and the silver tankard Ella had given to him for his recent birthday were methodically returned to the desk. 'I am a professional thief and proud of my methods. I aim to leave no trace of my visits and now you've discovered me I'm duty bound to return your goods and leave without further ado,' said Isaiah.

Carl was still unconvinced that this was not a dream. As he stood in the doorway of the room he was also becoming aware of his naked state, heightening the unreality of the situation. 'You're returning the stuff? You're not going to take any of it?'

'That's what I said. If you'll just give me a moment to set these where I found them, then I'll leave the way I entered. You see, you left the French door wide open. There was no damage caused by my entry - there never is.'

Carl took in the appearance of this man Isaiah, thinking that he may need to give a description to the police. His eyes traced an investigatory path from the floor up. Black shoes, trousers and tee-shirt. Black gloves, but no balaclava - weren't thieves supposed to wear a balaclava? His hair was dark but his face was unremarkable; Carl decided he would have difficulty in picking him in an identity parade or even in providing a useful description of the man's facial appearance. He was everyman.

Isaiah was now watching him, his task of replacing the intended booty complete. He met Carl's eyes; it was clear that he understood his appearance was being recorded. He answered Carl's unspoken question. 'No I don't cover my face that would be a bit common. I'm not too worried if I'm disturbed and spotted - my face seems to lack any distinctive features that would make it easy to describe.' He turned towards the open French door and Carl sensed he was about to leave.

‘Don’t go, not yet’ Carl blurted, despite himself and not knowing why he had said such a thing. ‘Can we talk some more?’ By now he felt no threat from this most peculiar thief but he could not explain to himself why he felt such a fascination to know more of this Isaiah and how he had come to invade his consciousness and his home.

‘OK,’ said Isaiah, lowering himself into Carl’s office chair. ‘Why don’t you take a seat?’

This is bizarre, thought Carl as he dropped into the other chair, the cool leather reminding him of his nakedness. This is my house and I am being invited, as if by favour, to take a seat.

Attempting to seize the initiative he said, ‘Isaiah, before I came across you I was awakened not by any sound you made but by a most odd recollection, a half-remembered biblical verse that refused to let me sleep. A verse from the book of the ancient Hebrew prophet who shares your name, Isaiah. Can you explain that?’ As soon as Carl said this he felt it was an absurd question.

Isaiah’s eyes fixed on Carl’s, as a slow smile spread over his face. ‘Of course I can’t satisfactorily explain that. And of course you are not the first one to link my name with that of my very famous ancient predecessor. But let me simply note,’ he leaned forward, his gaze intense, ‘the mind works in mysterious ways and we have senses beyond the usual five we recognise.’

Carl started. Was this man suggesting some form of extrasensory perception that had warned him about an intruder called Isaiah? The night had already provided more than enough bizarre events, now was his credulity to be challenged further? ‘Surely this is nonsense, it is just the most incredible coincidence that your name should figure in my dream.’

Isaiah smile had broadened. ‘You think so? Perhaps not.’ His demeanour became more serious, almost professional. ‘It is time I left - my time is valuable and now you may be able to sleep. Farewell.’

Carl did not call the police. In fact, he called no one and spoke to no one, not even Ella about the remarkable visitation. But he did wonder, and he continues to wonder, about a world of senses not yet understood. No one named Isaiah, either ancient or modern, has troubled him since.

Jack and Jill's Hill-Top Adventure

Jack grimaced as he lay back on the bed and reflected on his bad luck. This vinegar stings – and stinks. Whose idea was it to use this stuff to bring out a bruise? An old wives' tale to douse me in this stuff and then wrap my head in brown paper; I knew this was going to end in tears.

He shifted uneasily as his sore head rubbed on the pillow. Jill seemed to think that there was water up on the hill but she doesn't seem to understand that water flows downhill. He dwelled on this absurdity for a minute before his thoughts returned to Jill. A pretty girl, a bit thick, but he found her intoxicating, in a way that clouded his judgement.

She reckoned that there was a well up there, but who would be stupid enough to dig a well on a hill? And who would be stupid enough to believe her and trudge up that slippery shale slope.

He dwelled on that too before answering his own question. Short answer: me. I'd be stupid enough to believe her. Of course she took a cropper too, but she only scratched her knee, didn't bang her scone.

His head had begun to throb. Women, who needs them!

The Old Family Home

Soap and furniture polish. The old house was perennially untidy, with the remains of breakfast mouldering in the sink, mountains of washing on the kitchen table with an indefinite appointment with the iron, chairs left askew as if the scrambling family had realised too late that the butcher shop they operated in the main street opened in five minutes.

Yet it was smells not sights that my memory locked away – the aromatic cocktail of soap and furniture polish is burnt into my memories of the old house in the country town where my dad grew up.

Dawn, the part-time household help, was blind to untidiness and scornful of priorities. She washed clothes – a family of butchers generated an endless supply – and she polished. The furniture was slick with polish that perfumed the darkened rooms and the multiple table-top clumps of daily washing added their soapy freshness.

Somehow the two ordinary smells combined in an extraordinary way, marking the air in this house with a unique chemistry not to be found anywhere else. This was a house to be savoured with the nose, a house I could identify if led into it blindfolded, a house with a living heart - of soap and furniture polish.

Chris Lane

Chris Lane started writing short stories and poems after she retired from nursing 3 years ago. She enjoys writing about animals and their reactions to us. Her other interests are nature and history.



The Wind

Big trees
Medium trees
Small trees
Green leaves
Orange leaves
Dead leaves

All at the mercy of the wind.

The wind plays with them
Teases them
Blows them around
Tempts them
Freezes them
Beats them

Then the wind starts all over again.

Big trees
Medium trees
Small trees
Green leaves
Orange leaves
Dead leaves

All at the mercy of the wind.

The Key

My dear elderly aunt had given me a beautiful hand cut key on a matching chain just before she died nearly ten years ago. I've worn it as a piece of jewellery ever since and many people have asked me what it belonged to and I've always said I didn't know.

The family home where my Mother and her sisters had lived when they were young was being knocked down to widen the road and I thought I might have a last look.

I wandered around the rooms just looking at things I remembered from childhood. I came to the girls' bedrooms, my mother's and my aunt's, each looked old and tired but, I could still see their personal touches: a favourite print and the gingham curtains that the girls had chosen. I stopped and looked in my aunt's cupboard and as I opened it I saw old newspapers. Lifting them I found a small drawer hidden underneath. I pulled at the drawer and found it locked. Suddenly, the key that I wore as jewellery around my neck slipped on its chain and I realised it might fit.

Excited, I removed the key from its chain and tried it in the lock. It fitted. Slowly opening the drawer I found a pretty dark blue leather box and opened it. There inside was the most beautiful diamond ring sitting sparkling in the velvet. The ring became my

keepsake and I could look at it and remember my aunt and how we were close.

My Aunt had never married and the story whispered in the family was that her future husband had been killed in the war. Perhaps I had found her ring and perhaps she gave me the key so I could find it one day.

The Peppercorn Tree

It was a peppercorn tree and had been in that spot since we had gone to school some 50 years ago. It held lots of memories some good and not so good. Jenny and I had had our wedding photos taken while standing by this proud tree, as many others had. The whole town called it ‘the brave tree’ as it was never damaged or disfigured during the past fifty years. No one had dared graffiti it, although it had some initials scratched into its trunk.

One morning, hearing unexpected noises, I wandered outside to discover the council workers were about to cut the tree down. The chainsaw had just started and still in my night attire I rushed to the tree, calling,
‘Stop, stop.’

No one stopped. They continued to attack the tree. So I threw myself in front of the workmen.

‘What are you doing?’ I screamed.
‘Lady, we are cutting the tree down,’ said the Foreman.

‘Why?’ I asked. ‘What has this tree done to you?’

‘What’s your problem, lady?’
Other neighbours had now arrived and many were
showing support.
The Foreman stopped and came over to talk to us,
‘Look folks. This tree’s been here too long and is too
old and might fall on someone, it’s dangerous.
We’ve bought a new super-dooper chain saw and
we’re going to try it out on the tree.’
We couldn’t believe what we were hearing. At that
precise moment the mayor rode past on his bike and
stopped to find out what the problem was.
The neighbours upset at what was happening, started
to talk all at once and I was shouting. The mayor
looked at me and asked me why the protest.
When he heard the story and got the message about
how precious the tree was he said, ‘It’s safe as long
as I’m mayor and because the tree is treasured it will
be tested for problems regularly.’
As I walked away I was pleased that the tree was
saved as it still had my initials that I had carved into
it fifty years earlier.

Maarten van de Loo, a tertiary-educated agronomist and researcher, now in his twilight years, writes his memoirs of World War 11 in the former Netherlands East Indies, now Indonesia.



Survival: 1942 -1945

When, during the Pacific War, an 11 year old boy was arrested by Japanese occupation soldiers in the former Netherlands: East Indies (now Indonesia) he was denied schooling and parental care. For the next three and a half years while passing through five POW camps, hunger forced him to resort to the basic instincts: hunting, gathering and scavenging anything edible.

He used a slingshot to shoot pigeons; he set rat traps and caught large tropical lizards to supplement his diet. He boiled the catch of the day clandestinely below the bunk in his barrack on a charcoal fire.

Everything was about survival; adults even had gold removed from their mouths and bartered it for beans with people outside the camp through a top secret channel.

While out hunting he discovered that humans can be even more inventive than he ever imagined. POWs turned urine into Vitamin B for the seriously ill and yeast for the baking of 'bread', using equipment supplied by the Japanese.

Lack of proper washing facilities saw to it that after 3 years he and most others were lice infested but in spite of that, he was engaged by the Dutch camp administrator as messenger boy since a communication systems did not exist.

While on duty as messenger he was confronted with the cruellest Japanese torture ever imagined. The young psyche was indelibly impressed with lasting memories. But he survived and gradually learned to see the positive in people.

Now in old age reviewing the past and his miraculous escape from 'The Other Holocaust' (ref. *The Other Holocaust* by Pamela Masters): the planned annihilation of all remaining POWs by the Japanese in 1945, his thoughts have mellowed to the extent that he has now forgiven his old enemy unilaterally and unconditionally.

This brief outline is the basis of my recently released book: '*The Search for My Father, ex POW 2226 Remembers*'

Copenhagen

Come on, come on, we're off to talk BIG SIN,
eat pie in sky before it's falling in.
You a prophet, boofhead, climate guru
Fill more planes then, you come too.
(Generate more gas - cares who?)

There amongst the wisecracks, pollies and the
Danes,
sundry crystal balls, lead balloons and weather
vanes,

eat, drink, party and be merry
'cause it's just a few who bite the cherry.

They'll save the planet, my friend, and glorify
Kevin too.

All climate change deniers, using too much
lead in toothpaste,
just don't understand the haste - and are taboo.

And so, party on fellers and raise huge taxes;
on a world, soon ready to default on debt.

Who cares who pays - don't worry,
it's only next generations who'll be sorry.

And when untold misery and poverty strikes,
we'll say:

Was it the corrupt cabal of scientists behaving
badly,
natural climate cycles ignored so sadly,
a massive ego play.

Year-2000-bug hysteria repeated,
Copenhagen been cheated?

Listen Copenhagen boys, think again,
before you inflict enormous pain.

Lingo mix up

‘Come on lad, inspect my vegie patch,’
the Pom said to the Yank while venturing out
where plants and chickens hatch, seeds sprout.

‘Hey buddy what’s that? Was that sown?’
‘Yes me lad, they are tomatoes,
sown, grown and can then be thrown.’
‘They are what ? never heard of, what’s your lingo
buddy
is it tomaytoes you mean?’

‘Oh, come on you muddy, it is new lingo you will
glean
like your potahtoes you have never heard off
so why the scoff?’
‘Potahtoes and tomahtoes or tomaytoes and
potahtoes,
take your pick, confuse me not me lad’.
‘OK then buddy, let’s be consistent
I say you’re bad.’

Deaf-Man's Embarrassment

On a beautiful summer day
routinely three old fellers met.
Though semi-deaf, they'd stay
from early till late and chat.

‘Wiiiindy isn’t it,’ said Jack with cheer.
‘Noooo,’ said Joe, ‘it’s Thuursdee.’
‘Thirsty? So am I,’ said Ray,
‘let’s go and have a beer.’

So, off they went to the good old pub
right in the village hub.
There they saw a man in tears
old, buckled and of many years.

‘What’s your problem mate?’ asked Jack.
On and on he wept... a flood of tears.
It filled them with great fears.

‘Now what d’ya say,’ asked Ray.
‘I’m almost deaf mate but will play,
go, try harder, wipe your tears, move your lips
and give me some good tips.’

‘Ohh,’ he cried again, ‘it’s my lovely wife.’
‘What ? You beat her and

now you are in some strife?
serves you right mate, that's your life.'
'No,' he cried, 'she is so young and beautiful
She loves me oh so much and waits for me.'

'So, you say she was your tool
and now you're in her clutch,
and you don't wannabee?'

'HEAR me, man, she waits for me, I say!'
'OK then, she wants you still to play?
Go home then, what makes you here to stay?'

'Now - still sobbing - you deaf old feller, LISTEN!'
'OK mate just confess!'
'I forgot my home address!!'

Leonie Pike

Leonie Pike has started writing in retirement from her professional life to explore writing Travel Memoirs, poetry and other stories



Renowned Regional Restaurant

Stresa is a picturesque town situated on Lake Maggiore in the Italian Alps. Pleased to arrive, I breathe in the mountain air to recuperate my airways from the insidious odours of Venice.

Boutique hotel with renowned regional restaurant had sounded good on the Internet. We descend the sheer hill from the station and finally get registered by Maria. We will get to know her well as she seems to run everything at the small hotel which is squeezed into the corner of a diminutive square.

‘No lift!’ I pant as we lug our bags up four flights of steep stairs but we do find a large room with a balcony with a view of the square and the forest on the mountain.

‘Well, it can only get better! I’m cold. I’ll have a hot shower,’ says my husband.

‘Good idea,’ I answer.

‘Oh no, the water’s freezing!’

‘I’ll ring downstairs.’

After a delay Maria says ‘allo, Lorenzo not ‘ere yet.’ That message will ring in my ears for days.

With some crusty bread and smelly cheese in my backpack we wander through stunning gardens that embrace the shore and find a good bench for a picnic as we watch the whitecaps slapped by incessant wind. Three small islands not far off shore look inviting as

they welcome ferries that bustle about the lake. After a long walk and hungry again, we find a small café for dinner, and it's pizza with the lot for *Signor* and mountain trout for me. The place is in full swing with balloons, banners and songs for a six year old birthday party.

'Your complimentary *aperitivo* from the birthday family,' says our waiter.

We raise our glasses in toast to the birthday boy. I whisper, 'Stresa is looking up, excellent meal, entertainment and generous locals.'

'Let's go back to our room. Lorenzo has arranged the Internet for seven.'

We reach the desk. 'Sorry, Lorenzo not 'ere yet...'

Looking for entertainment we watch television; the BBC or Italian game shows with buxom beauties. Finally Lorenzo connects us to the Internet but by now it's eleven and we discover our session ends at eleven thirty. There is hardly time to do all we want to. 'Let's worry about it tomorrow,' I suggest and despite the uproar floating up from the hotel patrons spilling out into the square we finally get to sleep.

In the morning, anticipating breakfast in a *renowned regional restaurant* we march downstairs. Confronting us is a meagre smorgasbord of packeted cereals and yoghurt overseen by a muttering Maria. 'Allora, allora!' she yells. To our relief she is growling at another guest, so we select our packets and tiptoe to a table. She skulks by the bar like a Blue

Russian about to pounce. Struggling to keep straight faces, patrons sit stiffly at their tables.

‘*Mama mia, uno, uno.*’ A guest is taking *two* yoghurts.

‘*Allora!*’ She dives at some spilt coffee.

‘Let’s get out of here!’ we chorus as we follow other exiting guests smothering their mirth.

*

Stresa is an incredible place, with plenty to see and do; snow capped mountains surround the lake and we ride ferries to the islands and the cable car up the mountain. Half way up is the alpine garden and to our delight it’s snowing at the peak. An advertisement to a free jazz concert at a five star hotel seems like an impossible dream for our budget but we dress in our finest, and enjoy an evening with the local music society in the gold encrusted ballroom. All in Italian of course but free!

And so we acclimatize to cold showers, an icy room, four flights of stairs and breakfast with our Blue Russian ever ready to spring - but there is more to come. On our final night, we must organize a taxi for the first train so I ring the desk.

‘Allo. Lorenzo not ‘ere yet. Organize eet in morning.’

‘Let’s hope.’

Up early we descend the stairs, bags in tow.

‘All taxis busy at the big hotels,’ bellows Maria as she slams the restaurant door and turns a big key in the lock till the appointed hour for breakfast.

‘Too early for breakfast!’ I giggle. ‘But we *do* need a taxi for that steep hill.’

In desperation we enter the souvenir shop next door and kindly, the shopkeeper and his wife spend twenty minutes finding us a taxi. Relieved, we tip the shopkeeper and the taxi driver.

As the train accelerates into the mountains we shake our heads and laugh about the *renowned regional restaurant* and the highs and lows of Stresa.

Adelaide - Mad March is Here

In the Garden of Delights
artists share and prepare
to shock, enthrall,
to make themselves tall

In theatres all over town
actors, singers, acrobats
from all over the world
rapt audiences applaud

Behind Government House
retirees sit, listen and question
authors sharing their books
noisy chatter gets dirty looks

Leonie Pike

At Clipsal, men in machines
caged in thick walls
rev and roar to escape
while avoiding a scrape

Cafés fill to the brim
as chat hits the melange
matches the hum
of red Ferrari's thrum

Fresh faces smile
at the aroma of pizza
forks clatter as a loud song
winds up the throng

WOMADelaide beats
the fever is rising
this time every year
Mad March is here

Edie Eicas

Edie Eicas. After exploring the fine arts, Edie has turned her hand to writing. An interest in relationships and history, she explores her observations through poetry and short stories.



I Shouldn't Have

I knew when I first saw him through the window he carried temptation with him. They always told me, 'Madison keep your nose out of other people's business' but, what else could I do?

It was one of those days where the air was filled with the perfume of blossoms heralding change and the promise of new life; spring was in the air. The small town I lived in, trapped inside a time warp, was sprucing up its post card image getting ready for the summer onslaught of tourists seeking nostalgia. Fresh coats of paint and images declaring an old world charm were meant to capture the attention of the desperate tourist dollar.

As yet the summer hordes had not ventured beyond the city and I only had the regulars and a few stragglers for lunch. The dribble had finally come to a stop allowing a moment's reflection and I stood warming myself by the big glass window.

Standing in the sunshine just inside the café door I heard the distant roar of the motorbike on the half deserted street and turned toward the sound. Looking over, I saw the bike and rider sweep slowly past, anonymous in black; foreign to our area. Not the kind of rider who preferred the low slung Ducati where he could lie over the body of the bike as he would a purring woman but, someone a little more upright and

uptight. Mr Suburbs looking for a bit of country air, I thought.

Sitting high, holding on with one hand, the rider made his majestic way slowly along the line of shops and passed; moving on to the end of the street. In a smooth arc the bike turned back and came to a stop in front of me, the engine cut with a final roar.

Planting his foot to steady the bike he kicked the stand down, dismounted the silver steed and looked around. The Medieval knight dressed in black leather, helmet, gloves and dark sunglasses. Standing tall, he pulled his gloves from his hands in a confident smooth movement and undid the strap beneath his throat. Pulling the helmet from his head, an explosion of strawberry blonde hair in loose curls cascaded across his shoulders adding to the look of knight.

His bearing proud and stance sure, he gathered his gloves and helmet while I watched; interest drawn. His movements slow and rhythmic he turned and looked up to the café. Mounting the stairs he pushed open the door and pulling off his sunglasses stood for a second, adjusting to the low light.

‘Are you still serving lunch?’ he asked as I moved towards him.

‘Yes the kitchen’s still open,’ I replied motioning him to be seated.

The clip, clip, clip of his boots on the wooden floor boards announced his confident step as he made his way to a table against the window where he could look out onto the street and over his bike. Placing his

helmet down he unzipped his jacket, the soft roar revealing the white T shirt underneath. Stripping himself of the leather, I heard it creak as he divested himself of his protective armour.

Fine, hard and strong the body that stood arranging his jacket over the back of the chair and I watched his lithe movements as he settled himself. This was a man whose body was his pride; fit and tight he showed no loss of age through beer belly or podge. Yes, I was caught by the basest of feelings but he was a thing of beauty. How could I resist?

Adding temptation to my voice I informed him, 'I only have specials left but, everything comes fresh from my garden or the neighbourhood.' Waiting for an invitation to elaborate, he offered no line to parley into conversation. Taken aback by his self absorbed disinterest I left him to make his choice.

Turning to survey the board and assess his hunger, he sat a dark silhouetted mass against the lighted window. Waiting for a signal for attention, I felt a wedge between him and the world, a distance that he did not seek to breach.

Choosing steak he asked for bottled water while he waited. 'It will take about 10 minutes,' I informed him only to be told, 'I can wait.'

As I busied myself in the kitchen I could see him across the bench top and felt his energy drawing me to him as he relaxed back into the warming sun. Handsome and fine of feature but with closer scrutiny, I saw he carried an air of sadness and, surreptitiously

watching him, I saw his body finally strip his emotional armour and droop a little in the seat.

Against the bright window a pool of dark emotion settled with him and I felt a cold presence. Shivering, I sensed an intruder now sat with him and understood his need for warmth. Some silent tragedy was playing out in his head and it appeared to drain him. It was almost as if through the bike and its speed, he believed he could outrun that which stalked him but, when he stopped, there was no escape. The slow seep of something more powerful than his determination covered him and drained him of energy.

I know, I know, I shouldn't have but if I hadn't felt so strongly I wouldn't have been tempted.

At first as I busied myself nothing intruded but, as I followed the well rehearsed path I found my gaze coming back to him; my curiosity aroused further. Head bowed he remained deep in thought. At an angle, his legs stretched out in front of him, hands crossed in prayer under his chin, oblivious to the clatter from the kitchen, he traversed another world.

I could see he was possessed and now I wanted to know more. Unable to pry and with easy conversation denied me, I needed to find another means of tapping into the unknown. Every problem has a solution and I soon found one that would open the door to the curiosity that stood demanding attention of me. As I worked I deliberated and finally, a feeling of self satisfaction, for a plan had evolved.

‘Madison your gifts are not to be used frivolously,’ the chant, but although I’d been given gifts, character was not an addition. I thought temptation was both to be fought against but at other times to be enjoyed and I justified the decision I made by telling myself: I’m not hurting anyone.

‘A beautiful day for a ride,’ I ventured, casually trying to pull him out of his reverie as I placed lunch in front of him. Standing above him looking into his blue eyes I read the intimate detail of his recent history. The thank you through a half-skewered smile belied the pain inside and it steeled my resolve further.

I’m a mother earth figure built to nurture, short of stature but strong. I love watching my garden grow, my hands in the soil feeling the birth of new life. The seasons pass and life renews itself, spring after the dormancy of winter is a constant reminder that the circle turns and so he too needed to know ‘and this too shall pass’.

Determined now I had to look, I couldn’t help myself. While he ate I planned my next move and prepared myself. ‘I’m really a nurturer,’ I would constantly tell my friends. ‘That’s why I love to cook and look after the lost souls who walk through my door.’ This stray needed help and I was the one who could provide it for him.

Going back to pick up his empty plate I placed the dessert menu on the edge of the table and tried to engage him in conversation again. ‘Have you come far?’ I ventured as a gambit. The cold, dark energy

surrounding him jealously held him in thrall allowing no connection. Feeling his lack of response, I pulled away returning defensive to the kitchen. ‘Hmmm, I’ll show you,’ I muttered to that dark spectre, for now I was resolved to have fate move into my hands.

Pacing the kitchen I willed him to pick up the menu for all I had planned lay hidden under the folder. Frustrated, I stopped and steadied myself and calming my breath I willed his hand to reach out. As the puppeteer moves, so too his hand lifted the menu to reveal his fate.

Delicately balanced underneath, weighted carefully to sit on the edge of the table sat my special cards and with his movement, he dislodged them and they fell. Looking down in surprise at the Tarot cards strewn across the floor and finding I had disappeared, he reached out and picked them up.

A player now in the game his energy stacked the cards allowing me access to his world. Shuffling them into a pile he recorded his history offering satisfaction to my temptation.

I hummed as I cleaned up confident in my victory over the spectre. Now I had the means to see and with that, could understand the elements of his life. Smug now, I waited patiently as he roused himself and made preparation to leave.

I looked once more into his eyes as he paid his bill and saw the lines of pain recording the emotions that controlled him. His confidence and majesty were a pretence used to support him in the world, his leather

costume was meant to hide the soft emotional core; light of body and heavy of soul.

I know I should have stopped then but I'd gone too far to turn back.

As he mounted his bike I picked up the cards and sat in his chair feeling the last of his body's warmth in the leather padding. Spreading the cards out to read, I turned them over slowly to reveal his history and his future.

The Queen of Spades sat triumphant in his cards ruling his past and his heart still. The dark Queen held him denying the warmth he longed for. Such a romantic soul he sought love not dominion and yet like Orpheus he stood in the underworld crying for Eurydice. Trapped with no faith in the future his lament was for love lost. Now I understood the dark spectre hanging over him.

Turning other cards I could see he stood at a cross roads and needed to make a decision. Gone now, I could not tell him that there were two roads in front of him, one which offered the torment of the past while the other the Queen of Hearts. He needed to choose.

Misery has its own power and it can rob us of our future, he needed to fight off the addictive power of grief and loss and seek a different direction. Reward lay within reach but it appeared he was blind, longing to regain what long ago had escaped his grip.

Sitting still in the chair in the warm sun, I closed my eyes and saw him on his bike. Suddenly I felt a jolt, a gear change, the stepping down to a corner and

the smooth yielding to the curve. The bike's lean a perfect balance and I felt the air on my face and the power of a man confident with something and someone who he loves.

Apples

Why didn't he get it?
Why didn't he tell the truth?
Speak up?
That bloody apple
Adam's apple
that apple that Eve held out
enticing him to commit...
no second thoughts
about...
commitment.

Committed the sin
took a bite
didn't get it
that apple must have tasted so...
Can he remember now
that enticement to commit
that deadly sin?

Were there second thoughts
or was it...

just an apple?

Chanel

Why does she think I should move from the heater?
That flick of the hand meant as direction.

Go!

Excuse me!

I parry with a haughty elongation of my neck
the best of Mannerist Art combined with a
slow reveal of Egyptian profile,
history speaks.

No eye contact, the model of élan.

Ah, that threat again
she'll make fluffy slippers of me.
Ha! My coat is much too purr-fect
more Haute Couture than mange.

Short fur of broken charcoal stripes
on a dusky grey background
a high gloss making it:
suitable for evening wear.

Anyway, it's all pretence.

She needs me to keep her hands busy
her mind in neutral as she strokes my warm body
her feeler fingers allow me to send hope to her heart.
It's not remission: it's gone.

The Eucalyptus Tree

The aged eucalyptus stands as majesty
recording change
its canopy like a broken umbrella
open to the sky; no protection.

The last stand, marsupial's delight
gourmand tastes as epicurean fear
touches the last shoots left as hieroglyphics.

The tree seeks a moment of reprisal
as climate change and drought harden its resolve;
the enemy man.

The sound of a slow whip cracking as warning
like an arm, suspended for a second
the deadly branch arcs, then crashes to the ground.

Death as ritual, fragrant oil the incense
that perfumes the air like a last embrace
the god of fire leaves gifts: Earth's majesty as
silhouette.

Dust to dust the carbon sink, burnt offerings
smoke new life into forgotten seeds
roots like worms find the dark;
life's scorched record as fading trace.

Robert Schmidt has been resident in Glenunga for 35 years. He started writing in his 60th year at Club 68 (now The Cottage) and most recently joined the Burnside Writers' Group.



Mum's Very, Very Merry Christmas

We assembled for Christmas Lunch with mum regally sitting at the head of the table, as she did when we were kids.

I fumbled with a bonbon. Eventually it exploded long before mum's hands got anywhere near it. I don't remember what the joke was inside, but it was pretty cringe worthy. I placed her five cent hat on her head, but what the heck it was Christmas.

My mum has dementia and difficulty swallowing. There was a large bowl of lollies and another of cherries on the table. Next thing she's scoffing lollies and cherries, deftly spitting the pips out! But when the carer brought out her tasty mashed turkey and potato dinner he couldn't prise her mouth open to eat it.

In the end it was a case of one side of her mouth for her dinner and the other for lollies and berries. What a sight! There was a glass of champers on the table and she polished that off too.

This was her day. The only one having a nervous breakdown was me as she started coughing and her voice disappeared briefly. I was thinking: this is not going to finish well.

Anyway, her cough settled, her voice came back, so a happy Christmas was had by all.

Mind you, I still don't think I saw the funny side of it all until I was safely home having my own glass of

champers, thinking at least I will have a writing piece for the Burnside Writers' Group.

Rock 'n' Roll Heaven

You can't go too many days now before another Rock 'n' Roller has bitten the dust, gone to their maker, joining an ever expanding Band in the sky.

I hear they've all gone to Rock 'n' Roll Heaven. Gee, my dearly departed dad would be saying, Rock 'n' Roll Hell more likely.

Recently deceased Lemmy of Motorhead fame would freak if he found himself singing his 'Ace of Spades' in Heaven, not the other place.

When I was growing up in Adelaide in the 60s and 70s the music was tremendous. We were hearing stories of sex and drugs with perhaps a hint of rock 'n' roll.

In the 80s and 90s a time when some of the rockers were kind of in retirement, AIDS struck. There were those who proclaimed this as Rock's 'Sodom and Gomorrah' (Did I mention my dad earlier?) Mortality amongst the now middle aged rockers seemed high, but the industry recovered and kept moving along.

In the last decade a lot of the baby boomer musos have re-formed their bands. I'm a bit sceptical; it's their way of getting superannuation. I don't think a

smart statistician has done the stats yet, but I reckon the mortality rate of these old rockers, isn't much higher than us immortals.

How One Dollar Became 50 Bucks

I was excited at joining the Burnside Writers Group in July 2015. Especially as they soon accepted my wacky sense of humour and taught me to be more concise. I remember though, my most ‘unmemorable’ moment. It was after one of my first meetings.

I arrived at the Burnside Library and put my one dollar in the Tupperware container, took my name tag and wondered what the morning would bring. I think they liked my writing, they even chuckled.

In the early days I parked outside the Burnside Village. Not anymore!

On the way back to the car I ducked into the loo at the Village, aware I was fractionally over the two-hour parking limit. A fatal mistake! As I came out of the Village, from the corner of my eye I saw a parking inspector bearing down on my car.

Sprinting, but to no avail, he got to my car at the precise moment I did. ‘I’m over, aren’t I?’ I stupidly said.

‘Yep. Five minutes’

Arguing was to no avail, because a crime had been committed hadn't it?

Afterwards, on the phone to pay my debt to society, I was put on hold and trapped in a musical loop while wishing they would come to the phone as fast as they'd issued the ticket. Eventually, my fine was paid. But my one dollar day had cost me 50 bucks!

Anyway, my friends said enough whingeing and instead, I should write about the experience, give one copy to the Writers' Group and one to the Council front desk. I'm not sure about the latter; I still want to be welcome at the Christmas party when the nice lady from the Council gives us lamingtons!

My Eddie Betts Pocket Adventure

My big day of the year had arrived: the Adelaide Half Marathon. Despite nursing sore ankles my doctor had cleared me to run.

At 4.00 am in bed, I yelled, 'Oh no!' I'd woken up in a shock because in an hour or so it would be 'rise and shine' and 21.1K of torture ahead. There was a certain trepidation.

Did I say rise and shine; it was bloody cold and overcast; perfect for running. I don't have a support team, so it was in the taxi with the gear I'd be wearing for the run.

The event should be fairly uneventful this year. Just run, run, run - and run some more.

Did I say uneventful?

At about 10K, a marathoner snuck up behind me (we half marathoners shared the course with the full 42.2K people and they had right of way). He yelled, 'Hit the grass.' There was a grassy hill along the side of the course. I dutifully jumped aside letting him through. It could have been a calamity for me if I'd fallen. Fortunately I didn't, so no broken ankles this time.

At about 18K I was running behind two young ladies; probably admiring their bums. You do anything to ease the pain.

But wait a minute! They're gone! An official yelled, 'You've missed a U-turn.' Painfully I turned around. I've added goodness knows how many metres to the event. 'Boy are you in the zone,' the official said as I passed him.

Never did see those girls again.

At last I ran onto the Adelaide Oval, around it and across the finishing line and grabbed my medal. It brought a tear to the eye. But wouldn't you know it, my legs gave way. The officials grabbed me but I protested, 'I'm not going to the first aid tent.'

An official said, 'Well here's a chair. You can recover under the stands. You'll probably never have so many people gazing at you. Enjoy it. Take it all in.'

Then it dawned on me - I am all alone in the Eddie Betts pocket. WOWEE - like a wounded warrior of past glory.

Gradually recovering I am okayed to trudge up to the back of the stands for refreshments and mingle.

I leave you with another marathoner saying to me, 'Whose idea of torture was it to climb all the stairs straight after a marathon?'

Gail Orr started writing during the 70's and now has a collection of free verse poems takes much inspiration from the natural world. She is a newer member of the Burnside Writers' Group.



Sweetness

Sweetness
That's the heart of it,
Not sugary sweet
Not false sentiment
But kindness and generosity,
(Given without examination of worthiness)
It comes again and again,
That's its sweetness.

Nell Holland lives in a home dominated by a cat 'with attitude' and a long suffering canine companion. Her family is primary in her life but her love of writing is a close second.



Belonging

So it was done

All the way from the kirk to this small cemetery in *Aignish* he'd heard the swell and slap of waves as they hit the shore, just as he'd heard them in past dreams. He'd held tight to his hate of that remembered sound for thirty years and yet now, on this saddest of days, it faded into nothing.

Why had he let anger at the unfairness of life live on for such a time? Maggie had tried to convince him otherwise, but like the stubborn man he knew himself to be, he'd refused to listen, and with the passing years his bitterness had stayed. Back then he'd have found it hard to explain who or what he was so angry with, but now at last he was able to admit that the rage was with himself and his inability to make right a terrible wrong. Well, it was time to let all that fade from his heart. The bleak pain he now felt, surpassed any other he could have imagined.

Callum reached to the soil beneath his feet, seeing crumbled peat fall like black tears from his fingers. There was a time when the smell of peat smoke and the tangle below the level of the tide had been as familiar to him as his face in the mirror, but it had been years since he'd smelt the reek of either. Both brought back sad and happy memories of his parents and

growing up as the middle child of a family with roots going back forever in the Western Isles.

Donald was always the calm, responsible eldest son who'd carried on with the butcher shop, just as his father had wanted. Callum had been the wild one who'd left the island for the merchant navy but had eventually returned for Maggie. Five years younger than him had been Aline, the red haired sister who'd fallen in love with a young fisherman, Roddy, and been destroyed when he was drowned at sea on a wild night that left two others widows. For one long month she'd tried hard to be strong and carry on with life. But on the day that she would have been married she'd walked into the cold sea that had taken her love and just kept walking. She left behind a note that told them everything and explained nothing at all.

It was his memory of finding that note; and his mother screaming Aline's name as he repeatedly, futilely, dived into the sea in the effort to find her that was seared into his brain. The anger, the fear and the terror of that day had branded his heart and made him leave Lewis behind as fast as he could.

Maggie as always, had been his rock and though reluctant, had understood. His parents had been shocked with the rapidity that death had taken their only daughter and found it hard to comprehend losing a son so soon afterwards.

He and Maggie had married quietly and left on the Caledonian Macbrayne boat the same day. He'd stood at the rail motionless, as the wind whipped Maggie's

long hair across his face and she sobbed quietly. The lone piper ashore added to their pain with the sound of ‘Will ye no come back again’ as the boat moved agonisingly slowly away, and his last sight of Stornoway had been Donald and his parents stoically watching them sail from sight through the sleet ing rain. His mother was holding tight to the white heather ‘for luck’ and the rosemary ‘for remembrance’ that Maggie had left in her hands.

He’d promised Maggie that one day he would bring her back, but every time the subject was brought up he felt the pain of Aline’s suicide and couldn’t face a return.

Then at last, and too late, he’d fulfilled his promise, bringing Maggie back and burying her where she’d rest with other Macleods of Lewis. Neither Aline nor Roddy had ever been found and he could only hope that they had met once more in the watery North Minch.

As children, surreptitiously playing in the graveyard when adults were not around to see, they’d recognised the headstone of William Mackenzie, the Bard of Shader. The poor man had nothing of value to leave behind when he migrated to Canada, except the tooth he’d buried in his wife’s grave so that something of himself would stay with her. It was just an old story when they were young, and they’d never thought their own travels would lead them to that same place in Ontario. Poor William, a man of his time, had never

been able to return; at least he had been able to give that homecoming to Maggie.

His eyes glazed with recollections of their thirty good years in Canada and the sadness at not having children. Donald was the only one to have given their parents grandchildren, and his six fine sons were a credit to Donald and his wife Jean. The grandsons had been a great consolation to his parents before they died.

Callum's heart squeezed with sadness remembering Maggie's dogged insistence of returning to be with her 'ain folk' when she knew that her time was short. She had asked so little of him in her life and knew him well enough to know that he'd never refuse her request to be buried in the land of her birth.

The journey home had been hard and those last weeks hadn't been easy, but Maggie had been radiant at reconnecting with friends, and smiled most days. There had been some difficult moments, but all those days were best forgotten. His clenched jaw ached with managing painful memories.

A hand touched his shoulder and Donald said, 'Come awa, bonnie laddie and let her be now. Jeannie has a bite at the house and I've a drop of Abhainn Dearnag you'll be needing. There's no more good to be done here.'

Callum turned to the man who had welcomed him and given his home over to the two of them. There had been no recriminations for the years he'd been away and no questions asked about the reason for their

return. It was all as he knew it would be; just unspoken warmth and understanding that made him more humble than any harsh words could have done.

He hesitated, reluctant to leave this quiet spot and his thoughts, but grateful for the concern of people he had spurned for too long. He knew Maggie's instinct had been right. In this land of their belonging, family and old friends had seen her welcomed, then farewelled, and were all here for him now, which was just as she would have wanted.

In the way of the Islands, there had been no women at the grave side. They had all left after the kirk service but would be waiting for the men to return for whisky and food.

He brushed a forearm over wet cheeks, feeling the rough tweed scrape his skin. Without Maggie at his side he felt anchorless, but this small island and these people of his youth, though now grown older like himself, were making him feel the beginning of some renewal of spirit.

He looked around one last time before he followed his brother away from the grave. The purple heather would bloom soon, perhaps he'd stay until then and lay some on her grave. He knew Maggie would like that.

Christmas Eve England 1952

The cold room made her breath plume away like smoke in the dark, and though Ellen knew it was morning, she was reluctant to leave the warm shelter of her bed.

She wriggled further down under blankets and eiderdown but stopped as her feet encountered a cold spot. ‘Why can’t somebody invent a bed that stays warm all over?’ she thought, knowing Dad would say that was just daft. When you are only eight years old most of your ideas are put down as “just daft” by adults.

Then she remembered. Tonight she was going to star in the Nativity play at St John’s Chapel and the family were coming to watch. It was the last event of the year put on by her primary school headmistress, Miss Kirby, and the twelfth century building was going to be the setting. Maureen Carter had the part of the Virgin Mary, but Ellen had been given the only speaking part as the Archangel Gabriel. She squirmed with excitement thinking of the gown of fine gold netting and her halo and wings, and wondered how she’d get through the day until 6pm.

She slipped out of bed. Moving to the window and pushing aside the curtains, she saw the glass was crazed with silvered patterns of frozen condensation. Breathing heavily on the pane she rubbed hard with

the elbow of her nightgown and squealed with delight. While she'd slept, a snowfall had transformed the garden into a white enchantment, with the lilac tree rimed by frost.

Ellen ran downstairs shouting, 'Mam! It's snowed and it's Christmas Eve and Dad says that's lucky and can I go and call on my friend Joan so we can make a snowman and...?'

Mam held up her hand saying, 'That's enough. You're going nowhere 'til you're dressed and had breakfast. So get your clothes and dress by the fire while I make porridge.'

Ellen didn't need telling twice and scampered up the stairs, pushing past her brother David coming down. 'Morning, flubberdup,' he said with a grin. Ten year old David had begun teasing Ellen about her fascination with watching the "Flower Pot Men" on Joan's television. Normally the remark would have caused an argument but today Ellen was oblivious.

By 8.30am Ellen and Joan were engrossed in making their snowman. They used coal for eyes, a carrot for the nose and a red apple piece for the mouth. If they ever felt like stopping, they only had to look to where David and his friends were building a bigger creation, to be spurred on. A hat and scarf were added before Mam called all the children inside for hot Oxo drinks and toast. Everyone ate hungrily, but when the boys returned outside for snowball fights, Joan and Ellen lingered by the fire.

When Mam went to clean the “best” room in readiness for Christmas dinner the following day Ellen leaned close to her friend, saying, ‘My Auntie Rhoda came from hospital with a baby yesterday. He’s called Richard and he’s got red hair.’

‘If he’d been born tomorrow,’ said Joan, solemnly ‘they could have called him Jesus.’

‘Imagine having Jesus in the family!’ said Ellen, ‘But guess what? I’ve worked out where babies come from.’

Mam was singing while she worked, and Ellen knew that as long as they could hear her rendition of the popular songs, they were safe to talk about whatever they wanted. ‘Do you remember Marjory told everybody at school that Mams had zippers on their stomach and that’s how babies get out?’ she asked Joan, who nodded. ‘Well it’s not true. I asked my Mam and she said Marjory’s Mam had an operation because Marjory had a big head.’

‘She still does.’ said Joan, and the two girls rocked with laughter, thinking about Marjory and her head.

‘Anyway,’ said Ellen, ‘I listened while Mam and Auntie Rhoda were talking. Auntie Rhoda said she was glad this baby came head first. So I worked it out.’ She looked at Joan who said impatiently, ‘Well, tell me.’

‘When Mams go to hospital they must be waiting for babies to be delivered in bits, and when they’ve got all the pieces they put them together. Richard’s head came first, but it could have been a leg.’

Joan screwed up her nose and said, ‘Do they sew them together?’

Ellen shook her head, saying, ‘No. Dad always says I’d lose my head if it wasn’t screwed on properly so I think they screw them together like Meccano. Mams must stay in hospital ‘til skin covers everything, because I’ve never seen where they join up.’

Joan was open-mouthed and said, ‘I knew a stork couldn’t bring babies. There are babies everywhere and I’ve never even seen one stork.’

They sat talking and Mam continued singing, but by the time she’d finished “Sugar Bush” she’d returned and got the girls to help her make mince pies, lemon tarts, and sherry trifle for tomorrow. The house filled with baking smells, then after midday dinner, all the neighbourhood children trekked to the fields with sledges. Warm gloves covered fingers; scarves wound around necks, crossed over chests and pinned at the back; bobble hats on girls’ heads and balaclavas on the boys’ while everyone wore wellington boots with thick knee length socks.

For the next couple of hours, dozens of children sledged recklessly down the steep hill, whooping with excitement, then battling up the tracks to do it all again. As the afternoon wore on, the trail became ever speedier as ice was polished by the sledges’ steel runners.

By 3pm the light was dimming and Joan left for the warmth of home. However, Ellen had decided to make a last trek up the hill, when another sledge piloted by

two boys, veered off-track and caught her unawares. In the space of a heart beat she somersaulted, landing on slush at the trackside. The boys and their vehicle rolled to a halt, then without a glance they scrambled back up the hill, leaving Ellen lying stunned.

She struggled to her feet. Shocked, hurting everywhere and shedding tears, she managed to get home, but it wasn't until her mother let out a shout that Ellen was aware of the swelling and bruising on one cheek. 'Whatever have you been up to, you silly girl?' Her mother cried, 'You're supposed to be an angel in a couple of hours and you're going to look as if you've gone ten rounds with Randolph Turpin! Get upstairs and into the bath.'

The bath was blissful after being outdoors and Ellen lay back in the warm water. Her mother had fussed over the state of her legs and shoulder but was more concerned about Ellen's face. 'Stay in that bath until I can get Grandma to have a look at you.' she said. In her watery cocoon Ellen was more than happy to do nothing.

*

The bathroom door swung open, and Grandma, carrying her bag of home remedies, leaned over and said, 'Been in the wars, have you, our Ellen? You'd best get out and I'll have a look.' Ellen was soon standing at the side of the bath while Mam and Grandma applied ointment to her bruises and scrapes, with Grandma carrying on a diatribe about "silly girls" and mothers who "allowed this to happen". Mam and

Ellen stayed silent until Grandma was satisfied and the only thing left for attention was Ellen's face.

'Get her into some warm clothes.' Grandma said to Mam, 'I'll get some snow.'

By the time Ellen was sitting by the fire, Grandma had a cold pack of snow wrapped in a towel and insisted, that despite any protests from Ellen, that towel was going to stay where she put it; freezing Ellen's cheek. For the next half-hour Grandma kept replacing the cold pack while Ellen complained, cried, and finally was unable to feel anything. The torment came to an end when the towel was mercifully removed.

'Well that's as good as we'll get, but you'll have to put makeup on her face before you take her out.' Grandma said. 'Just as well that nothing ever stops her tongue wagging!'

A boiled egg with bread and butter was produced and Ellen discovered she was able to eat without anything hurting; and Grandma had been right, nothing had halted her capacity for speech. By the time Mam had applied makeup over the bruising, Dad was opening the front door to Uncle Charlie who was going to take them to the Chapel in his car.

It was quite a squash. Uncle Charlie and Auntie Rhoda, with baby Richard in her arms, sat in the front seats, while Grandma, Dad and Mam sat in the back with David and Ellen on their knees. Ellen felt a flutter of excitement and was glad of the comfort of Dad's

arms holding her tight. A car ride was a rare event and made the day even more special.

Just before the engine stopped Dad whispered, ‘Sock it to ‘em, our Ellen. You give ‘em what for.’ Then as they got out of the car, David squeezed her hand and muttered, ‘Sorry. We didn’t mean to hit you.’ Ellen gave him “a look”, but squeezed back in reply.

While the family went to sit on the old wooden pews, Ellen and the other children entered the vestry where Miss Kirby dressed them in their costumes. Once they’d been robed, the little group of schoolchildren were transformed into shepherds, angels and wise men all eager to play their parts.

Under Miss Kirby’s direction they moved into the Chapel, taking up positions in front of the stone altar decorated with swathes of red berried holly. Illuminated by candlelight, a painting by Michelangelo couldn’t have looked more ethereal as the children prepared to perform the Christmas story in the place where it had been performed for over eight hundred years; the wonder of the Nativity touching everyone looking on.

Standing on a raised platform, the tableau was dominated by Ellen, as Archangel Gabriel, but when Maureen took up her position as the Virgin Mary, all attention was focussed on the manger where a doll should be lying. There was just hay. Something had happened to Jesus!

Miss Kirby's eyes rolled in horror and there was whispering from the assembly until Grandma took control. Looking at Auntie Rhoda she said, 'Put baby in that crib. He's sleeping anyway and it'll give your arms a rest. Come on. Quick!'

And so that was how Richard made Christmas Eve 1952 a unique occasion by starring as a red haired Jesus.

'Unto us a child is born.' Archangel Gabriel's voice rang out. She kept watching the unusual Jesus, but couldn't see any mark on that little neck to show where he'd been joined together.

Sweet young voices sang all the old Christmas Carols, oblivious to the watching ghosts of earlier generations who'd performed there with equal sincerity. Handkerchiefs were well used and even the men frequently blew noses. Emotional parents swelled with pride.

When the service ended, children, stepping though the Chapel porch into a world blanketed with still falling snow, looked up with open mouths, feeling snowflakes feathering tongues. The Second World War was still throwing its last shadow over Europe but Christmas Day was only one sleep away and a new young queen in Buckingham Palace made everyone optimistic for the future.

The old photograph shows Archangel Gabriel's face looking ever so slightly dirty on one cheek, but Ellen remembers that though the world was struggling

to find joy in a time of austerity, it really was the best Christmas. And Richard was never that angelic again.

Dario

Dario in Venice, bought me my first champagne.
The bubbles caused my laughter, and the moonlight
showed the rain
Which sparkled and refreshed, the gardens and the
beach,
While Dario talked of poetry, and a love beyond my
reach.

Our worlds had just collided with music and
romance.

I was nineteen, he was twenty four and he'd asked
me for a dance.

He was the local pop star, and I was blissfully
unaware

That the females all around us would have loved to
tear my hair!

My first Italian holiday, and tomorrow I'd have to
find

My work, and friends and family, leaving Dario
behind.

*

Roses and a card arrived with pledges and foolish
words
That promised love everlasting. Good gracious! How
absurd!

The real world was restored; Dario a diversion I'd
dreamed.

Italy and romance had not the import they'd seemed.
Just an interlude of magic on a steamy Venice night,
Yet the memory lasts a lifetime, and the recall is
delight.

It's Only Words

It hadn't been a good week for me after comments from two doctors. The first, exasperated by my doubts regarding the possible adverse long term effects of a medication, finally said, 'You've passed your three score years and ten, so what are you worrying about?'

I reacted with good humour and a laugh, but a few days later I attended my GP's surgery and expressed dismay at the cost of a vaccination.

His comment that it would last 15 years, so would see me out, left me vaguely disquieted and a little flat, and when my husband told me we were attending a luncheon at the end of the week with a group of men who were all strangers to me, I was definitely not in the mood to be entertaining or entertained. I was even

less “in the mood” when we arrived and I discovered that many of the men were a couple of decades older than me and would obviously have preferred to remain an exclusively male group, talking with each other about their past working lives.

Fortunately I was seated next to an elderly widower who soon captivated me with snippets of his remarkable past life which was a script writer’s dream. Initially, it seemed we had little in common, but as the meal progressed we chatted like old friends and I was caught up in stories of derring-do that poured out of him. Occasionally one of the others would interject with a comment to my dinner companion and it was obvious that he commanded much respect from the others who were all keen to make sure he was well looked after .

I spent the meal absorbed by his past adventures, though at one point I asked if he didn’t like the food because his plate was half full when I’d already finished. He replied, with twinkling eyes that the food was delicious but he much preferred talking to me. He was in his nineties and he was flirting! The handsome charmer he’d once been had replaced the elderly man I’d originally met, and he was turning my previously low spirits into a laughing bubble of delight.

Eventually my husband had to remind me that we needed to leave for another engagement, and it was with some reluctance that I left what I’d believed would be a dull repast, but had in fact been the highlight of a bad week.

When we departed, my new acquaintance held my hand and remarked how he'd so much enjoyed spending time with a lovely young woman. It was a comment that made my husband chuckle and the rest of my own day brighter.

How amazing that two people could carelessly, unconsciously, undermine my confidence with remarks that made me reflect on my years and how many were left to me, while one gracious gentleman made me feel uplifted and almost young again. He transported me with him, to a time when he was a young hero and I hope that the day was as much a tonic for him as it had been for me.

Language is a powerful force.

Dinner Party Menu with a Lifetime's Loving

1970

*Music – Roberta Flack singing ‘The First Time
Ever I saw Your Face’*

*Pre-dinner drinks - Spiced nuts. Prawns with fresh
herb dip*

Whirlwind romance and wedding. ‘Who is she?’ ‘Where did he come from?’ ‘It won’t last.’ Surreptitious glances. Sly comments. ‘It’s all a bit quick. Why the rush?’ Huh – two years before the first baby. They were wrong! Multiple toasters and silver spoon sets as wedding gifts, and one large bottle of Chateau Lafite Rothschild. ‘There’ll be one perfect moment when you’ll want to enjoy this. You’ll know when it comes.’ Move to a house by the sea with all our worldly goods in two suitcases. And so it begins.

1980

*Music - The Carpenters singing ‘We’ve Only Just
Begun’*

*Entrée - Salad Niçoise with warm French bread
and butter.*

Now we have three children, two dogs and a cat. Cars got bigger and bank account smaller. Stress factor climbing with husband's career demands and children's educational ups and downs. Try carrot and stick approach but feel more like the donkey myself. Dream of a holiday. Anywhere. Please! France sounds inviting. Off we go to a large tent in Normandy. Children ecstatic. Everyone happy. Warm peaches and pain au chocolat for breakfast; barbecue fresh sardines for lunch and escargot and moules marinieres in the sunshine with cheap wine that stains our teeth; making memories for a lifetime, though we don't know it. Back to the grind!

1990

Music - Tina Turner singing 'You're Simply the Best'

Main Course – Beef Wellington, new potatoes, peas, carrots, gravy, horseradish sauce.

Move house with a pantechicon of belongings. Two suitcases just a memory. Children flexing psychological muscles. Education time versus boyfriends – no contest! Explosive family discord alternating with pride at their achievements. Husband's workload ever increasing. What are we doing? Got to get away. Long trip for just the two of us. Enjoy London and Singapore. Relax. Talk like we used to. Life gets back onto an even keel. Offspring survive, and so do we. Batteries recharged.

2000

Music - Savage Garden singing 'I Knew I loved You'

Dessert - Pavlova

Two weddings in quick succession. Pray they're happy and have staying power. Hope they've made wise choices – hope their choices appreciate the quality goods they're getting! Bank account immediately depleted and we now worry about their finances! Love the space in the house. Don't need breaks away. Every day is a holiday. Wow – all this time to do OUR thing. So quiet. We'll tire of all this peace – but not yet.

2010

Music - Rod Stewart singing 'Time after Time'

Last course - Brie, Camembert, Wensleydale and Gorgonzola cheese. Water biscuits, oatcakes, strawberries and grapes.

Coffee, liqueurs and chocolates.

The family has grown by 9 people. Two are married to our children and the rest are grandchildren. Family celebrations are ever more hectic, noisy and wonderful. Christmas once again has real meaning. Hope our children learned from our mistakes. Is the dinner party over already? Time has passed quickly with so much noise and laughter but we had fun.

2020

***Post-dinner wind down - Shania Twain singing
'You're Still The One'***

What will it bring? Who knows? We have a few years before we get there, but tonight we are going to enjoy that Chateau Lafite. The years have convinced us that life, though good, never has a perfect moment. Too many loved friends and family have left this world without tasting anything half as wonderful as we've enjoyed, so the bottle will be opened and savoured; memories revived and glasses lifted in a salute to this wonderful dinner party of life. Not sure I have the stamina to do all it all again but count my blessings that we had the chance to try it once.

***Finale - Slim Dusty singing 'Looking Forward
Looking Back.'***

A Prayer for Those Who are Sorely Tested

Lord, give me strength and fortitude
To bear the blether from those who're rude.
They think they're wise and believe they're kind
While to their faults they're unco blind.

Their words support such mean elation
When slicing the heart of the population.
Offensive sneers are impolite,
Unoriginal, boorish, trite.

Pray give me patience; give me grace
And keep this smile fixed on my face,
So they'll never know how I despise
Their culpabilities and their lies.

Please help me set my tongue to find
The way to make my language kind,
And dignify counsel I shall keep
To soothe my heart when ere I sleep.
Amen.
